

Fitting the Glass Slipper:  
The Iconography of Cinderella's Castle

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Figure 1. 1969 Rendering of Cinderella's Castle  
by Herbert Ryan.

If the shoe fits, sell it. At the epicenter of the design for Walt Disney World (WDW) is the Magic Kingdom, which begins with Walt Disney's ideal *Main Street, USA*, leading to the focal point of happiness, hopes, and dreams: Cinderella's Castle. This monument to the American dream is the central icon of Disney's vast entertainment empire, that today is a multi-billion dollar industry, boasting over 18 million guests per year.<sup>i</sup> Cinderella's Castle still stands today, overlooking Walt's kingdom of happiness, technology, and magic - both geographically and iconographically. In other words, it is both the literal and figurative image onto which all of Walt's memorable characters, adventures, and destinations are projected. This rags-to-riches Castle, resonates around America not only with Disney movies, but also with social, political, and economic facets of American culture. But what does it mean to be an icon of such an expansive and fictional enterprise? How has a simple fairytale come to mean much more than poor girl becoming a princess? This paper will look into the history and development of Cinderella's Castle and how it has morphed, both physically and symbolically, into a symbol of arguably the most powerful company in the world.

Walt Disney was one of five children, having grown up in Chicago, Illinois. He spent most of his childhood and teenage years drawing and making art. His brother, Roy O. Disney helped Walt to get him on his feet in the advertising business, which led the way for the brothers making a living, selling cartoons to various companies. Their studio, which they called "Laugh-O-Grams," ended in bankruptcy a few years later. Walt and Roy then moved to Hollywood, where they would make their first hit cartoons such as *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* and eventually the beloved *Mickey Mouse*. In 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* premiered and became an instant success, despite the Great Depression at the time. After their first successful full-length

motion picture, Walt Disney Studios would continue to make many more instant classics, including *Cinderella* in 1950. In 1955, Disneyland opened as an immersive, three-dimensional experience of the classic movies that Walt Disney Studios had created.<sup>ii</sup> Due to over-crowding of businesses around the California location, Disney secretly purchased 8,350 acres of swamp land in Florida in 1965 in hopes of creating an Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT) within a magical world of Disney. While Disney World was under construction, Walt Disney died of lung cancer on December 15, 1966. Roy Disney continued the construction, which was eventually finished in 1971, adding “Walt” to the park’s name, in honor of his brother.<sup>iii</sup>

Today, the resort expands over 40 square miles, containing 27 themed hotels and 4 themed parks, each sporting its own iconic landmark: Animal Kingdom’s Tree of Life, Epcot’s Spaceship Earth, Hollywood Studios’ The Sorcerer’s Hat, and most notably Magic Kingdom’s Cinderella’s Castle.<sup>iv</sup> The unmistakable castle was designed after the palace featured in Walt Disney Pictures’ *Cinderella* (Figure 2). Its form was based on a variety of real castles, such as those of the French nobility at Versailles<sup>v</sup> and Fontainebleau<sup>vi</sup> (Figure 3). This castle in WDW is considered an “upgraded” version of the original Sleeping Beauty’s Castle in Disneyland, which is much more modest in its facade and shorter in height. Both of the Disney castles, however, boast a moat surrounding the fortresses, are the center of fireworks displays every night in the parks, and are at the geographic center of their respective parks (Figure 4).<sup>vii</sup> So how exactly did an imaginary cartoon quickly become not only the icon for a Magic Kingdom, but also symbol for a multi-billion dollar industry and phenomenon?

Ernest Sternberg, an American scholar of urban planning, discusses tourism from the point of view of iconography. He explains that “tourists are tourists because they want to com-

compensate for their secular, disenchanting, mundane lives through a temporary exposure to the other - to the adventurous, foreign, ancient, or spectacular.”<sup>viii</sup> In other words, tourists want Disney World. For argument’s sake, Walt Disney was a marketing genius. He was able to manipulate not only his movies to appeal to the American audience’s emotions, but also his theme parks to immerse his guests into the worlds that he had made them already fall in love with through his animated pictures. Josef Chytry, managing editor of *Industrial and Corporate Change* at Haas School of Business of UC Berkeley, describes how Disney draws emotions such as happiness, aliveness, adventure, romanticism, and thrill out of his audiences through both film and environment. As he noted, Disney uses the “collective memory” to create a rich and emotional experience upon entering Main Street, USA, with Cinderella’s Castle in the background. This collective memory is developed through a generalization of the park guests’ idealized lives, along with memories and experiences of Disney films, from *Snow White* (1937) through *Frozen* (2013). Chytry states that “in this format, the ‘present’ was either non-existent or manifested as the emotional experiences of the guests.”<sup>ix</sup> As a result, the guests have a feeling of “owning” this happiness when drawn into this three-dimensional fairytale.

Let’s visualize how this works. The park guests get off of their ferry after much anticipation of seeing the flagging blue tips of their childhood fantasy palace. They walk through the arches underneath an All-American train station to what they would expect to be a fantasy come true, but instead it is a quaint square, resembling an American town. The buildings combine an array of eras (lending to the timelessness of the park) and have American frontier and colonial facades. There are old-fashioned jalopies humming about, and a modest flag pole, sporting our proud stars and stripes. Small shops, a town hall, a fire station, and not a castle in sight. Disney

designed *Main Street, USA* to be “the belonging attractions of a Main Street, California; the pragmatic modernity of ready-made cities; and the spiritualist community.”<sup>x</sup> But then the guests turn the corner and are hit with a wall of magic and childhood: a picturesque view of a typical American town in the foreground, leading all the way up to a soaring vision of fantasy, hopes, and dreams: Cinderella’s Castle (Figure 5).

Jan Bialostocki, scholar of Renaissance and Baroque art history and Director of the Warsaw Museum of Fine Arts, defines “iconography” as “the descriptive and classificatory study of images with the aim of understanding the direct or indirect meaning of the subject matter represented.”<sup>xi</sup> Ernest Sternberg, American scholar of urban planning and professor in the school of Architecture at the University of Buffalo, offers another definition that expands upon the idea of classification by outlining how the act of *making* an icon functions.<sup>xii</sup> In other words, according to Sternberg, an icon contains two parts: what is represented and what it represents. Taking this concept to Disney’s creation, it is fair to suggest that Cinderella’s Castle is a symbol of Walt’s own personal success. This rags-to-riches story, emblematic of the American Dream, echoes with the Grimm Brothers’ classic tale. Even the inside of the castle is covered with mosaics of the transformative story of Cinderella as a mistreated house-wench to a fabulous princess. Put simply, Walt’s monument to his own success is at the geographic center of the “Happiest Place on Earth,” thereby implying that this fantasy of the American Dream is available to all. To further reinforce this point, he surrounded the castle with smaller areas that resonate with this same ethos - lands of USA, Tomorrow, Adventure, Frontier, and Fantasy - which are encapsulating, within a small space, the vast landscape of the American Dream. As Disney understood, it’s important, from a business and artistic point of view, to create a symbol that anyone can relate to.

So while on the outside, this castle is a fiberglass structure, borrowed from European styles and a children's movie, its interior landscape represents something much more important to both its designer and its audience, whether consciously or not.

It's no wonder that this symbol of the American Dream became not only the icon for the Magic Kingdom and Walt Disney World, but also the logo for Walt Disney Pictures. Up until 1985, the logo for Walt Disney Pictures was just text at the beginning and ends of the movie. The logo was changed to the iconic castle (a sort of combination of Sleeping Beauty's and Cinderella's), featuring a magical arc overtop, "Walt Disney" in the signature font of the creator, and set to the music of "When You Wish Upon a Star" (Figure 6).<sup>xiii</sup> In 2006, the updated (and current) logo was hence-forth released.<sup>xiv</sup> The new design features a three-dimensional, CGI fly-over of the castle at dusk with fireworks, the typical pixy-dust arch over top, and the theme of "When You Wish Upon a Star" kept as is (Figure 7).<sup>xv</sup> Whether 2D or 3D, flat blue or bursting with variety, the Walt Disney Pictures logo has kept the same crucial concepts for decades: Walt's signature, the pixy dust, the music, and Cinderella's Castle. All of these factors remind us at the beginning of every movie that if we believe in ourselves, and with a tiny bit of Disney magic, anything is possible. So again, just like the experience of the Disney Theme Parks, we feel a sense of ownership to the adventure, happiness, and magic about to ensue in the film, keeping in mind that Disney has all control in the end.

While Cinderella's castle is an icon for "The Wonderful World of Disney," the Wonderful World of Disney is an icon for culture in America. Henry Giroux, American and Canadian scholar and cultural critic, explains that there is a battle for cultural power in America, and Disney is at the vanguard. He notes that "through its ordering and structuring of popular representations,



Disney mobilizes a notion of memory that parades under the longing for childlike innocence, wholesome adventure, and frontier courage.”<sup>xvi</sup> In other words, Disney rewrites history and culture, through its movies and theme parks, to promote the white, middle class, patriarchal society as the “American culture.” Susan Miller and Greg Rode, professor and PhD candidate for English and Writing at the University of Utah, define culture as “actual people, who have collectively been shown some, but not other, images.”<sup>xvii</sup> Disney, in affect, “screens and sanitizes” the reality of culture into something much more comforting and digestible, in turn creating an idealized society for the American consumer. This concept manifests through a variety of sexist, classist, and racist facets that are embedded in our favorite childhood movies, represented by our favorite childhood castle. This American Dream that is projected onto Cinderella’s Castle is defined insofar as Disney’s definition of “American.” In other words, if one wants to achieve greatness and success, one needs to follow the “correct” culture. After all, Cinderella was a white woman, suppressed and enslaved by a female power, who soared in her socio-economic status by means of magic and a white, rich man.

Other examples of this “screening and sanitizing” can be found in movies such as *Song of the South* (1946) and *The Jungle Book* (1967). Miller and Rode delve into the racial classification and distinction that is displayed in these two films. *Song of the South* depicts African-Americans in their wooded communities in the deep south, away from the white, upper class society, enjoying their time and content with their segregated lifestyle. After many years of protest from the NAACP, Disney eventually discontinued this film from being shown in theaters or released in America after 1972. *The Jungle Book* is less obvious in its racial slurs, but nonetheless continues the Disney voice of the sanitary culture. In this film, the young boy Mowgli, raised by wolves in

the jungle, goes on an adventure to find the man-village, led by the silly bear Baloo. When they reach the scene with King Louie, who is an orangoutang and has a distinctive black voice, he sings the ever popular tune “I Want to Be Like You” to Mowgli, which sets up a racial distinction between the “black” apes and the human.<sup>xviii</sup> Other racial moments can be seen throughout Disney with the black crows in *Dumbo* in addition to the countless white, or “white-washed” heroes and princesses. The race issues are just one example of how Disney has used its “innocent” cultural screening capabilities to shape the way Americans think and act in society.

In addition to race and class, the Disney Kingdom has traditionally established a sexist and patriarchal society through the “Disney Princess.” Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, professor of Fairy Tale Traditions at Monash University, discusses the patriarchal conditioning that is manifested through the Disney Princess phenomenon. She notes how Cinderella’s Castle is a timeless and perpetual reminder of the presence of the Disney Princess, which was invented by Walt and is representative of the Disney Empire. The castle is a symbol of princes choosing their brides, mermaids changing their appearances for men, and women being treated as objects, even when seen as the “heroin.” In addition to the principles of our princesses and heroins, Do Rozario laments the misogynistic principles that can even be seen with our favorite evil villainesses. According to her, characters such as *Maleficent* and *Ursella* are *femme fatales*, invented to show what happens to women when they go against the grain of their male, royal counterparts.<sup>xix</sup> All of this harkens back to the Castle, where Walt proverbially sits on his throne, looking out onto the “perfect kingdom” that he’s created. Perhaps a bit dramatic, but not entirely incorrect.

With all of this power in the cultural battle, there comes great cultural responsibility. Within the past decade, Disney has seen the error of its past ways and has changed its course,



making new, stronger, and more diverse characters and adventures in response to America's recent embracing of diversity and change. Princess Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) was the first black princess for Disney movies, which opened up the gates to a newer generation of diversity and forward thinking. *Wall-E* (2008) displayed ecological and "green" undertones for a brighter future with its post-apocalyptic view of Earth due to our carelessness of pollution and waste. Most recently, *Frozen* (2013) expresses an array of forward thinking in terms of a more feminist outlook on the "Disney Princess." In fact, the villain in this movie is a prince, who (spoiler alert) deceives one of our heroines, Ana, into loving him in order to acquire her kingdom. This is in direct opposition to the *femme fatales* that Do Rosario describes in Disney's movies, up until the 2000s. In *Frozen*, we see a complete liberation from the need for a prince with Elsa, who leaves her kingdom to start her own magical life alone, away from the pressures of society. Practically every little girl and boy today know her hit song "Let it Go," which won the 2014 Academy Award for Best song, along with many more awards and critical acclamations.<sup>xx</sup> This song is the anthem of a new generation of thinking for Disney and the culture it represents, belting out themes of individuality and pride in our differences. Disney is now moving into a direction of diversity and change, which is materialized through not only its movies, but its parks as well.

Today, for the holiday season, Cinderella's Castle features a projection display called "A Frozen Holiday Wish" that transforms the iconic castle into Elsa's ice palace (Figure 8).<sup>xxi</sup> Through technological advances, the Imagineers (park designers) have created a way to physically and figuratively project a new meaning onto this timeless landmark. This is an example of how Disney has not completely torn down their old ideals, but rather has changed the way this

icon is perceived by the public. Perhaps this is an attempt to make amends with its viewers based on its old ideals and “social screening” ways. Or maybe the movie creators and Imagineers are still milking *Frozen* for all its worth. Perhaps it’s a bit of both.

As per Disney’s legacy, this industry is still making money based on the public’s desires and ideals. It is shamelessly adjusting to its audience’s morals in order to rake in millions and turn out happy and empowered consumers. This is no different than the Cinderella Story that America was drawn to in a post-war, modernist society. Perhaps Disney is now stuck in its own iconography, which is preventing them from moving forward with the world’s changing ideals. Perhaps this is why they have to add technology and spectacle to their permanent icon of Cinderella’s Castle.

*Wishes: A Magical Gathering of Disney Dreams* was ignited in 2003 and features a fantastic show of fireworks set to music behind Cinderella’s Castle (Figure 9). The show features music from our favorite Disney classics, with a common theme of wishing and dreams coming true. It begins, of course, with the single stream of pixie dust arching over the icon, resulting in tingles down the spines of every Disney-lover, reminiscent of the feeling of their favorite movie about to start. “When you wish upon a star...” *Celebrate the Magic* was added to the beginning and end of the fireworks display in 2012, as a technological fantasy come true. It features state-of-the-art projections onto the Castle, which make it look as if it is being drawn, built, and transformed into all of our favorite Disney tales.<sup>xxiii</sup> The Imagineers have found the perfect way to project, figuratively and literally, every Disney movie onto this central icon. It is a technological facade to cover its old ways of the patriarchal, racist, and classist ideals in order to reveal a

dawning of change and individualism, while still holding to the traditions of nostalgia, innovation, and imagination.

Cinderella's Castle will always be engrained into our collective memory. Despite its variety in the interpretation of its symbolism across generations, races, genders, it still remains one of the most powerful symbols in the world today and represents much more than just an attraction at a theme park. The remarkable story of transformation - from Walt's start, through the building of the castle, through Walt Disney World's success, through the movies and ideals that the Castle came to represent, through its technological changes of today - remains cyclically true to its own identity. Cinderella's Castle is a rags-to-riches idea, story, landmark, icon, empire. It continues to reign as the influential symbol of society and culture, both symbolically as it pertains to Walt Disney Studios and literally with the newest technologies of projection. And whether the underlying drivers of this icon are financially or morally based, it still remains a powerhouse that will not be diminished any time soon.

And the glass slipper fit perfectly. And the Prince found his true Princess. And they all lived happily ever after.

*A dream is a wish your heart makes  
When you're fast asleep  
In dreams you lose your heartaches  
Whatever you wish for, you keep*

*Have faith in your dreams and someday  
Your rainbow will come smiling thru  
No matter how your heart is grieving  
If you keep on believing  
the dream that you wish will come true*

- "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes," *Cinderella* (1950)

Figure 1. (Cover) 1969 Rendering of Cinderella's Castle by Herbert Ryan.<sup>xxiii</sup>



Figure 2. Shot from Cinderella the Walt Disney Pictures film of Cinderella looking at the castle.<sup>xxiv</sup>

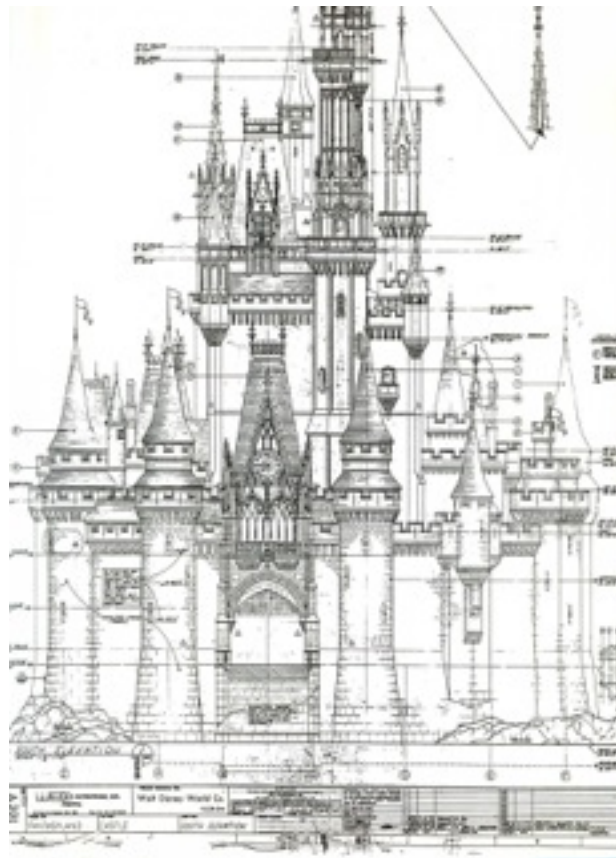


Figure 3. Construction drawing of Cinderella's Castle.<sup>xxv</sup>



Figure 4. Park map of Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom, feature Cinderella's Caste at the Center.<sup>xxvi</sup>



Figure 5. Cinderella's Castle from Main Street, USA. Magic Kingdom, Lake Buena Vista, FL.<sup>xxvii</sup>

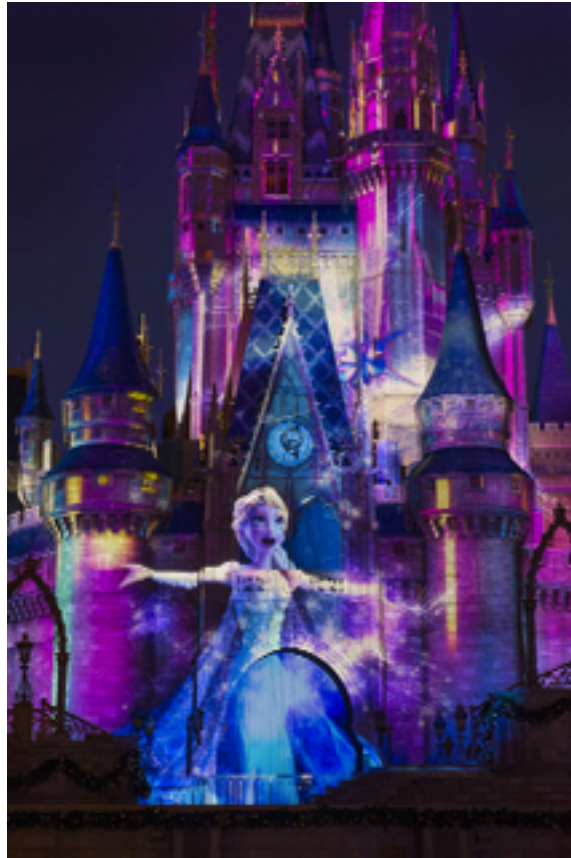




*Figure 6. Walt Disney Pictures logo from 1985 - 2006.<sup>xxviii</sup>*



*Figure 7. Walt Disney Pictures logo from 2006 - present.<sup>xxix</sup>*



*Figure 8. Cinderella's Castle with the "A Frozen Holiday Wish" projected onto it.<sup>xxx</sup>*



*Figure 9. Cinderella's Castle with "Wishes" fireworks display behind it.<sup>xxxi</sup>*



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- xiv With movies such as *Meet the Robinsons*, *Wall-E*, and *Frozen*.
- xv Matt Williams, "Walt Disney Pictures," *Closing Logos*, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://www.closinglogos.com/page/Walt+Disney+Pictures>.  
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- xvi Henry A. Giroux, "Memory and Pedagogy in the 'Wonderful World of Disney,'" *From Mouse to Mermaid* (1995), page 46.  
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- xvii Susan Miller and Greg Rode, "The Movie You See, The Movie You Don't," *From Mouse to Mermaid* (1995), page 87.  
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- xviii Susan Miller and Greg Rode, "The Movie You See, The Movie You Don't," *From Mouse to Mermaid* (1995), page 88-95.  
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Figure 3. Construction drawing of Cinderella's Castle.

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Figure 4. *Park map of Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom, feature Cinderella's Castle in the Center.*

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Figure 8. *Cinderella's Castle with the “A Frozen Holiday Wish” projected onto it.*

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Figure 9. *Cinderella's Castle with “Wishes” fireworks display behind it.*