The Artistic and Anthropological Influence of Lighting Design on Guests at the Disneyland Resort

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Jenny Pershon, Advisor: Dr. Jocelyn Buckner

Disneyland as a Theatrical Space

"It’s something that will never be finished, something I can keep developing, keep plussing and adding to. It’s alive.”
- Walt Disney

Walt created a canvas on which he brought his films and its icons to life, figures that exist to structure guests’ experiences within the ideologies of the Disney Company. The attractions in the park embody larger productions of the film, and guests are guided and ruled by the environment and its characters.

Designing Disneyland

Since Disneyland is a unique combination of a theatrical space and a living environment, lighting is utilized both as a symbolic piece of an overall production design as well as a form of art on its own. By speaking with employees of the park and observing the environment and its guests, I learned three essential approaches to lighting design, each providing a different purpose for the company and the consumers of the parks.

Aesthetics and Agency

People tend to have a dichotomous view of art, attributing its value either in terms of its aesthetic quality or its agency in communicating an ideology. The lighting design in Disneyland reflects a combination of both of these approaches by promoting a story through appealing visuals of light. Throughout the park, artistic lighting is used in themed areas to reinforce its subject and in outdoor shows to promote the storylines of Disney films. As a result, the art of lighting facilitates Disney’s ideology of wonderment and fantasy, which are foundational ideas that assist in bringing the magic from Walt’s film to life.

Guest Interactions with Light

Disneyland also utilizes lighting to promote its vast amount of brand images. Essentially, different lighting designs projected onto a brand image, or overarching theme that represents a company, causes varying interpretations of the subject or company. Disneyland’s foundation lies within its brand images, which guests are able to interpret through what Bourdieu describes as social capital. This is essentially a consumer’s understanding of and participation in popular culture. Guests thrive in Disneyland because of their ability to understand the images throughout the park due to their social capital. These images are highlighted through lighting, especially in shows such as the Fireworks Spectacular. Most interestingly, I found, through the direct observation of guests and the application of reception theory, that guests give greater attention to objects that are lit up in comparison to daylight. Normal objects are transformed into art due to lighting’s capability of effectively and spectacularly presenting a story and Disney’s brand image, thus allowing guests to feel more fully immersed in the world of Disney’s imagination.

Merchandise as Participation

Like many companies, financial gain is a huge component of Disneyland’s function to the company. Guests are driven towards consumption of merchandise throughout the park, and guests engage in this consumption not only to fit in with other guests, but also as a means of self-branding with Disney’s images. Self-branding is a strategy used in order to feel physically closer to a company’s brand image and to other consumers. The abundant light up merchandise, which includes “Glow with the Show” hats that utilize infrared to change with various shows, allow guests to brightly distinguish themselves from non-consumers and feel closer to the Disney magic as they suddenly become a part of the overall show.

So What?

There is more to lighting design throughout Disneyland than meets the eye. Light serves as a work of art in itself with theatrical, social, and economic importance. Lighting effectively creates an environment in which storylines and themes thrive, as guests successfully interpret and consume the company’s brand images that are highlighted through aesthetics. The achievements of these designers pave the way for the limitless possibilities of light.

Lighting Design as Art

Theatrical lighting has evolved into an essential piece of a production design, acting as the communicator of mood and theme through different colors and images. Audiences are able to interpret these symbols because of a shared cultural understanding of the symbolic aestheticism of different light. By applying Danto’s theory of art, I theorize that light also has the capability to act as art on its own, or in conjunction with non-artistic objects. Despite lacking a tangible existence, light can define a style that is communicated through metaphor by way of aesthetics, which by definition fulfills the prerequisites for art.