

Walt Disney's "American Century" and the *California Dream*



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In 1941, publisher Henry Luce declared the twentieth century “The American Century,” pointing to the rise of U.S. economic and geopolitical power. For Luce, the term was aspirational as much as descriptive, but by the 1960’s, the phrase was part of mainstream journalistic and scholarly discourse, used both affirmatively and critically, to describe the US role as a global power.

Yet beyond geopolitics, it was American popular culture—American movies, television, music, advertising images, fashion and amusement parks—that came to express and define the century, at least as powerfully as American military power or economic dominance. No figure is more closely associated with this *imaginative* dominance than Disney, and no place embodied “disneyization” more fully than California.

“Disney,” of course, refers first to a man. Walter Elias Disney was born in 1901, at roughly the moment economic historians believe the United States was overtaking Britain as the world’s largest economy. His life almost perfectly spans America’s rise from an emerging industrial nation to the world’s preeminent global leader and cultural power.

The years between 1955 and 1962—often regarded as the high-water mark of postwar American confidence and global prestige—also mark the period when Disney reached the height of his cultural influence while transforming his company into a new kind of entertainment enterprise that would find expression throughout the American built environment. When Walt Disney died in 1966, his ambition had expanded beyond filmmaking, TV and amusement parks to envisioning an experimental prototype of the American city. Much of that urban vision died with him. Within a few years, Vietnam, domestic unrest, and increasing international economic competition had begun to erode the confidence that had sustained the idea of “the American Century.”

In this course, we will explore some of the ways “Disney”—the man, the company, the films, the television programs, and the theme parks—both reflected and helped shape the ideals, landscapes, and national imagination of mid-century America. More specifically, we will ask how and why the *California Dream* became the most vivid expression of the American Dream and, in many respects, the lived experience of the American Century.

Week One: Walt’s Hollywood Dream to Disney’s *California Adventure*

We will begin with an overview of the American Century, talking about the ways that Walt Disney’s movies, landscapes and optimistic vision made California the imaginative center of the “American Century.”

Week Two: Disney Goes Hollywood

Walt Disney arrived in Los Angeles in 1923 and moved into his uncle’s house where he could see the new *Hollywoodland* sign that had gone up that year. In 1928, *Steamboat Willie* premiered, a groundbreaking animated cartoon featuring—in Disney’s words—“the mouse who started it all.” This week we will discuss *Steamboat Willie* and the *Silly Symphonies*, the cartoon series that revolutionized animation and filmmaking in general.

Week Three: Disney’s “Golden Age”

This week we will watch and discuss the film that was a pivotal turning point in the history of animation as well as an artistic and creative triumph: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The commercial success of that movie laid the groundwork for Disney’s modern entertainment empire. Many scholars have suggested that *Snow White* was an expression of the “American Dream,” but I will make a case for the distinctly California vision it reflected. We will also discuss *Pinocchio*, a film many historians regard as the artistic summit of Disney’s Golden Age. It also was an expression of Disney’s optimistic faith in self-transformation (“When You Wish Upon a Star”) a fantasy that resonates with the dream of California as a place where people reinvent themselves.

Week Four: Disney’s Three Wars: the 1941 Animators Strike, WW2, and the Cold War

Disney, in a letter to a friend describing the 1941 strike wrote “the entire situation is a catastrophe. The spirit that played such an important part in building of the cartoon medium has been destroyed...I have a case of the “D and D’s—disillusionment and discouragement.” The strike was settled 3 months later, but by the end of the year, the US was at war.

1941 marked the end of Disney’s first creative period. It was also a dark and uncertain time in Hollywood as well as in the US. That period would come to a real and symbolic end in 1955 with the opening of Disneyland. Walt’s “new” kind of theme park was to be his California utopia—a place that may have represented a corporate view of the “happiest place on earth,” but also embodied the youthful optimism, glamour, and “new-beginnings” spirit of postwar California.

Week Five: *Disneyland the TV show and Davy Crockett, King of the California Frontier*

In the mid 1950’s Walt shifted his creative focus away from movies and reconstructed his dream in a physical form. He also moved into what was, for Hollywood, enemy territory by embracing the medium of television. Through his weekly *Disneyland* television program (1954), Disney was able to finance and promote Disneyland, launch new franchises like *Davy Crockett*,

and integrate films, television, merchandising, and theme parks into a single entertainment system—a model that reshaped the industry. We will focus this week on the way that Disney's *Davy Crockett* was particularly salient as a California phenomenon, translating the frontier from a *place* into an *experience*—in effect, making California the place where Americans came not to settle the frontier but to remember, consume, and reenact it.

Week Six: Disney's Winter Olympics and his vision of the Future of American Cities

We will end our course thinking about the ways that Walt Disney's final projects responded to the unraveling of "The American Century" not with nostalgia but with increasingly ambitious acts of imaginative nation-building. The 1960 Winter Olympics recast America as the world's master of spectacle, the 1964 New York World's Fair presented technology as a source of democratic optimism, and EPCOT proposed that even the modern city could be reinvented through design and continuous innovation. Together these projects suggest that in the five years before he died Disney was attempting to replace the frontier myth that had animated nineteenth-century America with a new twentieth century California vision: a society that would continually remake itself through creativity, engineering, and carefully designed environments.

Assignments: to be watched before weekly lectures:

Week Two:

Steamboat Willie, 1928

Recommended: *Lullaby Land*, *Flowers and Trees*, *Who Killed Cock Robin?* *The Flying Mouse*, *Music Land*, *The Wise Little Hen*, *Three Little Pigs*,

Week Three:

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937

Recommended: *Pinocchio*, 1940

Week Four:

Education for Death, 1943

Donald's Crime, 1945

Recommended: *So Dear to My Heart*, 1948

Week Five

Davy Crockett, *King of the Wild Frontier*; selected episodes

Week Six

Walt Disney's *EPCOT*, 1966