

# Chapter 14

## Analyzing Disney's Early Exhibits as Installation Art Work

**Jonathan Lillie**

*Loyola University Maryland, USA*

**Michelle Jones-Lillie**

*Lillie Pad Studios, LLC, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter compares several Disney exhibits—particularly those narrativizing technological innovation—to immersive installation artwork in order to explore the importance of narrative and textual reference in creating powerful immersive installations as presentation of technological and scientific knowledge through multiple media. The narrative craft of exhibits such as the Ford Magic Skyway and GE Carousel of Progress, which Disney created for the 1964-65 World's Fair in New York, are compared to works within the genre of installation art, which has developed greatly since the 1960s. Similar to Disney, many artists have deployed immersive installation art exhibits to envelop audiences in a detailed aesthetic and conceptual narrative. Some educational institutions have also used experiential education installations, especially for teaching scientific concepts.*

### INTRODUCTION

If there are any media today that are truly reminiscent of critical theorist Theodor Adorno's critique of mass culture it would seem to be global mega blockbuster movies such as Disney's hugely successful *Frozen* (2013), translated into 41 languages with potentially a billion or more children being interpolated into its message. But Adorno and his Frankfurt School cohort were addressing the media of modernity and the über nation state of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas *Frozen* and like

phenomena are in certain ways very postmodern, especially if you prefer Fredric Jameson's (1991) popular definition that postmodern culture is the culture of advanced, global capitalism, with a few exceptions (such as the narrative breakout "In Summer" musical scene) *Frozen*'s storyline is very modern, sticking to the princess fantasy storytelling that Disney mastered almost 80 years ago with *Snow White* (1937). When Walt Disney began to sketch out his plans for Disneyland, which opened in 1955, he was explicit in this desire to bring the same narrative craft to rides and ex-

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hibits that he demanded of his feature films. He wanted visitors to (actually) step inside, immerse themselves in the story and experience the wonder and emotional connection directly. While the Disneyland and World's Fair exhibits are certainly not the first examples of the construction of large-scale, immersive narrative experiences, they have been extremely influential in the art, education, and cultural realms. At the 1964-65 fair in New York, Walt Disney wanted to demonstrate the vast improvement in installation/dark ride technology over the 1939 World's Fair (also in New York) and its influential future-gazing exhibits such as GM's "Futurama." In later years Disney, as well as other institutions such as museums and artists have drawn on these iconic exhibits to develop installations to convey concepts and trends in science and technology.

The 1960s also was a vital period for the development of installation art. Installation was one of several anti-commodity forms such as conceptual art, performance and body, earth works, and new forms of sculpture, which emerged in the 1960s (Morse, 1998, p. 4). However the birth of the genre is often traced back to the surrealist exhibits held in Paris in 1938, 1957, 1959 and in New York in 1942, which inspired the contemporary Art Installation movement insofar as the artists desire to display their artworks according to their own aesthetics rather than allowing a museum curator to take on that task (thus, defining the exhibition of the collection of artworks as an integral element of the artwork as a whole). The *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* was a surrealist exhibition held in Paris in 1938 with 229 artworks collaboratively arranged and displayed by 60 surrealist artists from 14 countries. Visitors were guided through a series of spaces that were considered by the artists to be a part of the surreal experience of viewing the art. The forecourt was the site for Dali's "Rain Taxi" (Figure 1), which was an old car covered with ivy. Inside the 'taxi' was a driver (a doll who's head was inside the jaws of a shark) and a backseat passenger (a

female mannequin with messy hair in an evening dress with live snails on her neck) who was sharing the seat with a few heads of cabbage, chicory, and a sewing machine. The exhibition completely transformed the exquisite décor of the Galerie des Beaux-Arts, a small Parisian venue with a lavishly decorated interior, so as to become more aligned with the aesthetics and mood of the dream-like artworks included in the installation ("Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme," 2013). An opening performance – French actress Helene Vanel, naked and wrapped in chains, hopped from a pile of pillows and began splashing wildly in a puddle – in conjunction with the treatment of the space and arrangement of paintings, sculptures and other objects, "served as elements in a completely surrealist environment" (Tomkins, 1996, p. 364).

Disney designed and produced four features for the 1964-65 fair: Ford's "Magic Skyway"; "The Carousel of Progress" for General Electric's Progressland Pavilion; "Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln" for the State of Illinois; and "It's a Small World", co-sponsored by Pepsi and UNESF. This chapter considers several Disney exhibits – particularly those narrativizing technological innovation – vis-à-vis immersive installation artwork to explore the importance of narrative and textual reference in creating powerful immersive installations as presentation of technological and scientific knowledge through multiple media. The narrative craft of exhibits such as the Magic Skyway and Carousel of Progress (Figure 2) will be compared to works within the genre of installation art, which has developed greatly since the 1960s. Similar to Disney, many artists have deployed immersive installation art exhibits to envelop audiences in a detailed aesthetic and conceptual narrative. Some artists, as well as educational institutions, have used experiential installations for addressing or presenting scientific concepts.

Prior to the 1990s, installation art was certainly explored, however the occurrences were sporadic and did not truly reach the height of its label as an artistic movement until the 1990s (Bishop, 2005,

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