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BOOK REVIEW

Koehler, Dorene. *The Mouse and the Myth: Sacred Art and Secular Ritual of Disneyland*.
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Dorene Koehler's *The Mouse and the Myth: Sacred Art and Secular Ritual of Disneyland* uses Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, CA, to challenge a common notion in myth studies: "the conventional attitude that contemporary popular culture is antithetical to the development of a psychologically fulfilling relationship with the imagination" (p. 1). For Koehler, the academic opposition between popular culture and authentic myth is odd precisely because scholars tend to highlight all myths as constantly in process; that is, all myths are constructed and mythmaking is always ongoing. With the constructedness of myth in mind, the Imagineers of Disneyland Resort have, in Koehler's view, constantly worked toward "a conscious manufacturing of what should constitute story" (p. 7). According to Koehler, Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, the original Disney theme park and the Disney industry's holiest of holies, "can, and does, provide a psychologically transformative experience" for the "devout patron, utilizing images, symbols, and the poetics of narrative to transcend the world outside the park" (pp. 2–3).

Koehler is well situated to analyze this sacred temple in Southern California. She has been a fixture of Disney studies in the study of American popular culture and identifies herself as an avid patron and "apologist" (pp. 4, 6, 84). Emphasizing that contemporary America is indeed disconnected from the transformative power of the human imagination, in part because it fails to grasp the "imaginative efficacy" (p. 2) offered by American popular culture, Koehler herself has experienced the psychologically transformative ritual of visiting Disneyland Resort. As a regular, she has observed Disneyland's impact on other patrons, even if Disney's myth and ritual do not "affect all patrons in the same manner" (p. 3). The book's six chapters largely center one aspect of Disneyland's play on traditional aspects of ritual, such as "the soul's journey to the imagination" (chapter 2), "the pilgrimage to a temple or shrine" (chapter 3), "an enchantment with image and spectacle" (chapter 5), and "an ever-evolving renewal practice" (chapter 6) (p. 3).

Chapter 2 charts how Walt Disney constructed Disneyland and its central myths. Using the work of Carl Jung and James Campbell, mixed with brilliant insight into Walt's personal life, Koehler claims that Walt fashioned Disneyland as a pilgrimage to the psyche, a place for "sacred play." In light of the tumultuous 1960s, it was "a need he intuited because he lamented the neglect of childlike imagination in the world around him" (p. 21). (The Disney industry's focus on play is still obvious today; one only need watch Disney's latest Pooh film, *Christopher Robin* [2018].) Koehler is also very adept at arguing that Walt was very modern, focusing on progress and humanist values, and also avoiding religious confessionality. But, he was quite conservative too, emphasizing the foundational social role of the family unit and a nostalgic view of the American

past. The consistent theme for Walt, his Imagineers, and the Disney industry has always been the transformative power of love, which unites his modern and conservative sentiments. This love is really about finding “one’s unique voice” in “the bonds of family and community” (p. 27). At the resort, both children and adults can play and rediscover their unique voice by participating in the rituals associated with Disneyland pilgrimage.

Chapter 3 is possibly the most significant chapter. This chapter elucidates how Disneyland’s defining myths of love and play are embedded in, and have become central to, myths surrounding California and Hollywood, a supposed golden land of change, opportunity, beauty, fame, and fortune (also addressed in chapter 1). I was born and raised just a stone’s throw from Disneyland and Koehler is quite right in claiming that locals are frequent patrons or even so-called cast members (i.e., employees). Disneyland’s almost infinite job opportunities means that everyone knows someone who is or was a cast member. In terms of its implications for scholars, by embedding Disneyland Resort in California’s mythos Koehler helps correct a lacuna in the study of the Disney industry and its global reach: key to Disney’s global success has been the many physical locations it inhabits, including the historic intersections of California’s traditional or founding myths in Disney’s overall mythmaking.

Juxtaposed with other theme parks, which were, as they say, quite seedy, Walt envisioned Disneyland as a wholesome and manicured place. Walt’s vision fits what Koehler, channeling Mircea Eliade, calls Disneyland as an *axis mundi*; that is, Walt constructed Disneyland as a kind of “*navel of the world*,” a temple that “conveys a responsibility for crafting an identity for the people to whom it belongs” (p. 54). For the “tuned in” patron, this constructed mythic center of the universe can provide psychological transformation and allows one to get lost in play. But, getting lost in play means that Disneyland is not simply a temple, it is also a theater. The Disney myth puts the patron at the center of the story, doing so through participation in ritual celebration. Much of the remainder of chapter 3 is devoted to reading the theme park’s internal geography, highlighting certain attractions and landmarks as more or less critical to the pilgrimage journey and ritual theater. In another brilliant move, Koehler uses Victor Turner’s notions of liminality and *communitas* to show that the entertainment value provided by ritual theater does not translate to simple escapism. (Many scholars assume that entertainment value renders mythmaking somehow inauthentic.) Rather, entertainment enables active ritual engagement and, therefore, creates a sense of patron togetherness.

Chapter 4, “Disneyland as the Work of Worship,” addresses the “mechanics and details of the park itself” (p. 87). An interesting chapter as a whole, with more analysis of particular attractions, it includes notable religio-mythic readings of Peter Pan attractions and the Enchanted Tiki Room. Koehler is most convincing when claiming that play and participation in Disney’s sacred myths involves a wide variety of ritual activities and celebrations. This play and participation includes wearing Disney-themed vestments, collecting pins, donning Mickey ears, eating iconic Disneyland foods, and purchasing collectables to mark the experience and celebrate its memory later. Again relying heavily on Turner’s idea of *communitas*, chapter 5, “Spectacular Spectacle” describes the daily and holiday-specific celebratory events at the theme park. She especially centers this chapter on what she calls *meta-spectacles*—“Disneyland’s most effective attempt at creating collective fellowship” (p. 120). Through parades, fireworks, and other shows, Disney

uses ceremonial meta-spectacle celebrations to connect patrons in larger shared rituals that further heighten their play-filled togetherness. When play-filled togetherness is on the line, ritual celebrations can be changed. Part of the Disneyland ethos is that all spectacles and celebrations are destroyable or morphable. Ritual celebrations are not static, but must accomplish their end goals to survive, including play, togetherness, and heightened experiences. Sure, the temple is sacred, but Disney's myths encourage a sense of progress and newness. Indeed, "Disneyland Resort finds itself in the midst of constant renewal of these traditions with an ever continuing effort to find newer ways to present the show" (p. 131). Disney's Imagineers draw up new rituals, attractions, and collective celebrations to constantly reaffirm the patron's connection to the temple. Change is largely effective, but not always.

Chapter 6 and the conclusion provide examples of how Disney succeeds and fails in (re)creating the magic of Disneyland. The failures of Disneyland Imagineers are an especially wise inclusion on Koehler's part. As suggested, Disney is constantly considering how it can update and keep pace with the changing world around it. For its myths to remain effective, it must be able to constantly captivate. Koehler suggests that Walt and his successors continued to shape the sacred landscape and the sacred temple, sometimes even destroying the seemingly iconic and holy. A key example is the 1980s changes to Fantasyland. The Imagineers of Fantasyland were willing to add much darker attractions (though always controlled), such as Toontown. This was a success. However, failure to properly imagineer the mythic landscape can be seen in Disneyland's California Adventure Park, a California-themed park next to the original Disneyland park in Anaheim. When it was originally built it lacked the characteristic magic of the original theme park, including coherent sacred rituals and myths. Eventually, California Adventure was revamped after Disney bought Pixar. Its Imagineers incorporated the characters and narratives from Pixar films into the park. The work of Imagineers is, thus, much more complicated than sprinkling a little bit of pixie dust on a new theme park and, *poof!*, success. It requires narrative construction and ritual fashioning. Renewal and change may get much more complicated in the future. For instance, there will be some massive changes in Disneyland Resort with new Star Wars franchise attractions on the horizon. With the Disney industry's acquisition of this franchise, which has its own myths and fanbase, how will Disneyland incorporate or change these narratives for its new Star Wars attractions? How will Star Wars continue to fit in with Disneyland's rituals and celebrations? Aside from Star Wars, Koehler notes other examples of potential future tensions. One thing is clear: Imagineers are at work; or, perhaps better said, they are at play, transforming the old and shaping the new, all in the name of love.

In light of her goal "to analyze Disneyland's place in mythic ritual," the idea that an excursion to Disneyland "can" and "does" work as a "psychologically transformative experience" posits two very different things. That is, while Disneyland offers mythic narratives and rituals for psychological transformation, which she analyzes quite well, whether it "does" this work in the lives of participants is a proposition that her methodology is not well positioned to address. Observing how the eyes of patrons light up during Disneyland's sacred rituals seems all too impressionistic for claiming that a visit "does" the work of psychological transformation. To her credit, Koehler states that she simply wants to "propose that the relationship between Disneyland and the patron is more profound than it may appear" (p. 3). However, discussing the impact of myth and ritual deserves data on and from patrons. Such data would have helped nuance her

argument as well. For example, her methodology cannot suggest the way that gender and age impact relationships between Disneyland and patrons.

Overall, Koehler's book could have benefited from a more critical lens. Koehler claims that "Disney offers something of value that is deeply lacking in our current psychological milieu—an emphasis on the importance of play and on the transformative nature of love" (p. 6). Similarly, she later states that what Disneyland represents for the patron is "the American ideal that crafting one's identity and the relationship to one's own imagination does not need to be dictated by the demands of culture or social structure, and it offers, through the physicality of the park, an environment dedicated to interaction with these ideals" (p. 85). One can definitely be an avid patron, apologist, and scholar of Disney, but claims like these need more nuance by countervailing points. In fact, I would suggest that her approach to and advocacy of Disney's psychological value leads her to gloss over cultural tensions that Disney exposes, tensions that would add important texture her reading of the theme park in Anaheim and its place in the wider Disney industry. To take a specific example, when referencing the Tiki Room and its popularity at Disneyland, Koehler says: "Many have spoken out about against these stereotyped, misappropriated mid-20th-century cersions [*sic*] of Polynesian gods, and rightly so.... It is a caricature of an island reality, and if it's damagingly so that is for those of Hawaiian heritage to judge" (p. 96). Not necessarily seeking a debate about what is at stake and who has a right to judge, I would still suggest that the Disney industry and Disneyland is interesting for exactly the fact that attractions like the Tiki Room, or films like *Pocahontas* (1995), expose tensions in American culture over the potential ramifications of Disney's visions of love and human progress.

To sit with *Pocahontas* for a moment, religious studies scholar David Chidester—strangely absent in Koehler's work—identifies Disneyization as a kind of globalized religion, at least in the way many people see the ubiquity of the Disney industry, its products, and its myths. Without resorting to clichéd arguments himself, Chidester reads *Pocahontas* with an eye toward Disney's myths about humanity. He states:

The film dissolves the differences between European invaders and indigenous Americans by having Ratcliff and Pohattan harmonize on the refrain, 'They're savages, savages, barely even human.'... In this harmony of mutual denial, the audience can only conclude that there was a basic equivalence.... This equivalence leaves simply a human identity, an identity that might be called the human neutral, which stands as a generalized, even universalized, basis for dealing with difference.¹

Likewise, more generally on the issue of Disney's mythic truths, he claims:

Critics have argued that the 'truths' distilled from the American past and enshrined at Disney theme parks—the complete domination of nature, the unlimited faith in technology, and the uncritical acceptance of the free enterprise system—have not always been a source of hope for the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the Disney theme parks can respond to such criticism by performatively demonstrating that the company knows the world better than the world knows itself.²

Does psychological fulfillment in and through the Disney industry mean that one must abandon some myths for others? What might be lost or sacrificed in Disney's vision of a psychologically fulfilling relationship with the imagination? In fact, whose imagination drives psychological

1. David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 145.

2. *Ibid.*, 146.

fulfillment? I am not trying to take Chidester as gospel truth, but he highlights an important aspect of Disneyland in California and the Disney industry's global reach: the fact that critics debate the Tiki Room *shows the cultural significance of Disneyland all the more*. The mythic narratives are contested because critics know they have such popular-level power. Yet, debates and critiques of this sort show more complex interactions with Disneyland and its imaginative vision of American and world history. One can only wonder how patrons track with these issues and debates, seeing as Koehler again does not have the firm data to suggest nuances and complexities in their seeming inculcation of Disneyland's foundational myths.

Indeed, there is much to commend in Koehler's study. *The Mouse and the Myth* does exhibit a very deep understanding of Disneyland history as well as the park's myths and rituals. My views on Koehler's method and critical lens should not distract from the book's high points, especially Disneyland's embeddedness in Southern California's mythos, a critical context regularly missed in the study of the Disney industry. Surely, her work should encourage others to examine myth construction and sacred-secular rituals in popular culture.

EDITORIAL NOTE

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