

Colonizing the Imagination: Disney's Wilderness Lodge

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Today, as in the past, ideas about things natural must be examined and criticized not only for ways they help us understand the material world, but for the quality of their social and political counsel. Nature will justify anything. Its text contains opportunities for myriad interpretation.

Disney's Wilderness Lodge in Orlando, Florida is one of thirteen themed resort hotels located on the Disney World property which claim to offer guests a seamless themed experience; the chosen theme is constructed into the hotel and its environs and is highlighted at every possible level (other themes include the Caribbean Beach Resort and the Grand Floridian Hotel) in order to **provide the visitor with a real experience of the themes**. The Wilderness Lodge offers guests an experience similar to one they might have in a National Park Lodge. In distilling the essence of National Park lodges found throughout the (northwest) United States and Canada, Disney draws on a long social and cultural history of America since first contact in the statement and representation of this theme.

But, there is more. **Disney wants to offer its guests the opportunity to stay in a hyperreal National Park Lodge setting, the real thing only better, wilderness without dirt or danger**. While other Disney hotels offer guests an "authentic" Polynesian experience, or a taste of turn-of-the-century Floridian elegance, the Wilderness Lodge is billed as a "tribute to the great lodges of the early 20th century" with the motto "don't just stay, explore". The Lodge and its surroundings, which most closely resembles the northwestern United States, are entirely human-created, offering the visitor a natural experience in an artificial setting. As a part of Walt Disney World, Disney's Wilderness Lodge takes its place as another attraction in **a theme park which deals largely in the world of fantasy achieved through the "careful screening out of undesirable elements and the staging of special activities expressing archetypal ideals."** The special event in this case is the Lodge itself, and **the archetypal ideals are nature, wilderness, the frontier spirit, the experience of the great outdoors, Native Americans and the myth of the West**.

Like the tourist industry in general, **Disney is in the business of constructing, organizing and selling experience; in doing this Disney is intimately involved in the production of landscapes and the selling of stories about nature. Disney World uses space to create and reinforce ideologies, particularly ideologies which are supportive of capitalism and consumption.** Disney World is "a kind of spatial analogy of a monopoly capitalism that incessantly produces rhetoric about free enterprise." While it is significant that we are physically bounded and directed within Walt's World, what is more "important is that our thoughts are constrained. They are channeled in the interest of Disney itself but also in the interest of the larger corporations with which Disney has allied itself, the system of power they maintain, and the world of commodities that is their life's blood." This need on Disney's part to continue to constrain their guest's thoughts is part of their overall interest in selling as much as possible. **In the end, is nature just one more commodity, another aspect of life to be brought under Disney's corporate control?**

We refer to the pattern that connects all of the diverse attempts to manufacture experience as colonization of the imagination. By shaping people's experiences and interpretations of popular cultural events and symbols, Disney and other thematic engineers are not merely regulating impressions of those things, they are reconfiguring people's imaginative capacities. **The Wilderness Lodge is literally changing what people understand wilderness or nature to be, and this in turns shapes their views of the real thing.** Lest it seem that we are exposing some sinister mind control conspiracy, it is more accurate and less distracting to rest an interpretation of what is happening in

Orlando and elsewhere on a material base. First, the Disney corporation is a massive commercial empire that is vastly successful because it has both responded to a consumer impulse and created other impulses. It is worthy of study simply from the standpoint of its contributions to the redefinitions of capital economies at the close of the millennium. Second, related directly to the first point, the pervasiveness of [Disney commerce has created a well-coated marketplace: Disney theme parks, Disney stores, Disney films and videos, Disney television, and constant secondary references in popular culture to Disney symbols](#). However, to comprehend the Wilderness Lodge simply as a crass commercial operation is to ignore Disney's highest ideological intentions, and to misinterpret the influence that it and other attractions is having on our understanding of reality. After all, [Disney is not alone in commodifying nature](#).

[The colonization of the imagination is of one piece with the larger project of colonialism that characterizes the development of North American life](#). In our rush to comprehend the colossal mercantile and technological changes that have dominated life over the past two centuries, we must not forget the religious, social and cultural forces which lay mostly dormant in a commodified society. It is these other forces which we believe contribute significantly to the popularity of themes such as the frontier and wilderness at the Wilderness Lodge. More important for our argument in this paper is the changing character of reality. In colonizing the imagination what the Lodge and similar projects are accomplishing is a non-hostile takeover of the reality that underlies themed experience. Disney is successful at [turning wilderness into a conceptual product, one that is adaptable, delimitable, endlessly pliable and available](#). And then [creating a new reality](#) in which to experience it. Moreover, the experience of this consumption conditions our understanding of the real thing, that is natural places which have not yet fallen under the empire. We turn to the work of Albert Borgmann and other commentators on the emerging „hyperreality“ for clues on how to interpret these changes. This kind of analysis adds helpful texture to a more traditional materialist analysis of the commodification of experience.

This essay provides a tour of the Wilderness Lodge through an anthropological lens. The interpretations we present are based on the field work accomplished by one of us (Cypher) and extensive review and analysis of literature about cultural constructions of nature, themed experience, hyperreality, the American idea of the frontier, Native American representations, and of course, Disney. The original motivation for this work was a desire to understand the outer boundaries of the contemporary practice of ecological restoration. The Wilderness Lodge more than any other place represented an apeiron of one kind of restoration: the total transformation of one place into another according to clear ideological objectives.

We begin with a „free“ tour of the Wilderness Lodge, providing background on the Disney approach and style, an overview of the facility itself emphasizing design elements that play on specific themes, and how these designs fabricate reality while creating another reality. This latter point illustrates a phenomenon that literary theorists refer to as a simulacrum: [a referent with no true origin](#). Here, we begin a discussion of reality and hyperreality, which occupies the remainder of the paper. We take up with Borgmann's account of hyperreality as one which not only is congenial with an analysis of commodification, but also connects us to his larger project of [understanding material and epistemological changes in an advanced technological setting](#). Reality, he argues, [is being supplanted by a hyperreality that is more pliable, rich, and brilliant, but that this comes at the cost of dissolving continuity and authenticity](#). The capacity to engineer realities or environments that are „better“ in the sense of being safer or more entertaining than the real thing, causes anxiety when subjected to the extraordinary reach of the Disney corporation. Whatever mixed and composite message North Americans now have about nature, these are bound to be shifted toward

an appreciation of a hyperreal nature à la Disney. We conclude by speculating on the significance of such changes: **Should we be concerned about a colonized imagination of nature? Are we obliged to resist?** Is Disney undermining its own cultural capital by constantly reproducing things that don't have their origins in any substantial? Finally, we reflect on the practice of ecological restoration, by viewing **the Wilderness Lodge as an extreme example of what can be accomplished in reengineering nature to reflect our images of the past.** In terms of on-the-ground issues, ecological managers (e.g. park staff) and restorationists of all kinds will have to confront these conceptual questions on a daily basis as they work on reclaiming what they believe to be natural.

Disney's Vacation Kingdom

The development of tourism in the United States over the last forty years and the development of the Disney empire go hand in hand. Walt Elias Disney's original intent in building his first theme park, Disneyland, was to offer families a safe and happy place in which to holiday together. **Disney sanitized the forms of the carnival and the amusement park, turning them into the first three dimensional Disney-version;** "Disney's park was a cleaned-up version, aimed at a middle-class family audience." Along with the construction of nature for the tourist trade, Disney was constructing another kind of world for families to enjoy, and his world also incorporated and constructed nature. Disney's constructed realities have reached their North American peak at Disney World just outside Orlando, Florida, in which the Disney Company has produced three separate theme parks, a shopping village and several other attraction areas on a 28,000 acre property wholly owned and managed by Disney. Disney's latest nature theme project, which is under construction at Disney World and slated to open in 1997, is an animal preserve style park, Animal Kingdom, where guests can go on safari and observe actual „wild“ animals in their „natural“ habitat.

While Disneyland may have had more innocent beginnings as strictly an amusement park, Disney World has no such naiveté. Stephen Fjellman reminds us that Disney World, **underneath the glamour and the fun, is a business, and a very big business** at that. This business is based on selling commodities, and the more things that can be made into commodities, the more things there are to sell; **"The corporate project is to bring everything associated with human life into the market and thus under control."** This success of this project at Disney World is phenomenal, no matter how you measure it; visitation keeps increasing and the money keeps rolling in. **Over 30 million people visit Disney World every year, this figure alone indicates Disney's far reaching cultural and economic influence.**

The Wilderness Lodge: The Great Indoors

Disney's Wilderness Lodge is the latest attempt by Disney to **sell nature, wilderness and the experience of the great outdoors.** **Earlier representations of nature and wilderness brought to you by Disney were largely achieved on the big screen; Disney's own nature films dominated this genre of film for almost twenty years.**

The Wilderness Lodge captures the spirit of nature tourism which is now seen as part of the American national character and gives it a Disney spin, or as the Disney people might say, sprinkles it with pixie dust from Tinkerbell's magic wand. The Wilderness Lodge fits into Disney World in a very special way, far removed from the more obviously landscaped areas, straddling a fine line between wanting to look natural in its surroundings and wanting to toot the Disney horn about how much „imagineering“ it took to create a forest in a Florida swamp. Without the care and planning of a Disney product, the Wilderness Lodge might fly in the face of the overall message about nature presented throughout Disney World, in which a "reordered and rationalized nature 'naturalizes'

discourses of progress." Yet Disney absorbs the Lodge into this doctrine of progress by emphasizing certain elements of the story of the Lodge. [The human struggle against the wilderness is the tale told here, and the bringing the frontier under human control, both by physical and ideological means, places the Lodge and its history firmly within the ideological bounds of Disney.](#)

It is easy to forget that the Wilderness Lodge is, in essence and in reality, only a hotel, and while it is landscaped to resemble the northwestern United States it does not have a National Park outside the sliding glass front doors. The extreme attention to detail displayed at the Lodge is in keeping with the legendary detailing care taken virtually everywhere at Disney World. The measure of accuracy achieved at the Lodge was obviously a point of pride with everyone connected with the Lodge. Informants who had active roles to play in the Lodge and/or its development spoke of the „seamless“ feeling of the Lodge, and were very proud of their contribution to this evocative and accurate atmosphere.

Walt Disney's Wilderness Lodge is one of Disney's Premium Resorts, the equivalent to a four-star hotel. The Lodge has 725 rooms, four restaurants and lounges, heated swimming pool, bike and boat rentals, laundry facilities and a small store. The in-house description reads: "Disney's Wilderness Lodge Resort is based upon a romantic vision that returns the visitor to the era of the Early West; the stage for the American epic where the sky was always blue, Indians were noble warriors, wild game roamed freely over wondrous landscapes, and the pioneer and the frontier were given heroic proportions..." The cost for this romantic vision starts at \$169.00 a night, in 1996 dollars, and so far the Lodge has been extremely successful. It has been almost fully booked since its opening.

It is apparent that [Disney consciously chooses to represent certain kinds of thought and expression about nature](#), wilderness and the culture of nature in the Wilderness Lodge. Disney takes the information which it has chosen to represent very seriously, and has carefully constructed a narrative about and for the Lodge which uncovers, enhances, highlights, illuminates and demonstrates the Disney culture of nature at every opportunity. This ideological work is done while [the Lodge shelters you, entertains you, and feeds you with that Disney touch, an all-encompassing, yet unobtrusive cocoon of authenticity, fantasy, and good feeling.](#)

The Lodge itself is impressive. As one turns off of the main highway and onto the road which leads to the Lodge, Timberline Drive, the atmosphere and surroundings change immediately, but subtly. The road curves and winds, the vegetation begins to change, the trees are taller and conifer. The main gate to the Lodge appears around a curve in the road, constructed of stacks of logs supporting a stretched „skin“ arch painted with designs inspired by Native American art. The road divides in two, the centre meridian is planted with low scrub pine bushes and small redwood trees supported by unobtrusive poles and guy-wires. The road begins to incline slightly, and the Lodge itself comes into view for the first time, its green many-leveled roof and log walls, reminiscent of Tinker Toys, rising out of the trees. Passing by beds of wild flowers arranged in neat borders, you drive under a covered entry way to be greeted by a valet dressed in something that looks like a park ranger's uniform. You leave your car with one of these trusty looking rangers and are directed towards the entrance. The walls around the massive wooden doors appear to be built of huge blocks of granite. The wooden doors stand permanently open, and the double layer of glass sliding doors opens to let you into the cool, air conditioned lobby of the Lodge.

It takes a moment for your eyes to adjust to the light, which filters into the room as if through mountains and forest. The lobby is enormous. Over seven stories high, it is encircled by wooden balconies at each level. Huge stripped logs support the room at its perimeter, and bundles of logs

topped by animal carvings reach for the timbered roof. At the far end of the lobby is a fireplace, its chimney nine stories of stratified rock formations. Two totem poles face each other from across the lobby, each reaching almost to the ceiling, decorated with carved and painted images familiar to those who have seen the carvings of the Native people of North America's northwest coast. The stone floor is rough granite around the room's perimeter, giving way in the centre to highly polished stone inlaid with designs suggesting Navajo and Hopi blanket patterns. Iron and stretched skin teepee-shaped light fixtures hang from the ceiling; the iron work depicts Native people on horseback pursuing buffalo. Several groups of Mission-style furniture are placed in the central part of the room, sitting on rugs woven with Native-looking patterns. A replica of a Native American ceremonial headdress is displayed behind one of these groupings in a glass case; another glass case displays beadwork on pairs of moccasins, leather belts and bags.

Passing through the lobby and out into the central courtyard, flanked on three sides by the U-shaped Lodge, one follows the path of „Silver Springs Creek“. The creek's source is in the lobby itself, bubbling up through the stone floor. It passes out of the lobby and into the courtyard, dropping down into a small, graceful falls. Hugged on either side by wildflowers, the creek appears to run into the swimming pool and to be a source for both a hot and a cold spa (the occurrence of both a hot and a cold pool side by side from the same source is not explained). From the pool area the creek picks up again, and running under a wooden walkway, finally culminates in the spray of the one hundred and eighty foot „Fire Rock Geyser“ at the edge of the lake; this computer controlled piece of Disney „imagineering“ goes off every hour on the hour (just like clockwork because it is clockwork!). The wooden walkway serves as an observation site for the lake and the geyser, and there is also a rocky, rough-hewn observation point mid-way between the lobby and the lake which overlooks the pool and the courtyard. Looking out over the geyser and the lake gives a view of Discovery Island, Disney's nature preserve, brought to you by Friskies, the cat food people. An accredited zoological park, Discovery Island houses several species of birds and small mammals for the (paying) public to view, and they run educational programmes for school children and summer campers.

The materials used in building the Lodge would seem to be wood and stone, but the majority of what looks like wood and stone is actually carefully molded, coloured, and sometimes hand painted, concrete. The massive stone blocks which seem to make up the foundations of the building are concrete, as are the rocks out of which are carved the Observation Point and steps. These rocks, and those that artfully surround the geyser, are in fact hand painted concrete attempting to look completely natural, right down to painted-on lichen, mold and algae stains (these artificial stains now compete with the real thing). The geyser itself is a highly complex, computerized water-theatre which is connected to the three different water systems which service the pool area. Nothing is what it seems to be at first glance, or upon closer examination.

The theme of the Lodge is carried out in minute detail everywhere possible. The main floor bathrooms have Native-inspired designs on the wall paper. The concrete paths around the outside of the building have animal prints impressed into them. A small lake on the side of the Lodge has the outline of a buffalo planted into it with cattails, this bit of horticultural art can be viewed from rooms on that side. At the front entrance are two topiary figures of buffalo, an adult and a baby. The piped-in music which plays both in the lobby and in the courtyard is largely made up of themes from western movies, with a little light bluegrass thrown in for variety. These details are not taken lightly, by either Disney staff or guests. Disney people take pride in these details, and guests at Disney World make a game of seeking out Disney's smallest attempts at realism.

Disney's Wilderness Lodge is also a part of the nature-as-meta-theme project of the Walt Disney Company, and it reflects the values of progress, exploration, control and individualism evident in other Disney representations of nature and wilderness. As with most Disney themes, the theme of the Wilderness Lodge is difficult to distill, for it incorporates many ideas and concepts. The Lodge is built to represent a National Park lodge from the turn of the century and, as touched on before, in this way it attempts to straddle 150 or so years of American history. The Lodge also attempts to straddle geography and landscape; the Lodge and its landscape are built to represent the northwestern United States' native art and totems are worked into the interior design, redwoods are conspicuous outside, and the menu boasts salmon and elk steaks' yet this representation of landscape is strictly thematic in itself. An exact location (state, region, county or otherwise) in the northwest is never specified and elements which would fit comfortably in Montana are mixed with those which would only be found in the state of Washington; the northwest, therefore, becomes a theme unto itself.

What is created by this layering of theme upon theme is a simulacrum, or a simulation which has no true original. In the absence of an original, distinguishing characteristics can be cobbled together to suit the needs of the creators and designers. The honesty that typically accompanies a faithful and coherent original is unnecessary. Direct comparison is replaced by vague impressions, distant experiences, and the imagination. Going through the Lodge, one can pick out elements from other, real, places. The light fixtures closely resemble those at Jasper Park Lodge (in Canada) for example, but nothing is exact, it is bricolage at its most exact. This imitation intrigues and enchants, but it does not have much substance. Eventually the discontinuous elements begin to intrude, and the hot, humid air beyond the sliding glass doors contrasts too sharply with the coolness within and Florida is recalled.

The Forest for the Trees: Nature and Reality

"The detail is extraordinary. 'You may be proud of yourself for noticing something', says a Disney spokesman, 'but somebody thought to put it there.' And people do notice things, from the fake underbricks of Italy and the fake barnacles on the Japanese torii to the horticultural efforts....All these detailed differences make it difficult to see the forest for the trees"

Disney's vast material re-organization of landscapes have some impact on our ideas of reality and nature. In the construction and the presentation of the Wilderness Lodge, **the Disney Company consciously chooses a story to tell about nature, and the relationship humans have with nature.** The story it chooses is tied to Disney's need to conduct its business, and it reflects values and ideologies which serve these purposes first, make us feel warm and good about nature second, and hopefully make us critical about this construction of nature not at all. While the Wilderness Lodge has a story to tell about Disney as a company and a cultural icon, it also has things to say about North American ideological trends regarding wilderness, nature, culture and consumption.

Recent technological developments have added further dimensions to what is thought of as real, and the development and use of such concepts as virtual reality, artificial reality, cyberspace and hyperreality are forcing the boundaries of a reality which at one time seemed easily contained, described and experienced by conventional theoretical and practical means. The simulacra created by Disney for the provision of themed experiences challenge commonly held definitions of reality. **As physical constructions they seem to be real, but the experiences they provide are not real; while you appear to fly over London with Peter Pan it is a simulated flight.**

A reverence for simulacra is evident at Disney's Wilderness Lodge, for example in the way in which the Lodge attempts to present itself as a composite of the lodges of the United States National Parks. National Parks have long been held in high regard in the United States as living symbols of America's greatness. Original designs for the Lodge included a heavy emphasis on the legend of Teddy Roosevelt and his parks, and while Teddy is gone from the Lodge in name, the idea remains tangibly in two carved bears which hold up each side of the bar. To design and build the Lodge the design team took a six week field trip to National Park Lodges in Yellowstone, Yosemite, Jackson Hole and Glacier National Parks. The purpose of this trip was not only to pick up elements of design, but to **capture the feeling and essence of the parks and their lodges, "how nature feels"** said one informant, and to transport this more ephemeral aspect of the parks back to Disney property in central Florida.

The task of getting the "correct vernacular" for the Lodge, with reference to National Park Lodges is accomplished, according to one informant, in countless ways, some of which are transplanted directly from existing National Park properties. The patterns inlaid into the floor were inspired by those at the Ahwahnee Lodge (Yosemite), the exterior stone and log construction is taken from the Jackson Lodge and the Old Faithful Inn. The walkway and outlook in the courtyard of the Wilderness Lodge which overlook the pool and geyser are "exactly like they build them in Yellowstone National Park" (same informant), except that the Disney-versions are made of concrete formed, coloured and painted to look like stone, while those at Yellowstone are made of stone found in the park.

It is not simply the composite nature of the styles which makes Disney's Wilderness Lodge a simulacrum, it is the fact that the Lodge reproduces and represents something which does not exist, a mythical super-lodge. Like many things created by Disney, **it is truly a copy without an original.** At its heart the Wilderness Lodge represents not only artifacts and a stylistic genre, it attempts to be a better-than-real, or hyperreal, Park Lodge.

Albert Borgmann, an American philosopher of technology, provides a theory of technology that accounts for a distinctive pattern underlying contemporary life. His theory of the „device paradigm“ includes a decomposition of focal things‘ things which affirm bodily and social engagement with things that matter deeply to us into two constituent parts: a commodity and machinery. A live performance of music by someone one both knows and admires, for example, is reduced when played back on a compact disc. Here the commodity is the music itself and machinery the infrastructure (amplifier, cd player, power cables, etc.) required for it to be heard. The device paradigm is consequential in its steadily pervasive character. A few encounters with recorded music, or skillful understanding of the limits of recorded music to capture nuances of the real performance, are inconsequential. This changes as recorded music becomes the dominant way we taken up with music, and experience of live performance, or performance itself, is measured according to its technological character (in the same way that franchise and fast food becomes a measuring stick for contemporary gustation). Borgmann identifies several other important factors in a theory, a few of which are directly relevant to our case. Machinery tends to become part of an enlarged background of consumption with the result that commodities are foregrounded predominantly without reference to cultural context and ecological implications. Consumption and commodification are fueled by the concealed character of the machinery; the world appears simply that it really is. The separation of foreground from background exaggerates a steady separation of actions from their consequences. The attribution of responsibility becomes more difficult to discern. This constitutes a significant moral problem.

The device paradigm fits our observations of the Wilderness Lodge closely. Through elaborate design and commercial intention concepts and experiences that are deeply imbedded in North American life national parks, the image of the frontier, indians, wood burning fireplaces are transformed into marketable goods. We procure these at the cost only of money. To experience a national park fully, for example, would involve a suite of skills, hardships, ecstatic experiences, and long term commitment to a place. Similarly, an appreciation of fireplaces, that is appreciation that has depth, requires close engagement with tending a fireplace, knowledge of sawing, chopping, stacking and drying of wood, the consolation of a warm fire on a cold winter evening, and the significance of a hearth. It is no surprise that the designers of the Lodge chose to have a wood burning fireplace (eight stories tall!) as the central feature of the lobby. **To consume something typically requires little experience.** A visitor to the Wilderness Lodge need not have any prior experience with such phenomena in order to have a pleasant visit. Depth of experience with frontier living is replaced by a mythic view of the frontier, distilled in the form of gift stores, design features, in-house newspapers, and promotional materials. **The mark of a successful „imagineer“ is to distill exactly the elements of a phenomenon that correspond with popular experience; not too many or the view becomes obscured and not so few or the image appears unworthy. Where these are difficult to distill, they are created.**

Portrayed this far, the theory of the device paradigm is bound to fall short. Too many people will notice the incongruity of a wood burning fireplace in the middle of Florida summer. No matter how fine is the attention to detail, eventually visitor sleuths will discern faults in the fakes. And, of course, what of the people who have had extensive experience in national parks, lived on the frontier, and so on? What happens when their depth of experience collides with the simulation? It is clear from our studies that what makes the Wilderness Lodge so popular, and of course the success of the entire Disney venture, is that **they attempt not simply to mimic reality, but to provide a setting that improves on reality.** The past is processed, edited and re-presented in the context of entertainment. This is what Borgmann and other commentators (Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco) refers to as „hyperreality.“

Borgmann's view of **hyperreality is a setting that is more brilliant, rich, and pliable than „real“ reality.** In his book, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, he hangs his analysis on the paradigmatic qualities of virtual reality. The allure of virtual reality as a technology is not its ability to convey reality, but to provide something that is a significant extension, perhaps an improvement, on reality. How is the Lodge a manifestation of hyperreality? **It is brilliant, highlighting the desirable elements of National Park Lodges, such as their natural settings and their use of natural elements like wood and stone in their architecture. The Lodge excludes the unwanted, there are no unpredictable wild animals and the road never needs to be plowed.** Keeping out undesirable elements takes on a different meaning at Disney World, the designers of the Lodge wanted to include deadfall in the construction of the stream and geyser formation, but it just wasn't possible at Disney; "the Disney janitocracy would be out there cleaning it up, we even looked at fiberglass deadfall, but it was way too expensive" (informant). Also in accordance with Borgmann's definition, the Lodge is rich, or better than real. The geyser goes off predictably every hour, no waiting, the guests can see native art without having to deal with native people, the geyser and the Grand Canyon are within easy walking distance of each other. Finally, the Lodge is pliable; **as an entirely created physical and cultural space the Lodge is quite obviously subject to the "desire and manipulation" of its creators.** Ultimately, the Lodge is a commodity, and because of this Borgmann would most likely find this place "alluring...but not sustaining."

While the public may wish to maintain their ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy in every day life (and this is itself debatable), they come to Disney World with the intent of living out fantasy and experiencing illusion. To their credit, the Disney people never deny that they are in the business of selling dreams, and the creation of simulacra is undertaken to provide guests a place in which to live out these dreams. Perhaps the success of the empire would collapse if people took too seriously their explorations. **Most approach the Wilderness Lodge (present writers excluded) for entertainment, escape, and wish fulfilment.** Cloaked in this fashion, it is easy both to overlook (or become fascinated by) flaws in the presentation and to marvel at the technological capability.

Louis Marin looks at Disney's representation of reality in terms of what he calls a "degenerate utopia (which) is ideology changed into the form of a myth." Marin sees **ideology as "the representation of the imaginary relationship individuals maintain with their real conditions of existence"; when this ideology is placed in an utopian setting and presented in a narrative format it is given mythical status, and becomes understood as something natural and common-sensical.** In order to accomplish this, Disney replaces the real world with an imaginary one. Guests to Disney's properties are complicit in this, and a willing suspension of *disbelief* is undertaken. This suspension of disbelief is taken very seriously by visitors to Disney World, and it is not uncommon to observe people who would ordinarily be unwilling to participate in make-believe play along with such things as people dressed up as larger than life size Dwarfs, going so far as to ask for Dopey's autograph, delighted when they receive it.

Once ushered into this new reality, visitors are bombarded with information which will make it coherent and acceptable. Disney has actually already started this process in the outside world through their massive distribution of films, other media products and merchandise, which tell the stories that are retold at Disney World, and stimulate the desire to live these stories by experiencing them at Disney World. Once within that world, however, it is these stories which become the way reality is experienced, their narrative structures are repeated and participated in by guests, in this way **"reality is changed into image," images are given equal values and by this sleight of hand fantasy and reality become interchangeable.** "This coming back of reality as fantasy, as a hallucinatory wish fulfillment, is in fact mediated by a complete system of representations designed by...Disney and constituting a rhetorical and iconic code and vocabulary that have been perfectly mastered by the narrator-visitor." The mastery of the code is crucial for the experience to work, for the world of Disney to turn the imaginary into reality.

Not only is Disney World creating a new reality, it is saying something about the very nature of reality. Through the use of hyperreality, reality is seemingly flexible, easily constructed by those with the right kind of imagination and the right amount of money. Disney's hyperreal island expands beyond the park, backing up their version of hyperreality with a context created through various media and shown almost around the globe; Disney is able to present their version of things and call it reality, blurring the lines between the real and hyperreal. The inevitable conclusion here is that Disney has created referents for their simulacra through the repeated telling in as many different ways as possible of the Disney version, thereby creating reality out of myth. **At what point does the hyperreal begin to become the real, where does the commodity become a focal thing, rather than a device, and begin to have a certain kind of telling continuity (pace Borgmann 1984)?** Disney does its best to create this continuity, to make their products appear to take on the importance of things.

Does Disney do this deliberately to undermine the value of reality, or are they responding to an existing erosion of reality's value? They would probably argue that they are providing a place for

people to live out their fantasies, sidestepping the fact that the fantasies Disney caters to are those that they themselves have created. Disney has perceived the richness of the hyperreal when compared to the real and found it very profitable indeed. Whether they are marketing Disney character halloween costumes or wilderness, **the reality is, hyperreality sells**. Given the attraction of hyperreality, and its apparent success for the Disney Company, this question becomes virtually meaningless, for Disney's mass marketing of the hyperreal will surely continue to undermine the value of reality, whether or not other forces also contribute to its devaluation. Remarkably, **relatively little attention has been given to the signal question of why it is that we should care about real nature (or more generally, reality)**. Borgmann has risen to the challenge in a recent essay, but one is left wondering whether such an argument matters ultimately in a rising sea of artificiality:

The philosophical challenge, of course, is to circumscribe this sense of reality in a way clear and precise enough to counter the suspicious of deconstructive postmodernism that advocates of a substantial reality are wistful and sentimental at best and patriarchal and fascist at worst. To fix our attention on a particular instance, how do we explicate the difference between a mountain in the Northern Rockies, covered with natural snow, and a skiorama in Los Angeles?

The difference, I suggest, is this. The mountain possesses a commanding presence and a telling continuity with the surrounding world. The skiorama, to the contrary, provides a disposable experience that is discontinuous with its environment.

Borgmann has accomplished the philosophical task of careful erudition, but will this clear exposure prompt a return to reality? **While people will certainly continue to attend real parks and wilderness areas, Disney's Wilderness Lodge will stand as a testament to the „imagineering“ potential of the hyperreal to transform continuous reality into themed experience**. The themed experience of nature will certainly have an influence on perceptions of the reality of nature and wilderness, particularly as things which make America, and Americans, unique. At a material level, we ought to be concerned about the implications this has for commodification. The traditional notion of commodities as material objects are being supplanted significantly by hyperreal experiences. There is, indeed, much more money to be made from hyperreality, and much more work required to comprehend its cultural and ecological effects.

Journey's End: Conclusions

"As Sartre might have put it, the world of Disney is a manifest case of bad faith"

What Disney attempts with **the Wilderness Lodge is nothing short of a re-colonization of nature as a conceptual product**. Disney commodifies and markets the *concepts* of nature and wilderness, and creates natural spaces in which to experience these concepts. In this way **Disney controls our experience of nature while we are in their domain, and colours our experiences of nature without**. Hence, we refer to this general process as one of colonizing the imagination. While the advent and progress of the tourism industry began this work in the management of space for the its own purposes, Disney takes this project to new levels in its actual creation of new space and new landscapes, rather than management of existing land. Disney takes a geographically and ecologically foreign ecosystem and its cultural signifiers and transplants them to central Florida, creating a simulacrum of wilderness experience that gives them unparalleled control over both ecosystem and experience. Disney's reduction of things to archetypes implies that a little verisimilitude goes a long way, even so far as to stand in for the real thing and offer an adequate representation and/or experience.

In order to control visitor experience Disney creates a simulacrum incorporating themes congruent with the ideal and the reality of national parks and provides guests with a themed experience within that construction. Themed experience relies on the creation of realistic physical and narrative contexts like the Wilderness Lodge in which people are able to experience things similar to what they might encounter in the real place; it is within the context of themed experience that Disney plays on visitor's perceptions of reality, nature and experience in order to communicate themes and concepts. Not only does Disney create this physical and conceptual simulacrum, it has generated its own referents for its creation by continually representing nature and wilderness in the popular media, especially television, over a forty year period. The viewers of Disney's nature specials on television are also those people who will visit the Wilderness Lodge and the messages of the Lodge make sense, they seem real, in light of the context which the visitor has received of Disney's version of nature. With this context intact, and the representations of nature and wilderness at the Wilderness Lodge, Disney is able to impart its ideological message to the viewer as seemingly part of the natural order of things.

We have suggested that the [creation of such places and the selling of the experiences designed for them is problematic, for it replaces actual experience with virtual experience and creates a form of hyperreality](#). Also, this hyperreal experience of nature is what the Wilderness Lodge provides that a trip to a real wilderness area does not. [Hyperreality and other artificial forms of experience are fast overtaking reality, replacing more immediate experience and perhaps, the immediate experience of reality itself. From an environmental standpoint, this replacement places people at a greater distance from a nature which requires their intimate involvement for its survival](#); Disney's Wilderness Lodge is another high-tech component of that distancing. By making nature a theme (Nature, The Great Outdoors) which can be experienced outside of a setting which most people would call natural, Disney's Wilderness Lodge becomes an example of the widespread character of artificiality in North American culture, and highlights the extent to which the world is constructed by humans for human interests. This highly constructed world, one teeming with hyperrealities foster endless availability of experience without the need for experience to occur within real spaces or contexts. The worry, following Borgmann's analysis of the nature of reality, is that the boundary between artificiality and reality will become so thin that the artificial will become the centre of moral value.

If the ability to make moral judgments with reference to reality wanes in favour of the artificial, or if we simply are no longer able to distinguish or care about differences between the real and the artificial, will nature become preeminently technological? What will prevent this development in the absence of a clear preference for reality? [If themed experience is, as we have suggested, a device, it is a part of a technological paradigm which privileges means over ends. When themed experience encompasses nature in such an immediate way as it does at Disney's Wilderness Lodge, nature, too, becomes part of an artificial reality and a device paradigm](#). The creation of nature by technological means, then, can be undertaken without thought to ends, results or the meanings that are generated by such acts.

This argument assumes that nature and wilderness are real, tangible places that *do* matter to us, that we care about them in ways that are both concrete and abstract, and that we can and will continue to distinguish them from artificial nature. [Artificial realities do not cause difficulties until they colonize reality and imagination, and confuse the traditional relation between mean and ends](#). With the increase in the artificial, particularly artificial nature however, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between the real and the artificial; ["As the art of simulacrum becomes more convincing, its fallout enters our bodies and heads with unknown consequences."](#) One of these consequences may be an increasing difficulty to value things as authentic and therefore unique. ["Who cares about](#)

authenticity with respect to an imaginary origin?" Once authenticity is no longer needed to make a representation meaningful, simulacra are all that may be left, nature remains only "of interest as spectacle." At a deeper level, artificial nature implies that the value of real nature is negligible. "Plastic trees? They are more than a practical simulation. They are the message that the trees which they represent are themselves but surfaces." The depth and value of things and places loses meaning in a world of infinite artificial possibilities.

Nature has been a subject of intense commodification throughout the industrial revolution as every conceivable thing was transformed into a product. Trees have multidimensional meaning, but in the books of economic rationalists and capitalists, they are forest products. Disney has moved this conversion one step further through the construction and marketing of themes. Experience has its own commercial value, and is evident with the Wilderness Lodge, it is remarkable how consistent and coherent such themes can be. However, the value we place on these conceptual products is changing in response to new, hyperrealities. What we are willing to pay, and what we expect in return, are increasingly structured the by themes themselves (i.e. the hyperrealities) instead of grounded in real trees, experiences, and so on. From a political perspective, this lends enormous authority to those in control of the themes.

Disney may also be unwittingly striking at the heart of its own core values with the Wilderness Lodge, which at once strengthens and weakens the argument it tries to make about the importance of authentic, made-by-God nature to the formation of American identity. If authenticity is at the root of this identity, then Disney's re-invention of the story of the great American West and how it shaped a nation and its people by artificial means undoes this legend in its very representation. If this landscape and this feeling can be created by Disney, what does this say about its inherent, natural, value, and the impact of this value on the American spirit? If it turns out that the landscape is not as real as we thought it was, does the identity of America gained through this landscape also come into question? If this identity sprang from contact with Nature how authentic can it be when its place of origin can be recreated by technological means at Disney's Wilderness Lodge?

While ecological restoration projects, which we mentioned early in this essay, are attempts to create actual, living, healthy ecosystems which may or may not incorporate cultural elements, the Wilderness Lodge is only a representation of an ecosystem and its cultural elements, with the cultural elements being the largest component of the construction. Disney does not claim that the Wilderness Lodge is a restoration of a national park, merely a tribute to the spirit of national parks. This tribute uses representation as a lens; "this simulacrum figures representation itself as an inert mirroring of a timeless, objective reality....the most pernicious aspect of this objectivist view is the implicit denial of itself as representation." All of the work that Disney does to highlight the fantasy of the Wilderness Lodge is overshadowed by the work they do to convince you of its realness, this bid for realism camouflages the fact that the Lodge is a representation.

In the case of Disney, who create their own referents, simulacra worlds for the simulacra forests, we learn to appreciate the authenticity of things which are human created, including a nature which we create at will. Further, we learn to appreciate and value those things which are authentically Disney, seeking out that Disney touch, searching for those mouse ears carved somewhere on the face of the Grand Canyon. It is the Disney version of nature which becomes the referent for experiences in real nature, not the other way around. With the building of the Wilderness Lodge as another representation of the Disney version of nature, Disney's project of colonizing the imagination has come full circle as regards nature, wilderness and the frontier.

