

EPCOT theme park as a science communication space: the Test Track case

Daniela Martin

Abstract

Science and technology have become tools to legitimize messages that affect the world in terms of society, politics and economy. This paper presents part of the results of a study that analyzed the symbolic construction of the future in the scientific-technological discourse at EPCOT theme park in Orlando, Florida. The sociohistorical conditions and narrative strategies are analyzed based on the theoretical and methodological approach by John B. Thompson. The results highlighted that the construction of the notion of progress is strongly influenced by the commercial and political interests of the sponsors. In particular, the *Test Track* ride totally lacks any discussion about the impact of cars on society and the environment. The future is presented as a utopian one without any possible disruption, a perception that permeated the development of the United States over the 20th century and is promoted even in the 21st century despite the evidence provided by multiple wars and crises.

Keywords

Popularization of science and technology; Representations of science and technology; Science and media

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.22323/2.18040209>

Submitted: 14th April 2019

Accepted: 6th August 2019

Published: 23rd September 2019

Background

This work is based on a study that analyzes the symbolic construction of the future presented by four EPCOT attractions at *Walt Disney World Resort* in Orlando, Florida, starting from two thematic pillars: progress and science and technology. It is an open-access study available in its entirety online.¹ For further in-depth discussion on the communication of science and technology within thematic spaces, a paper written along with Dr. Susana Herrera-Lima was previously published to focus on an attraction called *Living with the Land* and the environmental issue.² On the other hand, this paper deals with the *Test Track* attraction, the issue of urban mobility and its relationship with the desired future.

¹<https://bit.ly/2KmOAWI>.

²<https://bit.ly/2Ro21GK>.

Cultural industries as science communication spaces

In a media-oriented world such as ours, the communication of science and technology has been implemented by various actors with different intentions and objectives. Science and technology have become tools to legitimize messages on a desired future that affect the world in terms of society, politics and economy. Cultural institutions, understood as the bodies that exercise symbolic power [Thompson, 1997], have played a great role in this practice.

Within the wide range of cultural bodies, there are cultural industries that produce symbolic assets with a commercial purpose. A few examples of cultural industries are film studios, publishing houses, record labels, and even tourist/holiday resorts. These industries are battlefields in which cultural, political, social and economic wars are fought. By their nature, these spaces employ persuasion and entertainment strategies in their narratives to attract and arouse public interest.

This paper presents part of the results of a study aimed at analyzing the narrative strategies pursued by cultural industries to promote an ideology of the future. The choice of the case study — the area called *Future World* of EPCOT theme park at *Walt Disney World Resort* in Orlando, Florida — was dictated by its hybrid nature straddling a leisure and holiday space, a science and technology museum, as well as a world's fair. In this particular case, scientific-technological messages are not addressed to experts but rather to an avid audience looking for entertainment, which implies the implementation of public science communication strategies mixed with recreational and consumption features. In this sense, the mass communication carried out by cultural industries is characterized by the production of symbolic forms that may be subject to economic valorization by their recipients [Thompson, 1997].

Theoretical-methodological framework

This research is based on the communication theory formulated by John B. Thompson [1993; 1997], which approaches the meaning of symbolic forms and their social contextualization. According to Thompson [1997], media communication is “a reworking of the symbolic character of social life, a reordering of the ways in which content and symbolic information are produced and exchanged in the social sphere, and a restructuring of ways in which individuals relate to each other and themselves” [p. 26].

Thompson defines communication as an action carried out in fields of interaction, referred to as the “set of previously established circumstances that offer individuals different inclinations and opportunities” [1997, p. 28]. The position subjects or institutions occupy in a field of interaction is closely linked to the power they possess and the resources they use to exercise it, which means that the more resources subjects or institutions possess, the more power they will hold. The institutions that offer privileged platforms for the exercise of certain forms of power are called paradigmatic institutions [Thompson, 1997]. Paradigmatic institutions of symbolic power are the cultural institutions that focus on the large-scale production and spreading of symbolic forms in space and time, an example of which is *The Walt Disney Company*.

Symbolic forms are “significant constructs that are interpreted and understood by the individuals who produce and receive them, but they are also significant constructs that are structured in different ways and inserted into specific social and

historical conditions” [Thompson, 1993, p. 407]. In this sense, symbolic forms are the single units that — taken as a whole — make up culture. In particular, there are five aspects involved in their construction [ibid.] that are closely linked to one another. The way they are involved in the constitution of symbolic forms may vary from case to case.

In order to explain the application of this theory using the ideas proposed by Thompson [1993] as a basis, such five aspects could be expressed as follows: symbolic forms are significant constructs that refer to something (referential aspect) produced by one or several subjects (intentional aspect) with certain transmission and reception rules (conventional aspect) that have certain structures (structural aspect) according to a specific time and place of creation, distribution and appropriation (contextual aspect).

To successfully carry out an analysis of the construction of symbolic forms, Thompson [1997] proposes a methodology called depth hermeneutics. This methodological framework involves three phases that are not subsequent but intertwined with each other: sociohistorical analysis, formal analysis and interpretation/reinterpretation. This provided a basis to divide the research into three phases as well.

The first phase involved a sociohistorical analysis of the production conditions of *The Walt Disney Company*, the theme park and each of the attractions. This phase allowed us to appreciate the conditions under which the company’s cultural productions were developed as well as their purpose based on events that unfolded in parallel. To achieve this, a historical review of the company was carried out, also intertwining historical events at a global scale as well as scientific and technological milestones of the 20th and 21st centuries. Such data provided a basis to construct a timeline that facilitated the analysis.³

In the second phase, the transcripts of the attractions that were selected⁴ after the ethnography work performed in October 2015 and in May 2016 were retrieved. Each transcript was systematized and analyzed to respond to the conventional, structural and referential aspect of the symbolic production of the future. On the other hand, the conventional aspect focused on identifying various (linguistic and cultural) types of rules, codes or conventions to encode or decode the aforementioned message. The referential aspect focused on retrieving allusions to the future made through science and technology within the discourse.

The structural aspect was analyzed in relation to the basic characteristics of storytelling laid out by Pimentel [1998]: the construction of time and space, the type of narrator, the actors spoken of and the perspective (both the narrator and the actors). The sum of such characteristics resulted in an x-ray picture of the structure of the discourse which, combined with the sociohistorical analysis, provided

³The complete corpus, the timeline, the field diaries and the analysis tables can be found in Martin Segura, D. (2019). *La construcción simbólica del futuro en los discursos científicos-tecnológicos de las industrias culturales: EPCOT como caso de estudio*. Guadalajara: ITESO. Available at <https://bit.ly/2KmOAWI>.

⁴The selection of attractions was based on three criteria: to be eligible, they had to be based on the themes this research is concerned with (science, technology and the future), present a storyline, and address themes that are different from each other.

enough information to proceed with the third phase: the analysis of the intentional aspect or interpretation/reinterpretation.

The objective was to identify and analyze the park's scientific-technological discourse in order to give an account of the construction of the symbolic forms of the future through the storytelling resources and specific sociohistorical conditions of a cultural industry such as *The Walt Disney Company*.

Below is a summary of our analytical work. The first part reports on the main ideas derived from the sociohistorical analysis of *The Walt Disney Company*. Then, an analysis of the conception and development of EPCOT is presented. The second part goes back to the results of the analysis of the sociohistorical aspect and the narrative of the *Test Track* attraction.

An overview of *The Walt Disney Company*

It cannot be denied that *The Walt Disney Company* is a giant of entertainment. Its weight within the range of companies operating in the business is enormous and its institutionalization has allowed it to exercise symbolic power over almost a century. Like any other company in a capitalist system, *The Walt Disney Company* has alternated moments of crisis and economic prosperity that were strongly influenced by specific social and historical factors [Thompson, 1993]. An example of this was during World War II, when it started producing various propaganda and training films for the Department of Agriculture, Treasury and State, as well as for the Navy and the Army to avoid filing for bankruptcy [Gomery, 1994]. In addition, it owes much of its success to its ability to adapt to the technological innovations of production resources [Thompson, 1993]. Examples of this are the foray into sound and color animation as early as in the 1930s, the creation of a television channel when cable TV emerged in the 1980s, or the recent announcement of the launch of its Disney+ streaming platform in 2019.

As of 2019, *The Walt Disney Company* calls itself a company that leads international family entertainment through its media networks such as ABC or ESPN, its six theme parks around the world, and its film studios such as Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm and the recently acquired 20th Century Fox. According to its 2018 financial reports,⁵ the company's highest revenues came from its media networks and theme parks. Exponential revenue growth in its tourist resorts is expected for 2019 due to the newly opened areas such as *Toy Story Land* and *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge*.

The issue of revenues is important because *The Walt Disney Company* became financially successful when it built *Disneyland* in 1952. While in the previous years it had existed thanks to its film productions, the company actually became a profitable business starting from the construction of theme parks. Because of this, and although there have been other important operations and changes over the years, the various executives of the company have devoted much of their time and financial resources to expand the tourism business. To *The Walt Disney Company*, everything — even entertainment and education — was, still is and will be a business [Smoodin, 1994].

⁵The reports are available at <https://www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/the-walt-disney-company-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-earnings-for-fiscal-2018/> [retrieved on 11 April 2019].

An overview of EPCOT

After the success of the *Disneyland* park in California and *Magic Kingdom* in Orlando, Walt Disney began to develop an idea that emerged as a result of the involvement of *WED Enterprises* — the branch of the company responsible for the design and development of the attractions at its theme parks — in the construction of four exhibits at the New York World's Fair in 1964. The robotic technology piloting, its design, the message transmission strategies, and even the fair's financing mechanisms all served as a basis to develop EPCOT.

At first, Walt Disney conceived EPCOT as a city for twenty thousand inhabitants in which the most advanced technologies available at that time would be implemented for testing. However, after his death and almost fifteen years of conceptual development, the idea of a city evolved into one of a permanent World's Fair. On the day of its opening in 1982, EPCOT was sponsored by General Motors, Exxon, Kraft, General Electric and The Bell System. In addition, it could count on the support of the governments of Mexico, Norway, China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Morocco, France, United Kingdom and Canada.

Following the footsteps of the 1939 New York World's Fair, EPCOT functions as an ideological and marketing showcase of the technology developed by the industry. The science-business-technology link is the narrative axis that dominates this space and leads the public to think of science and technology as elements for the construction of a comfortable and pleasant future for their everyday life [Herrera-Lima, 2016]. Most of the EPCOT sponsors have been North American companies, with the exception of Siemens. This somehow monopolizes the discourse on the future not only in terms of commercial ideology, but also of American ideology. In the words of Walt Disney [1964]: "EPCOT will always be a showcase to the world for the ingenuity and imagination of American free enterprise" [cited in Beard, 1982, p. 11].

On the other hand, the future presented in this space is exclusively conceived in terms of economic, technological and urban development, the social prosperity implications of which are considered as naturally ensuing positive results. As explained below, the objective seems to be to "educate" the public about the beneficial contribution to modern society from the products manufactured by the sponsors [Herrera-Lima, 2016]. This does not have an altruistic intent, but aims at imposing a commercial monopoly by creating a captive public who believe that the consumption of such brands will allow them to be part of the progress.

The Test Track case

Test Track is an attraction designed to address the issue of mobility and its innovations. Originally, its facilities used to accommodate a pavilion called *World of Motion* sponsored by the first company to formalize a deal with EPCOT, General Motors. In that space, according to the plans from the 1970s, guests could experience the evolution of car design [Crawford, 2015] and would use a futuristic vehicle prototype to go on a historic tour. This idea was revisited after the success of the Ford exhibit during the 1964/65 World's Fair, which is why General Motors — its main competitor — did not hesitate to sign a ten-year contract with *The Walt Disney Company* to increase its competitiveness by welcoming around 25,000 guests a day in the first year of the park's opening [Pedersen, 2011].

Disney's interest in the aspects of mobility was not recent and should be placed in a context in which the presence of the automobile was central as a configurator of social life [Herrera-Lima, 2016]. Disney wanted to create efficient transport systems that could later be implemented in cities around the world. By the end of the 1970s, *The Walt Disney Company* participated in a Hybrid Electric Vehicle Program with the United States government. In 1979, energy was a very important issue and — with the nation engulfed by a series of oil crises, — Disney's management started to feel concerned about the increase in the price of gasoline, which could severely affect the vacation patterns of Americans [Crawford, 2015]. In this sense, the company's interest in promoting the electric car project derived from its concern regarding profit losses due to a slump in ticket sales as a consequence of higher oil prices.

This concern led the company to develop various energy conservation projects, many of them in collaboration with the United States Department of Energy [ibid.]. Upon entering the program, Disney began testing electric vehicles in its maintenance area. The pilot program was so successful that the company bought 20 additional vehicles, which showed a short foray of the envisioned progress into the real world. Again, this example is useful to illustrate Disney's interest in technological innovations: first for financial reasons, second for obtaining and mastering access to such inventions, and third — perhaps — for an altruistic spirit. Although it is unknown whether they are still carried out today, such activities provide further evidence of the initial purpose of EPCOT: to test prototypes of systems and technologies to later be introduced into the market. Following is a summary of the changes *Test Track* has undergone since 1982 to date in order to contextualize the final reflections.

In 1982, *World of Motion* was a pavilion with a cylindrical building that resembled a wheel. The main attraction was intended to tell the history of transport from the invention of the wheel until present time. The tour began with various scenes in which reference was made to the power of our feet, the discovery of raft transport, the domestication of animals, and the invention of the wheel. There followed scenes illustrating the Renaissance, which displayed the work by Leonardo Da Vinci and his drawings of transport means that were utopian for his time. Another section showcased the inventions relating to the era of steam engines and the industrial revolution. The tour reached its final scenes with representations of bicycles, airplanes and even a car transporting a family wearing hats with Mickey Mouse ears.

Following the tour through the historical scenes, guests moved on to a simulator intended to take them to space while listening to a story: "It's fun to be free!" Once the simulation ended, visitors entered *CenterCore*, a space with a detailed model of a futuristic city while the narration concluded by saying:

Yes, our world has indeed become a world of motion. We have engineered marvels that take us swiftly over land and sea, through the air and into space itself. And still bolder and better ideas are yet to come, ideas that will fulfill our age-old dream to be free; free in mind, free in spirit, free to follow the distant star of our ancestors to a brighter tomorrow. [*World of Motion* transcript, 1982 quoted in Pedersen, 2011, p. 117].

The future envisioned in this first version of the ride was directly related to freedom achieved through the ability to move. In this sense, only scientific-technological

innovations would provide the human being with true freedom to be and think. This notion of progress goes back to the narrative of the World's Fairs from the early and mid-twentieth century, in which applied science was considered as aimed at the production of consumer goods and the practice of consumption as a "public liberation" of the population [Herrera-Lima, 2016]. A future built on the basis of the acquisition of goods, in this case of transport, in order to feel "free."

After leaving the simulator, guests used to step into a space in which General Motors displayed several exhibits with its latest products and services already available or under development, including one that gave rise to the *Test Track* ride as it is known today, *Concept 2000* or *Design 2000*. This exhibit allowed riders to design a modern vehicle. According to General Motors reports, the cars exhibited in this area showed wear corresponding to 7 to 10 years in just one month, which helped the company to know how the public used the vehicles and which components were the ones that presented greater deterioration [Pedersen, 2011].

When the contract with General Motors came to an end in 1992, the company's attitude towards the pavilion had changed dramatically, probably due to the bad reviews that labeled the attraction as expendable. From 8 million annual visits in the first years, by the beginning of the 1990s only 6.5 million visits were being recorded. This situation as well as an economic slump due to the decline in sales were the reasons why General Motors started renewing its sponsorship only year after year. Thereafter, in 1996 it decided to continue sponsoring the pavilion only if a complete refurbishment was made, shifting the focus exclusively onto cars.

World of Motion was closed down to give way to massive renovation which lasted just over three years. In 1999, the newly opened *Test Track* invited riders to experience the tests that any General Motors vehicle undergoes. The tour began with a vehicle climbing a small slope to start the tests: performance on hard surfaces, brake efficiency, behavior in extreme temperature changes, performance in evasive maneuvers and high-speed engine operation, at which point the car reached 100 km/hr in a few seconds. Once the vehicle entered the building again, the ride came to an end and riders could enter the new version of *Transcenter*. In this space you could find various exhibits and simulators that addressed automotive transportation issues. Guests could not leave the pavilion without walking through the General Motors gift shop called *Inside Track*.

With such refurbishment, the focus of the storytelling shifted from the benefits of efficient mobility systems to the production process of the sponsor's vehicles. Herrera-Lima [2016] explained that the demonstration of the production processes of goods is also an exhibition strategy, as guests are introduced in an immersed environment and incorporated into the tour "in a way, to process the walking visitor as well" [p. 191]. Despite the success of *Test Track*, the sponsorship by General Motors came to an end in 2009 when the company officially filed for bankruptcy. However, just one year later the company would be fully recovered and focused on globally boosting its key brand: Chevrolet.

Two years elapsed before General Motors, with its Chevrolet division, was ready to re-sign a sponsorship contract at EPCOT. This time it was an important investment allocated to finance improvements up to \$300 million, which made *Test Track* the most expensive attraction in the world at the time. While the basic concept of the

ride remained the same, this time the guests' level of immersion in the attraction changed completely. Now, all riders can create their own conceptual vehicle of the future and test it in the simulator. The vehicles created by the users can then compete with each other in tests that measure their power, capability, responsiveness and efficiency.

In this new version of the ride, not only is the idea of transport reinforced as an essential element of the progress of any city, but a democratizing narrative about the use of science and technology is also included: it is the depiction of a citizen-consumer actively integrated in the plans for the future [Herrera-Lima, 2016]. Science and technology are at the service of a comfortable and pleasant future, not only as a result of the capitalist system, but as a result of a corporate effort to produce vehicles that are friendly to the environment that has suffered irreparable damage, much of which is due to the indiscriminate use of cars, a factor that is never mentioned in the ride. According to Eric Jacobson, Vice-President of General Motors, this new *Test Track* version would provide an optimistic view of the future [General Motors, 2012] by showing the "benefits" that efficient and environmentally friendly vehicle design can achieve.

In the first part of the tour, riders are invited to design their own cars using a touch screen that provides instructions. An interesting aspect is that the designers of the attraction assumed that the guests would have sufficient skills to understand the variables that influence the final characteristics of their vehicles. Depending on the shape, size and type of engine chosen to design a car, its responsiveness, efficiency, overall capability and power can be calculated. For example, setting all the features to the top notch results in a large engine that will have good capability, but little efficiency in ecological terms. This part of the tour invites guests to play with the different variables and choose those that best suit their tastes and needs, resulting in a range of very different vehicles.

Once a vehicle has been designed, a message on the screen requires the guest to scan their *MagicBand*⁶ or park ticket, moving it closer to a slot to wirelessly save the design and subsequently test it in the simulator. The objective of *Test Track* is to show how any design must pass the tests prior to being launched onto the market in order to offer the most efficient and safest vehicles to consumers. Before boarding the simulator, riders must scan their *MagicBand* or park ticket at the gate to upload the design they created earlier. Once inside the simulator, riders can see on a screen how their cars perform in each of the tests, ending the tour with a winner.

During the tour, riders can hear phrases that describe each of the tests such as "Commencing SimCar offroad and extreme weather sequence" or "Engaging eco-scan for aerodynamic efficiency." This is the only spoken storytelling throughout the ride and is available only in English, although given the nature of the ride it is not so necessary because its function is descriptive, whilst the physical space is able to build the story by itself. It is important to mention that *Test Track* is one of the most successful attractions at EPCOT. Waiting times can reach up to two hours during the high season, and its success could be attributed to two elements: the technological novelty factor [Sandifer, 2003] that attracts and invites the public to

⁶*MagicBands* are wristbands that wirelessly synchronize personal data at different contact points around the parks. By wearing and scanning them, users can access the parks, their photos and even their hotel rooms.

experience the tour regardless of the queues, and the familiarity with the proposed theme as automobiles are a narrative element the majority of guests can relate to.

We are dealing with an exhibit the narrative strategy of which is constructed starting from several elements: the benefits of scientific-technological innovations, the importance of efficiency in current mobility and the commercial strengthening of a brand like Chevrolet. It is important to acknowledge the change in the discourse on mobility which took place over the 20th and 21st centuries. Initially, the automobile — as well as any means of transport — was considered the leading element of the progress of humanity, using words such as “freedom” to describe the benefits these products could offer. Although the automobile still is one of the main actors in our daily life, thanks to various efforts made to give visibility to the environmental issues derived from such progress, automotive companies are committed to offering efficient engines and reducing the environmental impacts of their use. However, it should be said that they have not always sought such efficiency or sustainability.

In *America as Science Fiction*, Bruce Franklin recovers the contribution of *American Ground Transport*, formulated in 1974 by the US Senate Subcommittee on Anti-Trust and Monopoly, which tells how the great companies of the North American automotive industry systematically and intentionally destroyed urban electric transport routes. In fact, between 1935 and 1956, General Motors bought more than 100 electric transport systems in 45 cities and turned them into scrap metal, replacing them with transport lines that employed buses manufactured by GM itself [Herrera-Lima, 2016, p. 213].

This fact is crucial to understand that the corporate actions by companies are subjected to economic interest. The decision of automotive companies — starting from Chevrolet — to invest in more efficient mobility systems such as electric cars was dictated by commercial demand, not by real beliefs underlying a commitment to the health of the planet. Similarly, thanks to marketing strategies, a person who owns an electric car is now perceived as more “progressive” or even more “conscious” than someone who still uses gasoline or diesel vehicles. In this sense, caring for the environment is being commercially exploited when sold as the desired future and has been associated with a social status of moral superiority. Thus, the narrative that seems to propose a transition to different ways of conceiving the relationship with the environment is overshadowed by the prevalence of the consumption of processes and products [Herrera-Lima, 2016].

Finally, it is important to point out that the environmental impact that car emissions have had over the years is never emphasized. The fact that vehicles are one of the main sources of CO₂ emission into the atmosphere is strategically omitted. In the case of *Test Track* it is also necessary to “interpret” what is not shown. Rose [2001] explained that what is left unsaid can be as powerful as what is said. The storytelling of this ride only shows the effort of the company to mitigate such impacts by adding the word “efficient” and a green leaf logo to the initial design interface. Artfully, the reason why a characteristic such as efficiency is important is never mentioned. The proposal for the future then goes from selling a type of progress built thanks to better and larger machines — regardless of their efficiency — to one built by sustainable machines.

Test Track is the attraction that makes most use of technology to tell a story, one about the manufacturing of Chevrolet vehicles. It is also the largest marketing showcase in the park, which reflects the company's current economic situation and its desire to penetrate the international market. The present and future of land transport is presented as a result of technological innovations that make it possible to test various vehicle prototypes and improve their technical and mechanical features.

The narrative of progress

All narratives are modeled after social practices [Van Leeuwen, 2005]. In its first version, *Test Track* presented a narrative focused on the production of automobiles, making it clear that it has an industrial capability in the automotive world and positioning the guest as a spectator of the process. This approach was still a reflection of the industrial mentality that permeated the development of the United States during the 20th century. After its refurbishment, the guests became responsible for producing their own automobiles, leaving the company as an expert actor that ultimately offers its models as vehicles that combine all the elements of efficiency in an environmentally responsible way. In this sense, the current narration aims to transform the social practices connected to mobility, giving it a sense of environmental care to continue to justify its existence.

The theme parks of *The Walt Disney Company* have become a landscape in which corporate visions converge with the political and historical reality of the United States and the world. In this park, the image of the future is built through storytelling strategies and practices that have progress as a guiding axis. EPCOT presents an optimistic future full of possibilities for humanity, without mentioning events such as wars, crises or environmental impacts; this is a notion of progress encapsulated in the period between wars that has not tried to face the reality of today.

Because of the great influence of World's Fairs, capitalism and the desire of the United States to consolidate itself as a world power, this narrative of the future is still used in the park today. A narrative in which progress is presented as one without disruption, uncertainty or complexity, the purpose of which — dictated by corporate interests — is to secure a privileged and exclusively positive symbolic position in the collective imagination regarding the role of science and technology in the world. In a few instances, such as *Test Track*, the breakdowns of the so-called progress are addressed as elements of persuasion and not discussion or critical analysis of social practices. Caring for the environment by using more efficient cars is used as a marketing factor, not as an element that encourages reflection on the impact that motorized transport has had on society and the environment.

The increasing industrialization of the world and its effects are not treated as issues in any of the park's spaces, as it would imply showing an undesirable aspect of progress to the public. In this sense, the narrative deliberately omits such negative effects because they are messages that do not sell, and therefore do not serve private interests in the economic and political spheres. This particular space of science and technology communication is therefore a device providing education and training to consumption by introducing a sample of how social life is transformed through the consumption of the technology that is showcased [Herrera-Lima, 2016].

EPCOT's fake reality, sold as legitimate, is built on ideas underlying a specific ideology, one that expresses the interests of the subjects and institutions that have

access to the greatest amount of resources [Thompson, 1997]. This is how sponsorships act as a way to acclaim, strengthen and exercise symbolic power by building cultural capital around the so-called progress. Therefore, EPCOT has established itself as “a device for introducing and consolidating cultural hegemony” [Herrera-Lima, 2016, p. 345].

Clearly, the narrative of progress in EPCOT is not one without an agenda. The park does not intend to confront the public but rather buy its complicity through a consumption model. This strengthens the symbolic meaning of the message and favors the creation of a truth to exercise it as symbolic power in this space.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

References

- Beard, R. (1982). *Walt Disney's Epcot center: creating the world of tomorrow*. U.S.A.: Harry N. Abrams.
- Crawford, M. (2015). *The progress city primer*. U.S.A.: Progress City Press.
- General Motors (9th November 2012). *Chevrolet, Disney inspire design innovation with Test Track*. URL: https://media.gm.com/media/us/en/chevrolet/news.detail.html/content/Pages/news/us/en/2012/Nov/1109_testtrack.html (visited on 11th April 2019).
- Gomery, D. (1994). 'Disney's business history: a reinterpretation'. In: *Disney discourse*. Ed. by E. Smoodin. U.K.: Routledge, pp. 71–86.
- Herrera-Lima, S. (2016). *Del progreso a la armonía. Naturaleza, sociedad y discurso en las Exposiciones Universales (1893–2010)*. Guadalajara, Mexico: ITESO. URL: <http://delprogreso.iteso.mx/>.
- Pedersen, R. (2011). *The EPCOT explorer's encyclopedia: a guide to Walt Disney world's greatest theme park*. U.S.A.: Epcyclopedia Press.
- Pimentel, L. (1998). *El relato en perspectiva: estudio de teoría narrativa*. Mexico: Siglo XXI.
- Rose, G. (2001). *Visual methodologies. An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*. London, U.K.: SAGE Publications.
- Sandifer, C. (2003). 'Technological novelty and open-endedness: two characteristics of interactive exhibits that contribute to the holding of visitor attention in a science museum'. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 40 (2), pp. 121–137. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.10068>. (Visited on 17th June 2019).
- Smoodin, E. (1994). 'Introduction: how to read Walt Disney'. In: *Disney discourse*. Ed. by E. Smoodin. U.K.: Routledge, pp. 1–20.
- Thompson, J. B. (1993). *Ideología y cultura moderna*. México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.
- (1997). *Los media y la modernidad. Una teoría de los medios de comunicación*. Argentina: Paidós Ibérica.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics*. New York, U.S.A.: Routledge.
- (2008). *Discourse and practice: new tools for critical discourse analysis*. New York, U.S.A.: Oxford University Press.

Author

Daniela Martin. A researcher specializing in science communication, social psychology and urban planning, she is a member of Origami, a science and culture communication consulting firm working for governments, universities as well as international organizations. She is currently an Adjunct Professor at ITESO, Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara in Mexico. E-mail: tapiocatundra@gmail.com.

How to cite

Martin, D. (2019). 'EPCOT theme park as a science communication space: the Test Track case'. *JCOM* 18 (04), A09. <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.18040209>.



© The Author(s). This article is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution — NonCommercial — NoDerivativeWorks 4.0 License.
ISSN 1824-2049. Published by SISSA Medialab. jcom.sissa.it