Natural and social order at Walt Disney World; the functions and contradictions of civilising nature

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Abstract

Elias’ theory of the civilising process is used to show how the Walt Disney World Theme Parks construct social control over visitors without calling into question the official presentation of these visitors as free, choice-making, experience seeking individuals. Particular attention is drawn to the manipulation of images of nature as either ‘wild’ or ‘civilised’ to code, respectively, forbidden and legitimate places for visitors. In doing so, WDW is able to maintain civilised, non-coercive, discourse with its ‘guests’ who are, thus presented to themselves as responsible and self-regulating persons. Attention is drawn to the contradiction that this strategy creates between ‘authentic’ and ‘civilised’ spectacle particularly in the presentation of animals. It is noted how this creates an imperative to show only civilised animal behaviour but which, in turn, limits the means that the Disney Corporation can adopt in order to create a space that is free from the intrusion of uncivilised nature.

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to show how social order, ie normatively prescribed behaviour, is maintained in a setting that is superficially, associated with freedom from social constraints; the holiday. Although this is a well established concern in the standard literature on the sociology of tourism (Urry, 1990; Rojek, 1992; McCannell, 1973) the paper introduces a new line of investigation. This is how and why the voluntary compliance of holiday makers with frequently unstated rules, particularly concerning the boundary between permitted and forbidden spaces, is achieved through symbolic representations of the distinction between civilised and uncivilised nature; visitors to the theme parks are invited to identify themselves with the former and, in so doing, conform to the norms of civility. The particular novelty of this approach is that it brings together two normally disparate strands of sociological thinking; the theory of the civilising process as an unintended long term process of social pacification (Elias, 1982) and the literature on escape attempts as studies of how modern selves seek to maintain a sense of personal
autonomy within settings of routinised control (Cohen and Taylor, 1993; Rojek, 1992). The research setting, Walt Disney World (WDW), Florida, showed itself to be a site that contained exhibitions of the tension between civilised order and autonomy. It is also appropriate through its significance for sociological theory. As a site within which large crowds congregate, detached from the routines of everyday life through which taken for granted order is sustained, WDW has the potential to generate spontaneous, disorderly behaviour in the style of the carnival (Bakhtin, 1984) and the night-time economy (Hobbs et al., 2003) especially as it contains aspects of both such as the spectacular parades in the theme parks and the entertainment in the bars and night clubs of DownTown Disney. Even the most common activity at the parks, strolling, has the capacity to subvert order (de Certeau, 1984). The paper explains why this generally does not happen, that the norms of civility prevail, through reference to the coded use by WDW planners of symbols of civil order embedded in the construction of nature within the site. I do not claim that this is all there is to the maintenance of social order at WDW but that the symbolic construction of an orderly nature is an overlooked aspect of control and that it is particularly significant for Sociology because it requires the compliance of those who are controlled through their capabilities as culturally ‘wise’ agents. Consequently a substantial part of the paper consists of references to observed events and overheard statements that indicated how this process is accomplished. That is, park employees and visitors are presented as culturally located agents whose reflexivity enables both the maintenance of social order and recognition of anomalies, contradictions and failure to fulfil expectations created by that system of social order.

Thus this paper addresses a particular sociologically significant paradox affecting the modern experience of leisure. As several authors have noted (Urry, 1990; Rojek, 1993a) leisure is associated with freedom, choice and novel experience that contrasts with the constraint, predictability and routinisation of everyday life. Yet the resources that make leisure available are typically provided by bureaucratic organisations that generate constraining, predictable and routinised order (Ritzer, 2000). Hence ‘leisure industry’ is oxymoronic. A number of writers (Project on Disney, 1995; Wasko, 2001) have noted how this tension requires that the performance of routinised paid labour by leisure industry workers be hidden or disguised, particularly when performed in the presence of leisure-seekers. This extends to the point where the workers themselves talk about their labour in a euphemistic language that presents it as not-work (Evernden, 1992). This paper focuses on a relatively neglected aspect of the relationship between leisure and labour. This is the labour performed by the leisure seekers themselves (Gershuny, 2000). In particular, how leisure seekers are drawn into reproducing the routinised behaviour required by the leisure providing organisation, without their awareness that this happening. This latter aspect is significant as it maintains the appearance of the distinctiveness of leisure and, therefore, does not compromise the rationalised production of enchantment (Ritzer, 1999).
Data relevant to these issues was derived from three field trips to Walt Disney World, Florida undertaken in 1996, 1998 and 2001. In total nine weeks of observation was carried out. During this time I remained on site by staying in WDW hotels. Significant events were written down in note form at the time on site maps etc and written up the same evening. The intention was to study undistorted events in their natural setting therefore formal interviews with visitors and park workers were not carried out. This self-imposed restriction also resolved the potential ethical problem of conducting research at a location which is both a public space in that the public are admitted but also the private property of Disney Corporation. Therefore I did talk to other visitors and to park employees but my interactions were those of any tourist to the site with the exception that I was listening and observing attentively. I was accepted as a tourist, which I was, and if other visitors and park workers asked what my job was, as they did, I replied that I was a social scientist. This may have had certain disadvantages compared to Bruner’s (2004) experience of being both expert tourist guide and ethnographic researcher as he could and did question ‘his’ tourists directly about their experiences but my method avoided the role conflicts that Bruner encountered. My behaviour within the parks was that of any other visitor; I took photographs, consulted guide books and promotional literature and navigated with the aid of site maps. The fact that I was writing on these pieces of paper was not unusual or remarkable. Also my experiences were in general the same as those available to any other guest; I visited all theme parks several times. Additionally in 1996 I took part, as a park visitor, in a focus group organised on behalf of WDW on our experience of the park facilities and in 2001 I took advantage of the opportunity available to all park visitors on payment of a fee to visit ‘back stage’ areas. The field trips were like the typical vacation entirely self-funded. Despite this I do not claim to reveal the ‘lived experiences’ of theme park visitors. This is not due to methodological shortcomings but to the conviction that Sociology is the generation of second order constructions; a means of making sense of how people make sense of their world. (Schutz, 1971; Giddens, 1984). Even some of those who claim that research reveals lived experience acknowledge that what is written is narrative (Williksen, 2004). There is no primitive experience of reality that we recover, all interpretations are attempts to expand on what can be said (Gadamer, 1979; Ricoeur, 1974; Skinner, 1985). That is, the primary goal of this paper is to use theme park events to fuse currently distinctive forms of Sociological interpretation.

**Leisure and self-determination**

In their discussion of escape attempts Cohen and Taylor (1992) have identified a distinctive expression of the long-standing problem of social order. The core of their argument is that members of modern societies typically attempt to escape from the restrictions of the social system. More specifically, and rem-
iniscent of Weber’s ‘Iron Cage’ analogy, (Weber, 1930: 181) that we seek to escape the restrictions and routines of a bureaucratised social system through locating areas of autonomy and self-determination. However, their argument concludes, these attempts inevitably fail. This is said to be for many reasons, in particular, that our escape attempts typically reproduce the routine order from which we seek to escape because we are both typically dependent on the order that it produces and our sense of self has been constructed through this order. Therefore, in all our escape attempts we take the assumptions of the social system with us in our expectations and self-identity. This can be extended by noting that in Western societies the dominant ideology of the self is that of the individual (Abercrombie et al., 1986; Harre, 1998; Ketcham, 1987; Lukes, 1973; Morris, 1992). As individuals persons are required to display, inter alia, autonomy and self-direction. However, social integration is accomplished through the co-ordination of individual action in bureaucratic systems of routine order and regulation (Lyon, 1994; Borst, 1993; Jenkins, 1996). This creates a potentially contradictory relationship between self and performance for those employees of consumer organisations who interact directly with the consumer. The organisations that recognise the commercial advantages to be gained from presentation of corporate identity through the emotional labour of such employees require them to interact directly with consumers as friendly, authentic persons through a prescribed and restrictive set of rules (Hochschild, 1983). Hence the emergence of both ‘false fraternisation’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1992) and the deceptions and self-alienation of ‘surface’ and ‘deep acting’ (Hochschild, 1983). Therefore, the cultural system that requires us to express ourselves, and to expect others to present themselves, as individuals conflicts with the social system that is reproduced through the denial of individuality. This contradiction, applied to Cohen and Taylor’s thesis, is expressed in the conjunction of the legitimacy of the attempt to escape routine organisation and the typical failure of such socially embedded attempts.

A particular escape attempt identified by Cohen and Taylor is the holiday, which they associate with the organised routines of the tourist package, and the adventure holiday, from which we must return to the paramount reality of everyday life. Rojek (1993) extends this argument in noting that even adventure holidays are routinised by planners and local cultural entrepreneurs. However the writers of the Project on Disney co-operative note that these routines liberate the tourist from the need to engage in the daily planning exercises from which they seek escape (Project on Disney, 1995). In particular, post-tourism is presented as a reaction to the inevitability of routinisation that permits an ironic participation in the events as opposed to the package tourists’ acceptance of the authenticity of the presentation. Post-tourists are presented as not seeking escape through romantic flight into authenticity indeed ‘are not that fastidious about authenticity’ (Bruner, 2004a: 147). However, predictability and familiarity is appreciated, even sought out by visitors to Walt Disney World. The organisation of the theme park enables
desired experiences to be delivered efficiently, effectively and predictably. In the Florida theme parks the timing of parades, shows, animal feeding times etc. enable the tourist to develop a personal itinerary that maximises their preferred experiences but, given that the timing of events is fixed, the itinerary requires tourists’ conformity to the organisational schedule. Organisations encourage the ‘getting away from it all’ holidaymaker to construct planned itineraries through eg fast pass and early booking systems. Tourists themselves expect efficient delivery of services. The highlight of the daily events at Walt Disney World Epcot, Magic Kingdom and Disney-MGM are nightly sound and lights spectacles that precedes the closure of the parks. These popular events are followed by a mass exit mostly directed towards the bus pick up points. Although embarkation is, in the circumstances, accomplished quickly and efficiently it is common to hear complaints from tourists about the slowness of the process compared with other times of day. That is theme park visitors expect and demand ‘rational recreation’ (Rojek, 1993b) and decide for themselves when WDW has failed to meet these expectations. This contrasts with the routine description of Walt Disney World guests as passive and gullible that is promoted by the cultured despisers of theme parks (Fjellman, 1992; Project on Disney, 1995; Adams, 1991). Indeed this aspect of visitor behaviour could be seen as aligning them with post-tourism in that these visitors to WDW require not just authenticity but the verisimilitude or credibility that is provided by a good performance, ‘the best show’ (Bruner, 2004b); the delayed buses were bad show. This is an explicit normative priority of WDW practice. The backstage workplace areas and the employee manuals contain diagrammatic and written distinctions between ‘good show’ and ‘bad show’ and one of the main rules for park employees is to avoid actions and intrusions, eg Snow White turning up in Frontierland, that would disrupt the credibility of the show. Bruner’s (2004b) post-tourists in Bali found identical dances more or less acceptable depending on the perceived appropriateness of the setting disregarding issues of the historical authenticity of the dance. However, as will be seen below, an important theme of Walt Disney World is that it presents authentic nature in credible settings.

The link between post-tourism and the main theme of this paper is identified by Ritzer and Liska in their claim that post-tourism is associated with soft control and that in Disney theme parks, ‘No-one accompanies the visitors and insists they go through Main Street at least twice, or that they disperse themselves throughout the park. They do so because the park is structured to lead them to do so’ (1997: 106). Soft control is consistent with the images of freedom, choice and an absence of the ordinary for the consumers that theme parks promote. Walt Disney World in particular identifies the theme park experience with ‘magic’, ‘fantasy’, ‘spectacular’ and, most frequently, ‘imagination’ (Wasko, 2001). Tourists are encouraged to enter fantastic worlds, to explore and use the power of imagination. An important aspect of the presentation of the theme park experience as one of self-expression and self-discovery is the relative absence of explicit instructions and prohibitions.
on tourists’ movements. Where these are present their potentially offensive nature is softened by an explanation. For example, the sign at the Boardwalk instructing tourists not to feed the ducks tells us that this is in order to discourage them from becoming aggressive. However, across the road in the Fantasia mini-golf course there are coin machines that dispense food for guests to give to ducks. This apparently laissez-faire attitude to tourist movements supports the image of freedom and self-expression but seems strange given that in Walt Disney World there is an extensive ‘back-stage’ area where the magic is rationally prepared, where devices are created that will direct and instruct the tourists imagination and from which guests are typically excluded. Yet, there are few ‘cast-only’ signs, indicating to tourists that this area is off-limits. But such explicit instructions seem unnecessary. Tourists, despite the apparent spatial freedom, stay within approved limits. For instance, during the theme park parades it is noticeable that the only barrier between the spectators and parade floats is a yellow tape that is rewound as the parade passes. At the back of the parade marshals hold a soft rope behind which large numbers of spectators walk. Even though the tape and the rope are purely symbolic barriers no spectator attempts to intrude on the parade space. That is, despite the informality of appearances and explicit endorsement of self-expression, behaviour at the parks is marked by civil order. This term is used as a development of Goffman’s concept of ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman, 1973) the deliberate refusal to recognise the occurrence of a stigmatising infraction of the interaction order. Civil order refers to those processes through which actors’ attention is drawn in an informal and implicit manner to the existence of rules of conduct. Thus the actor is not addressed as one who is actually or potentially socially incompetent, as would be the case with an explicit instruction, but instead is presented with the self-image of a ‘civilised’ person, one who knows how to behave without needing to be instructed in the manner of an authoritative relationship. That is, the actor is enabled, through displaying voluntary compliance with unstated rules, to present themselves as full participants in the setting. This is a significant strategy for those consumer industries, such as theme parks, that succeed in their commercial goals insofar as they successfully to persuade the consumer to accept an affinity between their self-identity and the product, ie that they belong in this place. Explicit authoritative instructions would tend to prevent this from occurring by presenting the consumer as an outsider or stranger who, therefore, must be subject to control. This makes it difficult to exercise direct control over the behaviour of guests (Project on Disney, 1995). This is not to deny the occurrence of unruly behaviour at Walt Disney World. During a visit to the Haunted House at the Magic Kingdom I observed an adolescent girl standing behind the actress playing the part of a domestic servant pulling faces and making aggressive gestures; she was ignored by the ‘character’ and the audience. Walt Disney wanted to exclude roller-coasters from his theme parks because he believed they attracted unruly teenagers (Fjellman, 1992) and the Project on Disney (1995) report instances of assaults.
by guests on park employees. However, it is interesting that employees routinely refer to such delinquents as ‘Brazilians’ thus identifying uncivilized behaviour with the cultural outsider who, unlike, the vast majority of park visitors, speak neither English nor Spanish.

I will show how, in part, this civil order is achieved through representations of a natural order that codes information for tourists concerning the boundaries between permitted and forbidden places. This, therefore, enables both the protection of the organisation’s back stage whilst maintaining an impression of civility and freedom for the tourists. Central to this argument is Elias’ (1982) claim that the culture of modernity has been constructed through a ‘civilising’ process, key components of which have been the control of natural bodily functions and the removal of spontaneous acts of violence from public view, including from leisure pursuits (Dunning and Rojek, 1992). Wasko (2001) notes how the rare instances of violence and unruly behaviour at Walt Disney World spoil the holiday experience for the family guests that the park management seeks to attract. The development of pacification can be linked to an implicit Durkheimian understanding of modernisation in that the civilising process, a ‘structured but unplanned development towards greater self-control of bodily functions and violent emotions’ (Rojek, 1992: 21), is presented as a necessary consequence of the increasing complexity of social networks that modernisation causes. Pacification, therefore, becomes a main function of the modern centralised state (Stokvis, 1992). This is achieved, in part, through the control of what are now defined as ‘natural’ behaviours and, consequently, a human identity becomes detached from conceptions of nature, an indicator of which is the abandonment of the bestiary as a means of commenting on human behaviour and character (Hassig, 2000). Consequently ‘Nature’ becomes subject to the gaze of human objectivity (Evernden, 1992; Rojek, 1992). Bodily and emotional control has become an indicator of the possession of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1992), and, therefore, expresses the coincidence of civilised manners and social status. This argument can be extended to include the civilisation of external nature. During modernisation nature was externalised as an object of the civilised gaze and, in particular, of rational organisation, in, for instance, the construction through principles of geometrical regularity of parklands and formal gardens, initially for the gentry and later for popular consumption in public parks (Wise, 1993). It has been frequently noted that theme parks are rationally constructed spaces from which increasingly spontaneity has been eliminated (Wasko, 2001; Fjellman, 1992). Almost all writers on Disney note that the guest experience of the rides and exhibitions is controlled and uniform. Even spectacles that have a history and image of carnivalesque spontaneity such as the New Orleans’ Mardi Gras have become sites of detailed planning and organisation resulting in the ‘standardisation and homogenisation’ of the spectacle (Gotham, 2002; re also Ritzer, 1999). I intend to show that coding of civilised behaviour is accomplished through contrasting representations of nature that implicitly draws upon tourists’ ability to decode
natural symbols. That is, order within a formally free setting has to be typically accomplished in a covert, indirect manner. This is achieved through the implicit but shared meanings contained in natural symbols.

**Civilisation and natural symbols**

In order to maintain the leisure experience the tourist gaze must be directed away from dissonant images such as those of people at work; in order to maintain the image of freedom the tourist gaze must be directed in a non-coercive manner. Bryman (1999) has noted that a distinctive feature of leisure park presentation is ‘theming’. That is, the establishment of the distinctiveness and cognitive coherence of particular places through the use of representations and images that conform to a culturally familiar set. The set of themes, therefore, symbolically represents the boundaries between one defined space and another as well as providing a unified identity for a particular place (Ritzer, 1999; Project on Disney, 1995). Therefore, the guest always knows where they are and, more important, that this is a proper place for them to be. A particular instance of this in Disney theme parks is the rule for employees that characters must never appear in a thematically inappropriate setting, this is ‘bad show’ see above. In this way theming enables the rational organisation of spectacle which, further, enables it to be used as a means of control. This is exemplified in the symbolic architecture of the Magic Kingdom which is composed of separate ‘lands’, each with a distinctive themed identity. Each land is open to the sky and is, therefore, light and bright. Lines of sight along the common pedestrian area are unimpeded inviting the tourist to stroll, as Bryman states, visitors are ‘immersed in its atmosphere’ (1999: 32). However, although lands are physically adjacent they are enclosed and separated through the deployment of natural images, particularly the opposition between light and dark, that discourage intrusion into the liminal space between the ‘realities’. Access from one land to another is accomplished through a narrow dark passage beyond which there is no evident visual object. In order to see the attractions in adjacent lands it is necessary to go through the passage and turn at right angles. It is important to note that this is not a physical limitation in that there is no actual barrier to movement. Similarly at the Magic Kingdom the road that gives tourists access to car parks at the entrance to the site continues on to the back stage areas where the ‘cast-members’ work free from public gaze at the rear of the park. There are no signs forbidding tourists continuing along the road but the ‘off-limits’ identity of the space is symbolically expressed. Whereas in the tourist areas road signs are themed with images of Magic Kingdom characters, after the tourist parking areas the road signs, although this is still part of Walt Disney World, change to regular state symbols, signalling to tourists that this is not part of their route. Nature is also used to convey this message through the construction of the road as an ‘infinity curve’, that is a long bend, which, like the organisation of liminal spaces within the park, pre-
vents the tourist from seeing the view ahead. Park employees report that tourists almost always read these signals correctly and choose themselves to turn round and return to ‘their’ area. That is, despite claims to the contrary (Bryman, 1995), physical barriers within the parks including signs on access doors saying ‘cast members only’ are few, restrictions on movement are typically symbolically identified; requesting rather than demanding guest compliance. It is possible that the normal absence of such restrictions accounts for my shock at seeing large men checking IDs after 9pm at the entrance to the nightclub area of DownTown Disney that earlier in the day is an unrestricted area.

Representations of nature are used more directly within parks to control the movement of tourists. In Epcot there are a number of themed pavilions, eg Journey into Imagination, The Land, The Living Seas, Wonders of Life, Universe of Energy. Each of these is in a self-contained space off the main walkway around the park and each is approached by an open, wide path that introduces the theme of the pavilion. For instance, in front of the Living Seas pavilion there is a simulation of a wave breaking on a rocky shore, the pavilion itself is shaped like a sea-shell and the whole area is bounded by flower-beds that reproduce wave-like images in the blue-green colours that dominate the pavilion. The significant point is that these natural symbols are civilised. That is, as sites of uniformly mown grass, formal flower beds they express order. At the side of each pavilion is a narrow path that the leads to the back area that is reserved for park employees. This is not only dark but is also flanked by unkempt shrubs and scrub. It therefore represents disorderly, uncivilised nature. Again, Walt Disney World employees reported that tourists almost never attempt to walk down the side of pavilions even though there are no written signs declaring this to be a forbidden space. Similarly, the isolation of the pavilions from each other and from the nearby road is accomplished through the construction of berms that, as a fairly senior WDW employee told me, are intended to block out sights and sounds from external locations. The berms are not formally landscaped but covered in thick and, apparently, neglected shrubs and conifers that again symbolically identify this as uncivilised space. Again, there are no signs forbidding guests from climbing the berms as a short-cut to adjacent pavilions; their ‘natural’ appearance seems to dissuade guests from doing so.

The main roads in Walt Disney World are typically flanked by broad areas of uniformly mown grass. In the approach to hotels and theme parks these are supplemented by more instances of civilised nature in the form of flowerbeds. One significant exception to this is the water parks. These are approached off the main highways by narrow roads that lead to the car park. Areas of dense, thick, unkempt scrub and conifers flank the sides of these roads. There are fallen and rotten trees as well as entangled brambles. In contrast to the light of the main road and the parks, these are dark areas that permit no sight of what lies beyond. Similarly, the bottom of the wall surrounding the water parks as viewed from the main road is covered in thick scrub. Again, there are no signs forbidding car-drivers from stopping and so
block the route for others or pedestrians from approaching the walls where there are no points of legitimate entrance, the uncivilised natural order displays the message. Similar areas of wild nature are used to screen backstage areas of staff accommodation. This constructed opposition between permitted areas of civilised nature and forbidden areas of wild nature indicates the significance of the ultra-cleanliness of the public places of the parks and hotel areas. If we accept Douglas’ (1969) assertion that dirt is matter out of place then the evident cleanliness of Walt Disney World parks and hotel areas can be interpreted as an assertion of the orderliness of these sites. Walt Disney World employees, whatever their status, are instructed to pick up litter. The tourist areas in Walt Disney World are notably free of uncivilised, ie aggressive, wild life. Despite the location in central Florida insects are rare, their numbers are controlled through regular spraying. The only insects that are found in significant numbers are harmless ‘love-bugs’. Small, attractive, non-aggressive lizards and frogs are also found around swimming pools. Civilised representations of nature are maintained through taped birdsongs through the loudspeakers in hotel areas.

The positive representation of civilised nature constitutes a main ideological theme in Walt Disney World. The Land pavilion at Epcot combines a pro-ecological message with confidence in the beneficial effects of the application of technological order to nature. For instance, The Circle of Life presentation featuring the cartoon characters Timon and Pumbaa, criticises thoughtless exploitation of the natural world. However, the Living With The Land boat ride takes guests through Disney’s hydroponics farms and fish farms during which guides draw guests’ attention to the beneficial effects of these technologies.

However, the recent extension of Walt Disney World through the opening of Animal Kingdom has created a tension between authentic presentations of nature, that contrasts with the earlier anthropomorphic presentation of wild life in the corporation’s nature films of the 1950’s, (Wilson, 1992) and maintenance of civilised order. Bryman (1995) notes that the incorporation of animals into staged events at Disneyland in the 1950’s were abandoned due to the animal’s unpredictable behaviour. Other central Florida themes parks display trained animals only but, even when the performers are ‘professionals’, they may still refuse to cooperate. Yet part of the civilising process has been the extension of the norms of civility to animals (Beardsworth and Bryman, 2001; Fiddes, 1991), but this also requires that animals themselves be presented as civilised.

Civilising authentic nature

A particular point of crisis for theme park management is the occurrence and presentation of death (Adams, 1991). Part of the process of pacification through modernisation has been the removal of death as a spectacle (Foucault, 1977) and its restriction to the sphere of detached professional
competence (Clark, 1982; Porter, 2001). There is a folklore among Disney employees concerning the corporation’s cover-up of deaths that occur in the parks, including the practise of recording such deaths as occurring off-site (Project on Disney, 1995). The Animal Kingdom park opened in 1998 and was almost immediately the focus of media criticism due to the death of some of the animals, a rare ibis run over by a park vehicle, antelopes that died after drinking anti-freeze, and crocodiles from an undeclared cause. The reaction of a Disney official who asserted the naturalness of death, ‘its what animals do’, was criticised as uncaring in local media. Similarly, at the conservation centre in the Animal Kingdom there is, in accordance with the Walt Disney World’s educational goals, an area where Disney conservation experts present animals and answer children’s questions. On one occasion a young girl asked what the lions in the ‘Kilimanjaro Safari’ ate. Her face fell when she was told by the Disney educationalist, ‘horsemeat’. Later I overheard the speaker reassuring the child’s mother that the meat came from old horses that ‘just hadn’t made it’. The extent of the sensitivity of the Disney Corporation to the issue of animal mortality is indicated by the decision in 2002 to abandon a comic routine on the popular Jungle Cruise in the Magic Kingdom in which the boat guide shoots blanks from a pistol at animatronic hippopotami. According to local media this decision had been taken due to protests by guests and ‘out of respect for animals in the nearby Animal Kingdom’. The sensitivity of guests to the possibility of harm to the animals was shown in an incident on the Pangani Forest Exploration Trail in the Animal Kingdom. There are a number of points on this walking tour at which guests can observe gorillas. A number of guests at one point gasped with shock when a gorilla fell heavily to the ground after grasping hold of a rotten tree branch. When the gorilla got up and walked away the guests cheered, smiled and chatted to each other about their relief. However, the contrary aspect of the dilemma between civilised and authentic presentations was evident in the question raised by an adult male visitor on the Pangani Forest Exploration Trail, in the Asia section of the park. In response to the visitor’s question of whether the tigers ever get out and attack the other animals a guide stated that ‘we’ feed them and separate predator and prey animals, for instance, the Maribou storks in this area, along with meerkats, would eat the small chicks of other birds if they were not kept apart. But the visitor objected, ‘then it’s not really a microcosm, is it?’

However, it must be recognised that the animals in the Animal Kingdom have been, despite the simulation of natural settings, ‘civilised’. On the open savannah of the Kilimanjaro Safari not only are there hidden fences and feeding areas to ensure that animals are brought into the gaze of human visitors there are also gullies, hidden from the view of the confined route of human visitors, to separate predator and prey species. Therefore, the only animal behaviour on display is civilised, ie peaceable. Further, in the hotel complex adjacent to the Animal Kingdom there is an extensive enclosed area for exotic animals but these are large herbivores only. That is, the guests can easily observe them and they will not engage in violence. However, the
authentic appearance of the park has left it vulnerable to encroachment by uncivilised nature. With the exception of a netted bird enclosure the Animal Kingdom is open to the sky and, therefore, to wild birds. In spring 1998, before the park was officially opened, I observed the Flights of Wonder presentation in which a wide variety of exotic birds perform tricks for the audience (although the presenters, maintaining the credibility of the park’s environmentalist message pointed out that these are entirely natural behaviours for the birds). The later show in 2001 had a human ‘stooge’ who has come expecting to see unnatural tricks such as parrots riding tricycles. Through the presentation he learns that the natural behaviour of birds is far more impressive. However, in 1998 one of the hawks’ perching posts infringed the territory of wild crows, which responded to the threatening presence by mobbing the intruder whenever it settled. The audience members’ response was confused by the presence of this natural behaviour, there were expressions of both amusement and concern. On the later trip in summer 2001 the hawk played its part in the performance without being assaulted. One of the bird handlers later confirmed to me that wild crows were a ‘problem’ but only during the breeding season, ‘at other times they leave us alone’ implying they are still present. Where the unintended presence of native world life does not lead to conflict it can be incorporated into the presentation. Wild buzzards are attracted to the park by the food left out for the resident animals. On the Kilimanjaro Safari the guide, in an extempore moment in what is a heavily scripted event, directed our attention to the sky where we could see ‘big black birds that have come all the way from Florida’; the visitors in the safari truck got the joke. However, park attendants generally perceive the visible presence of native wildlife as an intrusion into the credibility of the spectacle. In 1999 a guide on the Pangani Forest Exploration Trail apologised for the presence of weaverbirds inside the bird enclosure. Nevertheless, they were still there in 2001 and had found their way into the gorilla habitat. In 2001 a guide on the Maharajah Jungle Trek apologised for the presence of wild rabbits in the antelope area. However, nothing was being done in either case to eliminate the intruders. Prior experience has shown the Disney Corporation that it should not attempt to control the effects of indigenous wildlife on the credibility of the spectacle by being so uncivilised as to kill it. Shortly after the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971 its management was heavily criticised in the media for trapping and killing migrating vultures that had settled in Discovery Island (Fjellman, 1992). Thus, Walt Disney World itself is bound, in part through the reactions of visitors, by the rules of civilised nature that it uses as a means of controlling these same visitors’ movements.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Disney Corporation organises and controls the movement of the guests at Walt Disney World in a civilised manner that presents
the guests to themselves as full members of the setting who are making free, uncontrolled choices. This is achieved through the symbolic use of representations of nature that draw on common cultural meanings. In particular, the corporation themes Walt Disney World around an opposition between the legitimate order of civilised nature and the illegitimate disorder of wild nature. Guests typically interpret these representations in the conventional manner and respond to the former only as indicating a place where their presence is appropriate. This, therefore, enables the corporation to retain the distinction between the performance and preparation of spectacle without explicitly forbidding the guests’ presence, an action that would be inconsistent with the goal of incorporating consumers as ‘guests’. However, this endorsement of civilised nature generates contradictions with the presentation the Animal kingdom Park as authentic nature in distinction from the entertainment orientation of traditional zoos, as well as other parks in Walt Disney World. The contradiction is resolved insofar as the park is able to limit the gaze of its guests to those aspects of authentic nature that conform to norms of civility.

Notes

1 A holiday maker pointed out to me the novelty of seeing a plastic cup rolling down the road outside one of the parks. As we watched a Disney van pulled over, the side door slid open and a mechanical arm picked up the piece of litter. After it moved away the road seemed much emptier than it had before. Similarly a guide at the Cape Kennedy space flight centre routinely recited the impressive statistics on the size of the main rocket assembly area, the immensity of the ‘stars and stripes’ on the side of the building etc. but only became animated when describing the local wildlife which he associated with freedom, ‘no-one tells them (alligators, herons) what to do’.

2 This was not the complete situation in 1996. At that time the ‘Sky-Ride’ gave visitors a panoramic view of the different lands ie the spatial separation of the lands was lost. However, the ride was discontinued in the following year.

3 Children are not always concerned by such intimations of mortality. Outside the Worlds of Flight exhibition a handler was showing off a hawk to a crowd of children. At one point he held up an excreted pellet still containing fur. ‘Look’, he said, ‘put a couple of ears on it and it’d look just like Mickey. . . Only kidding’. He need not have been concerned; the children thought the comment was hilarious.

4 Fjellman notes the similar response of a guest to the friendly, non-violent spectacle of Frontierland in Disneyland, ‘its shockingly peaceful’ (Fjellman, 1992: 66).

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