



# Mickey Mouse as Icon: Taking Popular Culture Seriously

BRUCE DAVID FORBES

Standing in front of Cinderella's castle at Walt Disney World is a statue of two figures, one tall and one short, holding hands like parent and child. The tall figure is a representation of Walt Disney himself, evoking memories for baby boomers who watched him as the genial narrator of Disney's Sunday evening television show. The smaller figure, the child, is Mickey Mouse, including those trademarked ears that have come to symbolize all things Disney. Mickey is now an icon of American culture, and the statue points to the fullness of what he has come to represent, beyond items featuring Mickey Mouse to a wide array of other cartoons, movies, theme parks, merchandise, and an entire global communications corporation.

Mickey and other cultural icons deserve the attention of scholars, clergy, educators, and civic leaders, because such icons help us understand ourselves, revealing some of the desires and beliefs of a large portion of the population. These icons also represent shaping influences in our culture, sometimes as rivals of formal religions and sometimes in dialogue or agreement with religious perspectives. This essay will first discuss the importance of giving attention to popular culture and then will focus upon Mickey Mouse as an example, to illustrate how investigation of an icon can prompt reflections on society's needs, desires, and values. In the case

*Popular culture is worthy of study for people active in ministry because it both shapes us and reflects us. It is everywhere, like the air we breathe. It tells us "who we are, and what we are, and why." One icon of popular culture, Mickey Mouse, mirrors our utopian dreams and symbolizes our transformation of everything into commodities.*

of Mickey, this essay will argue that he represents widespread yearnings in American society for a utopia or Eden characterized by happiness and innocence. Yet Mickey also represents shaping forces in our culture that turn virtually everything into a commodity, a powerful inclination that affects even the church.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF POPULAR CULTURE

Let us first consider the question of whether reflection on Mickey Mouse and other icons of popular culture is at all useful and worthy of our time. Some persons shake their heads in disbelief when they hear about college courses on subjects such as *The Simpsons* or *Star Trek*, wondering what has happened to the quality of education. And now, what are we to think of a serious theological journal joining the trend, devoting attention to entertainment, celebrities, and passing cultural fads? Would it not be better to concentrate on content that lasts and topics that have more depth?

Indeed, one approach to “culture” is to focus on that which nurtures and upholds intellectual, moral, and aesthetic excellence. Culture is “the best which has been thought and said,” in the words of Matthew Arnold.<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot once described culture as simply “that which makes life worth living. And it is what justifies other people in other generations in saying, when they contemplate the remains and the influence of an extinct civilisation, that it was *worth while* for that civilisation to have existed.”<sup>2</sup> These sentiments express understandable appreciation for the most sophisticated intellectual and artistic achievements of a society.

However, many scholars argue that other forms of culture are important subjects of study as well. In this line of thinking, it is helpful to acknowledge culture of several kinds: high (or elite) culture, folk culture, and popular culture. The sentiments of Arnold and Eliot described above reflect the perspective of “high culture,” and many of its advocates tend to use the word “culture” in a restricted sense, applying only to those human products that are of the highest sophistication and quality. For instance, from this perspective, a symphony orchestra would be an example of “culture” but a polka band would not.

Yet anthropologists and sociologists use the word “culture” in a more neutral way, referring to the whole range of human products and thoughts that surround our lives, providing the context in which we live. Thus, when we refer to something as part of culture, we are making no judgments about its value or quality. Culture is simply the network of “practices, artifacts, institutions, customs, and values” of a society.<sup>3</sup> In this wider sense, comic books and Faulkner novels, tuxedos and athletic shoes, radio talk shows and university lectures, Beethoven and the Beatles, all are examples of culture.

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Michael Petracca and Madeleine Sorapure, *Common Culture: Reading and Writing about American Popular Culture*, 3d ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001) 2.

<sup>2</sup>T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) 100.

<sup>3</sup>Petracca and Sorapure, *Common Culture*, 2.

Within this wider understanding of culture, we might distinguish (as indicated above) between three kinds of culture: high, folk, and popular.<sup>4</sup> Without offering formal academic definitions, examples provide us with an immediate sense of the three. In the realm of food, high culture would be a gourmet meal, folk culture would be grandma's casserole, and popular culture would be a hamburger from McDonalds. In music, high culture might be an opera, folk culture a bluegrass tune, and popular culture a song by Madonna. From these examples alone, we can begin to discern several differences:

1. The types of culture tend to rely on different modes of transmission. Folk culture depends upon oral, face-to-face communication (family traditions, ethnic customs, regional practices), while high culture inclines toward sophisticated written expression (gourmet cookbooks, musical scores, novels). Popular culture relies on and is spread by the mass media (television, movies, radio, mass publications, and now, cybercommunication).

2. Thus, popular culture earns its name ("popular") by having a larger audience than the other two, in part because of its link with the mass media. High culture tends to require more preparation and/or education to be fully appreciated, and thus it appeals to a more limited audience. Oral communication similarly limits folk culture to smaller audiences.

3. The creators of folk culture are, in general, anonymous, and the folk culture that emerges from the people serves to perpetuate and reconfirm the values and perspectives already present in a family, an ethnic group, or a regional community. In contrast, authors or creators of high culture are known and identified to their audiences, and they frequently gain recognition for their creativity by challenging norms and encouraging new perspectives. One reason creators of high culture are praised for "higher quality" is that they do not merely follow patterns and formulae; instead, they show originality in charting new paths. While folk culture *confirms* a mindset and high culture often *challenges* and *reshapes* it, popular culture regularly does *both*.

All three types of culture are worthy of study. The values of two types seem obvious: high culture because of its original contributions and its representations of excellence, and folk culture because it arises so directly from a people and reflects their worldview and values. But what of popular culture, which is so often dismissed as "just entertainment," trivial and faddish? The rough, broad distinc-

<sup>4</sup>The following discussion of high culture, folk culture, and popular culture is drawn from the following four sources: Bruce David Forbes, "Finding Religion in Unexpected Places," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 2-7; Jack Nachbar and Kevin Laue, *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) 10-20; Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1989), scattered passages; Petracca and Sorapure, *Common Culture*, 1-6. The three types of culture are of course artificial constructs, and many examples do not classify neatly into one or another. Also, examples may shift from one category to another depending on time and geography. For example, a medieval morality play may have been an example of folk or popular culture when performed in its original setting, but becomes high culture when performed in a university theatre in the twenty-first century.

tions suggested above point to some of the reasons it merits attention as well. First of all, popular culture simply has a larger audience, and for that reason alone it can be much more influential than the other two. Almost everyone is surrounded by popular culture constantly, watching television at home, reading a magazine or newspaper, driving by billboards, shopping at the mall, eating at fast-food restaurants, attending sports events, buying new styles of clothing. Popular culture is everywhere, like the air we breathe. To ignore popular culture is to allow it to act upon us blindly. To reflect upon it critically allows us to make choices.

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Critical examination should be guided by the basic principle that *popular culture both shapes us and reflects us*. On one hand, anything that is so pervasively present must exert some influence on our thoughts and actions. What are the dominant messages communicated in popular culture? Do they perpetuate established gender roles or encourage new ones? Does popular culture encourage consumerist impulses, or global awareness, or violence? We are undoubtedly influenced by our constant encounters with popular culture, but the deeper dimensions of that influence are not always immediately apparent.

On the other hand, we are not mere pawns under the influence of those who create popular culture. In spite of all the marketing efforts, some things become popular and others fail. Why do certain movies, clothing styles, songs, and household items “catch on” when others do not? The public makes choices, because something meets our needs, or resonates with our values and desires. Thus, when we examine what becomes popular, it is a bit like holding up a mirror in which we discern much about ourselves. This does not mean that popular television shows, for instance, are exactly like our own lives, but it does mean that there must be a reason we choose to watch them: for reassuring messages, or vicarious adventure, or relaxation, or *something*. (Thus, we ask ourselves, just what does it say about *us* that “reality” television shows are so popular these days?) In the words of Ray Browne, a pioneer in popular culture scholarship, popular culture “can tell us who we are, and what we are, and why.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, when we learn about ourselves by examining popular culture, we recognize that we also are influenced by the same cultural presence. The dynamic continues to work in both directions, as popular culture both reflects us and shapes us.

So, what should we examine in trying to investigate popular culture? A standard theoretical consideration can be found in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, edited by Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, and their introductory chapter pro-

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Petracca and Sorapure, *Common Culture*, 5.

vides a very helpful analogy of a “house of popular culture,” with a basement and two floors.<sup>6</sup>

The basement of the house, say Nachbar and Lause, represents the underlying mindset of a culture. This includes bedrock beliefs and values that are relatively stable, significant, and long-standing, expressing cultural convictions, certainties, and assumptions. Many cultural commentators would call these bedrock beliefs and values “myths.” American examples might be the importance of individual freedom, devotion to the nuclear family as “the most proper and rewarding mode of social existence,” or the conviction that the United States has a special mission in the world.<sup>7</sup> Some persons want to critique such beliefs, claiming that they are inaccurate or undesirable, but the first question for the student of popular culture is whether beliefs such as these are indeed the content of the cultural mindset in the basement. Critiques or affirmations can follow.

Nachbar and Lause note that there are other beliefs and values in the basement that are not so stable, ones that might be “more transitory, shallow, and fadish.” They still reflect underlying beliefs and values, but these more transient values may change significantly in a generation, a decade, or even a year. An example might be the exaltation of thinness as today’s ideal body type; other eras of American history saw beauty in other kinds of bodies. Thus, the basement includes “bedrock beliefs and values” (those that are “deep down in the solid rock of the house’s foundation”) along with more transitory beliefs and values that are important for the moment but may not last.<sup>8</sup>

The goal of most analysis of popular culture is to discern what is in the basement, but the problem is that the basement is the very part of the house that is least visible. The two floors of the house above are much more visible and easier to examine. Because the house is a unit, and the various rooms and floors relate to each other, our hope is that an examination of the more visible floors of the house will help us understand the beliefs and values that are in the basement.

On the first floor, in Nachbar and Lause’s analogy, are artifacts of popular culture, which include both objects and people. Popular *objects* are what Nachbar and Lause call “icons,” and popular *people* are what they call “heroes,” or sometimes celebrities. Both icons and heroes are “widely accepted or approved of by the masses” and thus are *visible expressions of the values and beliefs that lie below in the basement*. Icons, popular objects, might be real or imagined. Examples of real icons could be credit cards, the American flag, or jeans, and an imaginary icon might be the Batmobile. Heroes also might be real (Daniel Boone, Charles Lindbergh, Martin Luther King Jr.) or imaginary (Captain Kirk, Betty Crocker, Harry Potter). Celebrities complicate this discussion because they are *both* real and imaginary.

<sup>6</sup>Nachbar and Lause, *Popular Culture*, 20-31. The following discussion is based on a portion of their introductory chapter, with the addition of some of my own examples and interpretations.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

Although they are real persons, their public images may be quite distant from the realities of their lives. Even when we cannot tell what is real or imaginary about celebrities, Nachbar and Lause still see them as “valuable signposts of immediate cultural preoccupations.”<sup>9</sup> On this first floor, Nachbar and Lause also discuss stereotypes, which are usually negative. Icons, heroes, and celebrities often represent what the masses value and embrace, but stereotypes frequently “encapsulate the opposite—the fears and hatreds of a popular mindset.”<sup>10</sup>

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Thus, according to the house analogy, the first floor includes numerous artifacts, both objects and people (icons, heroes, celebrities, stereotypes), all of which are significant because they are visual representations or symbols of deeper yearnings and ideals, hatreds and fears, values and beliefs. While Nachbar and Lause restrict the use of the term “icon” to physical objects and do not apply the term to people, many of us use the word in a broader sense to include almost all of the visual symbols on the first floor, including both objects *and* people. In this broader sense, a Coca-Cola bottle, an SUV, Marilyn Monroe, and an Arab terrorist all are “icons” of some sort, representing assumptions or values of the culture.

Before we leave the house analogy, we should at least mention the top floor. There Nachbar and Lause discuss “rituals” and “arts.” *Rituals* are “highly patterned symbolic events in which we bind our culture together in a celebration of our common beliefs and values and/or in which we release tension and anxiety in a socially acceptable” manner.<sup>11</sup> Such rituals might include class reunions, voting, sporting events (including the Super Bowl), weddings, or holidays (Christmas, Halloween). *Arts* are the various expressions of popular culture that we frequently call “entertainment”: television programs, movies, popular music, comic books, popular fiction (romance, mystery, science fiction, westerns), supermarket magazines, etc. Often, when people talk about studying popular culture, they are referring to these “arts,” and thus they analyze movies, television shows, or popular songs to try to discover their underlying meanings. The house analogy reminds us that popular culture includes much more. The various rooms of the house all relate to one another (not only arts, but also rituals, and various symbolic artifacts in the forms of objects and people), and all of them draw upon, and usually reinforce and reconfirm, the values and beliefs in the basement.

That is the “house of popular culture.” In essence, we examine the artifacts

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 24, 27.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 27.

(icons), rituals, and arts on the upper floors of the house of popular culture in order to learn about the values and mindset in the basement. Persons in ministry ought to find this especially relevant, because of their focus on values and meaning. Even though clergy advocate certain beliefs and values, learning about the basement in the house of popular culture may help us understand what the general public *really* believes.

#### MICKEY MOUSE AS ICON

One could choose any number of “icons” as symbolic representations of the dynamics and values embedded in popular culture. McDonalds’ hamburgers, for example, prompt reflection upon instant gratification, mass merchandising, lifestyle and dietary shifts, family patterns, American penetration into international cultures, and much more. Marilyn Monroe’s status as an icon leads to discussions of celebrity, sexuality and sensuality, gender roles, power relationships, and the role of entertainment as the standard against which everything is measured (including education and worship services). Among the obvious iconic choices, another is Mickey Mouse.

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Mickey as an icon functions on three levels of representation. First is the cartoon mouse himself, introduced to the world in 1928 by the artist entrepreneur Walt Disney. Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein once declared that Mickey Mouse was America’s most original contribution to culture, and cultural commentator Michael Real has written that Mickey is “recognized as one of the most universal symbols in the history of humankind.”<sup>12</sup> On this first level, we could analyze why this cartoon character has appealed to so many people, what roles he plays in cartoons and comic books, and what values he represents.

On a second level, Mickey has become a logo for a far-flung family entertainment empire, no longer centered only on the mouse cartoons. This includes full-length animated movies, nature and family films, theme parks (in California, Florida, France, Japan, and soon in China), television shows like the *Mickey Mouse Club* and the various Sunday evening programs over the years, an entire Disney cable channel, and extensive Disney merchandise, found in Disney stores and almost every other kind of retail outlet one can name. Mickey has become the symbol for all of these “family-oriented” offerings.

On a third level, the corporation’s reach has grown even wider, with the ac-

<sup>12</sup>Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney: From Mickey Mouse to the Magic Kingdoms*, new concise edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1975) 52; Michael R. Real, *Mass-Mediated Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977) 78.

quisition of Capital Cities/ABC television in 1997. The Disney empire now includes the ABC television network, A&E, Lifetime, E!, the History Channel, ESPN, the Mighty Ducks hockey and Angels baseball franchises, real estate developments, Miramax and Touchstone movies with adult themes, and much more. While the breadth and influence of the entire corporation cannot be ignored, what has inspired the most public devotion are the Disney efforts on the first two levels, especially the animated movies, theme parks, cartoons, and related merchandise. The following brief consideration of Mickey as icon refers especially to those first two levels.

If there is any doubt about the extent of Mickey's and Disney's exposure in American culture and around the world, the statistics are overwhelming. Some miscellaneous examples: even before the corporate expansion in 1997, the Disney corporation's revenue in 1995 was \$12.1 billion, and \$18.7 billion in 1996. By 1999 it was \$23.4 billion. *The Lion King*, one of Disney's most successful movies, has grossed more than one billion dollars worldwide. Orlando, Florida, with Walt Disney World as its centerpiece, has become the most popular tourist destination in the world. More than fifty million tourists visit Orlando annually, a number equal to the entire populations of California and Pennsylvania invading the Orlando area every single year. Walt Disney World has recently become the number one honeymoon destination for married couples in the United States. Approximately 100,000 people reside in Walt Disney World's on-site hotels every night.<sup>13</sup>

Mickey has become the trademark for all of these family-oriented enterprises, but even more, he has become an icon. In his iconic status, what themes or issues does he represent? Among many possibilities, here are two sample suggestions:

#### 1. Mickey Mouse as an icon of utopian dreams

What was and is the appeal of the films, theme parks, and merchandise associated with Mickey Mouse and the Disney name? Most persons first mention children, but Walt Disney and his corporate successors have been quite clear that the childhood appeal was intended for adults as well. For example, Walt Disney, in conversation with biographer Bob Thomas, said about his first theme park: "Disneyland isn't designed just for children. When does a person stop being a child? Can you say that a child is ever entirely eliminated from an adult? I believe that the right kind of entertainment can appeal to all persons, young or old."<sup>14</sup> Years later, Michael Eisner, the current Disney corporation CEO, also claims that Disney entertainment responds to "the child within us."<sup>15</sup>

Rather than focus only on children, it is more appropriate to see Disney as upholding ideals and values widely embraced by American society. Michael Real has written that "Disney's work typifies twentieth-century America's self-image

<sup>13</sup>Carl Hiaasen, *Team Rodent: How Disney Devours the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1998) 2, 6, 10; Richard E. Fogelson, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) xi, 3.

<sup>14</sup>Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original* (New York: Hyperion, 1994) 11.

<sup>15</sup>Michael Eisner, "It's a Small World After All," *NPQ: New Perspectives Quarterly* 8/4 (1991) 40-43.

and worldview much as Dante's work typified Medieval Catholicism." However, it is represented in a "utopian, idealized form."<sup>16</sup> What kind of ideals? In the 1970s, Real administered a questionnaire to two hundred people who had spent considerable time at Disneyland in California, and when he asked what virtues were especially approved by Disney presentations, the following words were listed by multiple respondents: "kindness, honesty, truth, happiness, smile, friendliness, innocence, sweetness, generosity, sharing, creativity, thriftiness, money, industriousness, obedience, and cleanliness."<sup>17</sup>

Popular culture commentator Russel Nye, in his observations on Mickey Mouse cartoons and comic strips, has raised some related themes:

Mickey's is a child's world, safe (though occasionally scary), nonviolent, non-ideological, where all the stories have happy endings. Characterization is strong and simple....No Disney strip ever gave a child bad dreams or an adult anything to ponder. Mickey's whole existence is predicated on love and security for all....The roots of Mickey's appeal lie in his continual reassurance that all's right with the world, that the meek will inherit, the innocent triumph. The mouse, the symbol of all that is weak, always wins in the end.<sup>18</sup>

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*"Disney entertainment provides a utopian vision for which people yearn"*

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Disney entertainment provides, for adults and children alike, a created experience that represents what many people would like the world to be: happy, innocent, simple, safe, clean, honest, and kind. Especially in the midst of the complications of our lives, it is a utopian vision for which people yearn. Instead of "utopia," in religious language we might refer to it as Eden (a golden age of the past) or paradise (the ideal that is yet to come).

Even though the Disney corporation has spent much effort promoting itself as a representative of happiness and wholesome values and has received an enthusiastic response from broad segments of the American public, it has become a target for critics on all sides. Best known is the Southern Baptist boycott of Disney, initiated in 1997, as a protest against what was perceived as "gay-friendly" corporate policies and objectionable programming. From other directions, critics have complained about the subservient roles of women in Disney animated films (only partially ameliorated by *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*) and about racial and ethnic stereotyping. For example, one commentary on *The Lion King* summarized:

What they produced is a story that, on the surface, is about a lion cub who prevails in the face of adversity. But the real story of *The Lion King* is the marginalization of females such as Nala and Serabi, the vilification of gays personified by

<sup>16</sup>Real, *Mass-Mediated Culture*, 47.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>18</sup>Russel Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Dial, 1970) 233.

Scar, the ghettoization of Blacks and Hispanics, represented by the dreaded hyenas, and the glorification of hierarchy and paternalism symbolized by Mufasa and Simba.<sup>19</sup>

In the way the Disney utopian package has been delivered, it seems to have been a largely white, middle-class American dream that has struggled to take account of the experiences of people beyond that core audience. Indeed, even some white middle-class Americans have trouble with how the dream is portrayed.

Whatever the criticisms, we have to understand why so many Disney fans do not want to hear them. Remember the principle articulated earlier: popular culture both shapes us and reflects us. Critics are concerned about the influence of Disney's encoded messages on our lives and understandings, but we also should ask why Mickey and Disney touch a chord with so many people. Is it because the Disney experience represents a life many persons yearn for, where things are happier and simpler? For persons in ministry, the appeal of Disney raises important issues. How can we take seriously these human yearnings? How does the Disney version of Eden compare with Jewish, Christian, and other religious visions? How should we respond?

## 2. Mickey Mouse as an icon of the commodification of culture

Today, parents complain that children's movies aren't just movies any more; they always seem to be accompanied by mass marketing of toys, character bed-sheets, promotions at fast-food restaurants, and more. An undisputed pioneer in such cross-marketing was Walt Disney. When the *Disneyland* television show was launched on ABC in 1954, Disney "planned to devote roughly a third of each episode to the promotion of either the park or an upcoming Disney film." He called it "total merchandising."<sup>20</sup> Disney also pioneered the concept of the miniseries, and his first success was *Davy Crockett*, "sparking television's first cult craze." Sales of coonskin caps and other *Crockett* merchandise surpassed \$100 million in seven months, which amounted to approximately 10 percent of all domestic children's product sales at the time!<sup>21</sup> *The Mickey Mouse Club* (1955-1959 in its original run) made celebrities of its young stars ("miniversions of *Davy Crockett*"), and it included more advertisements than any show up to that point—twenty-two per episode.<sup>22</sup> Of course, the marketing has grown ever since. Critic Henry Giroux voices the suspicion that Disney's "pretence of innocence" functions as "little more than a promotional mask that covers over its aggressive marketing techniques and influence in educating children to the virtues of becoming active consumers."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Gail Robertson, "Snow Whitey?" *Canadian Dimension* 32/5 (Sept/Oct 1998) 45-46. For examples of critical assessments, see Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), and Carl Hiaasen, *Team Rodent*.

<sup>20</sup>Steven D. Stark, *Glued to the Set: The 60 Television Shows and Events That Made Us Who We Are Today* (New York: Delta/Dell Publishing, 1997) 71.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>23</sup>Robertson, "Snow Whitey?" 45-46.

Movie reviewer Leonard Maltin has called Disney “the merchandizing king of America,” and commentator Steven Stark adds,

By weaving together the worlds of television and movies, programming and advertising, and adult programming and children’s programming, Walt Disney made his TV offerings part of a seamless mesh of entertainment. Today, we are all ensnared in Walt’s web.<sup>24</sup>

Walt Disney may have been a pioneer, but it is clear that such cross-merchandizing is now culturewide. A concern about this development is that all of life seems to be transformed into commodities, products to create and sell. Is this simply successful capitalism with neutral impact, or should we be concerned about corrosive effects on life experience? Just as some children prefer a sugared orange drink to fresh-squeezed orange juice, the synthetic may replace the real. Thus, Port Orleans at Walt Disney World becomes preferable to the actual city of New Orleans, and a packaged trip to Walt Disney World, something we can buy, becomes the highlight of a family’s experience. Such issues invade the church as well. When the gospel becomes a commodity, a product to be marketed, is it changed in the process?<sup>25</sup>

Mickey’s iconic status can lead our discussion in many directions. The point is that the entire world of popular culture, usually ignored as harmless and innocuous entertainment, is of immense importance and worthy of critical reflection—to learn about ourselves, and to respond creatively to the influences that envelop us. ⊕

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<sup>24</sup>Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 3d ed. (New York: Hyperion, 1995) 8; Stark, *Glued to the Set*, 75.

<sup>25</sup>See R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Marvel, Pixar, Star Wars the Mouse House's empire keeps on expanding. But have recent developments shown the chinks in its armour? First Disney was Marvel supervillain Thanos, relentlessly acquiring pop culture's Infinity Stones including Pixar, Lucasfilm and Marvel itself – all the better to obliterate half the Hollywood universe. Having swallowed up its rival 21st Century Fox for a colossal \$71bn, Disney became the Death Star – an empire so intimidatingly huge and hungry it reduced its rivals to the status of scattered rebels. Last year, Disney dominated the movies like no studio has before, taking more than 38% of the world's box office.