

# Diversity or “Exotic” Fantasy?: Pastiche in the Art and Architecture of Hong Kong Disneyland

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*The video that accompanies this essay can be found at:*  
<https://www.mpcaaca.org/v11i1-video-essays>

“Here is the world of imagination, hopes, and dreams” (Disney).

Opened on September 12, 2005, Hong Kong Disneyland is a major scenic spot of the city, attracting 4.5 million visitors from around the world each year (Fung and Lee 1999). However, from the beginning of its construction, Hong Kong Disneyland has courted controversy due to alleged exploitation of labor and overstatement of benefits to the local economy. Local media described it as “marred by public relations debacles that left Mickey Mouse looking like Cinderella’s stepmother in this former British colony” (Banh 50). Though Walt Disney coined the term ‘edutainment’ to emphasize the educational function of jovial rides, critics have called Disney a symbol of “superficiality, historical pastiche, escapism, and empty fantasy” (Ghirardo 44). However, little has been written on the later years of expansion of Hong Kong Disneyland, during which Disney included multicultural elements to showcase its diversity. This paper examines pastiche in the art and architecture of the Castle of Magical Dreams and Mystic Manor of Hong Kong Disneyland. Hong Kong Disneyland aims to display its value of inclusion and diversity through the pastiches of various architectural styles and artifacts from different cultures that construct a utopian fantasy of diversity. It argues the intrinsic paradox in edutainment manifested in Disney’s tactics of pastiche turns efforts to enhance “inclusion and diversity” into a quasi-colonial fantasy displaying “exotic”

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cultures. Performing Disney’s assigned roles as both the center and periphery, visitors become part of Disney’s institutionalization of multiculturalism for self-correction, which restrains the defiant critical position of postcolonialism in power relations.

The Castle of Magical Dreams appropriates European and Islamic architecture to form an optimistic place where cultures benignly coexist. Mystic Manor as a contact zone partially educates children about history and culture while distorting and sanctifying the coercive nature of imperial museums. It extracts art and architectural motives out of their cultural and historical context, sometimes colonial and imperial, to fit oversimplified fantastical Disney narratives. Lacking real-life originals, the medley of simulacra constructs potential colonial fantasies and asymmetrical power structures in Hong Kong Disneyland. However, the simultaneous and indiscriminating appropriation of European and Asian art and architecture adds subtleties to the criticism that Disney creates a place of absolute imbalance between the dominant and the subordinate. According to narrations and instructions, visitors consciously or unconsciously perform various assigned roles that create fluidity in identity between the center and the periphery. The fluidity of their identity enhances the fantastical experience and dissolves the reality of hierarchy and coercive history. Nevertheless, Disney responded to cultural criticism by incorporating multicultural elements for self-correction. Similar to the criticism of canonization of institutional critique, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism, when consciously adopted by culturally influential corporations like Disney, have gained its efficacy and lost their critical positions of subversiveness. When taking up the assigned roles in the park, visitors become part of the institution’s narrative to create happiness.

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