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Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and the De-Disneyfication of America

Martin Heusser

Not far from the entrance gates, on the main square, visitors to the newly opened Disneyland would find a plaque dated July 17th, 1955, with a short inscription, welcoming them and explaining the purpose of the place they were about to visit. "Disneyland is your land," the plaque read, and "Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, dreams and hard facts that have created America."

When Walt Disney had begun to entertain the idea of a theme park in 1951, he and movie art director Harper Goff worked out first concept sketches. The core of their original design for a little park "celebrating America" (*Imagineering* 12) consisted of drawings of an imaginary main street with a drug store, barber shop, hotel, general store, and a newspaper office – all of them based on Disney's and Goff's boyhood small-town memories of, respectively, Marceline, Missouri and Fort Collins, Colorado.

Clearly, to all intents and purposes, Disneyland is meant to signify America, to be a sign for America. Investigating Disneyland as a sign can thus tell us more about the massive changes in the cultural signifying practices of postwar America. And it can shed some light on the radical redefinition of cultural and political self-awareness which essentially divided the country in two opposed camps, each with a distinctly different public discourse. On the one hand there are the attempts of the political establishment at all costs to recreate a continuity of public values by invoking core myths and their underlying ideologies. Such discourse is based on Disneyfication, I would claim, that is, the systematic commodification of reality, to the point where it turns into Kitsch or, as Baudrillard has it, "a *pseudo-object* or . . . simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype, as a dearth of real signification and a superabundance of signs, of allegorical references, disparate connotations" (*Consumer Society* 110). Against this, West-coast counter-culture

critics such as Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti pit a discourse of authenticity, a discourse implying a still undisturbed signifier-signified relationship, one in which the “I” of each poet stands for “America.” Both Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti have recourse to what Bercovitch has identified in historical leading figures in American cultural tradition as the “auto-American-biography,” the “celebration of the representative self as America” (*Puritan Origins* 136).

It is thus certainly not a coincidence that Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti and Disneyland are also closely linked to one another historically. In the same summer of 1955 when Disneyland opened, Allen Ginsberg first approached Lawrence Ferlinghetti about the publication of *Howl*, and Ferlinghetti himself published his first book of poetry, *Pictures of the Gone World*, under the City Lights Imprint within a few months after taking over the sole ownership of the City Lights bookstore.

Conceptually, my arguments are based on the notion that Postmodernism began with the opening of Disneyland. Disneyland represents the first large scale illustration of the new turn towards the sign and its relation to “reality,” the condition that Baudrillard dubs “the characteristic hysteria of our times: that of the production and reproduction of the real” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 23). The postmodernist condition is primarily characterized by its redefinition of two sign-related mechanisms. For one thing we can observe what Fredric Jameson has identified as a “breakdown in the signifying chain,” that is the simultaneous presence of “distinct and unrelated signifiers” or “unrelated presents” (63). Interestingly enough, Jameson bases his model on a Lacanian model of schizophrenia. And indeed, there is something schizophrenic about the obsession with which Disneyland pursues the realistic rendition of pure signifiers, and, throwing into relief the signifier in isolation, glorifies and exalts the simulacrum. Umberto Eco is right on the mark when he describes the Disney attitude in *Faith in Fakes* as “giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original” (19). But what happens indeed in the postmodern industrial consumer society is that the simulacrum is trying to step in for an original, a model, which never existed. It is this unrelatedness that the post-war counter culture critics identify as a constitutional absence and try to replace with authenticity.

The issue at stake is, like so many times in national cultural debate, Americanness. In their attack on the establishment version of Americanness, Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti sought to discredit core myths which were particularly favored in the McCarthy era, such as individualism, free enterprise, masculinity. To be precise, one would have to mention that counter culture

critics of the fifties and sixties had an important forerunner who had attacked precisely the same core myths. Decades before them, E. E. Cummings had, very successfully, interrogated public figures and their actions and unmasked them as ideological constructs – camouflaged absences – deployed through public and political discourse for the maintenance of social power structures.¹ It goes without saying that Ferlinghetti was thoroughly familiar with Cummings' poetry – in fact his typography reflects the anarchic morphology and syntax of his predecessor.

Individualism and masculinity, both directly inherited from the frontier days, were among the public values advocated by the same Truman administration which had launched the prosecution of communist party leaders in 1948, they were the values of Senator McCarthy who began to put together lists of allegedly subversive government employees in 1950 and they were the values of the SISS, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee who began to interrogate university professors about their political opinions in 1951 (Heale 2).

But this individualism was regarded by many as a strange brand of conformism: After his visit of the United States in 1945 Jean-Paul Sartre observed that the US citizen felt "most reasonable and most American" when he acted "like everyone else." Already twenty years before him, Einstein had noted that "there is much more uniformity both in outlook on life and in moral and aesthetic ideas among Americans than among Europeans" (Heale 8). The 1950 Red Scare politics in the US strongly amplified such tendencies to the point where individualism was becoming a synonym of subversion and Ginsberg noted "The suppression of contemplative individuality is nearly complete" ("Poetry" 331).

The other major mythological construct of the time is the cult of masculinity. Rooted in an unquestioned belief in "natural gender roles." One of its most important consequences for the intellectuals and the artists of the time is that they were both associated with effeminacy. As Harold Rosenberg stated in his brilliant essay on "Masculinity: Style and Cult" (which originally appeared in the November 1967 issue of *Vogue*): "In the United States, the artist and man of ideas have always lived under the threat of having their masculinity impugned (44). It is now interesting to see that one way in which both Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti address the two issues, individuality

¹ Poems like "Buffalo Bill's / defunct" and "o pr / gress" debunk two prominent mainstream myths, masculinity and progress. The second poem, "o pr / gress" may well be Cummings' reaction to President Herbert Hoover's March 4 1929 Inaugural Address which was dedicated to "the importance of our progress."

and masculinity, is with the help of a literary figure, Walt Whitman. Both – although Ginsberg certainly much more than Ferlinghetti – write a Whitmanesque line. For both of them the long, unrhymed, desultory, fragmented line becomes a gesture of authenticity and the reference to an authority on individualism. As Ginsberg notes in 1959

The stakes are too great – an America gone mad with materialism, a police-state America, a sexless and soulless America . . . Not the wild and beautiful America of the comrades of Whitman, not the historic America of Blake and Thoreau where the spiritual independence of each individual was an America, a universe . . . (“Poetry” 333).

In a notebook entry of the same year on beat writing, Ferlinghetti anchors his notions of individualism in Whitman: “the only thing that will stand will be the narrative ‘i’ . . . the voice of him sounding thru the American experience, first Whitman, then Thomas Wolfe, then Kerouac” (Cherkovski 126).

Whitman’s irreverent individualism, his professional dissent and his liberative postures manifested themselves differently in Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti. But, for both, if one looks more closely, they are related to aspects of masculinity. Both, each in a different way, at least to a certain extent, define their authenticity in terms of masculinity. Ferlinghetti adopts the masculine looks of what Rosenberg calls the “new activist male image of the Depression decade: the leather-jacketed revolutionist allied with the peasant and factory worker” (44-5). The 1957 photograph of a pensive Ferlinghetti in beret and leather jacket at his Mission Street studio in Neeli Cherkovski’s *Biography* (110) illustrates this to perfection.

Another, more immediately visual link to Whitman appears on a poster of Ferlinghetti for the United Farmworkers Benefit.² The three-quarter shot depicts a casually dressed, relaxed poet, hands in his pocket, facing the camera. Dressed in a white shirt and dark pants the bearded Ferlinghetti becomes a striking visual echo of Whitman’s portrait on the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the steel engraving by Samuel Hollyer of an 1854 daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison. Profiting from Barthes’ “prestige of denotation” (*Image* 21), the Ferlinghetti photograph suggests perfect informality and naturalness. But as casual as it may look, it is a carefully arranged and studied pose which relates directly to the very image of informality, physicality, negligence and rough manners that Whitman liked to project of

² In the seventies, Ferlinghetti actively supported the political cause of the United Farm Workers of America and appeared repeated at readings on their behalf.

himself. But beyond calling up the rough and ready frontier outdoor masculinity, it endorses Whitman's attitudes of working class protest: "I am he who walks the States with a barb'd tongue, questioning every one I meet" (CP 470) and "I hold up agitation and conflict" (CP 379). Like Whitman before him, Ferlinghetti insists on a proletarian look, clearly aimed at blurring the line between the poet and the worker.³ But in contrast to Whitman, Ferlinghetti follows a sanctioned heterosexual high-profile masculinity pattern.

Ginsberg on the other hand focuses on and adapts another aspect of Whitman's masculinity. He is using his homosexuality to assert authenticity by means of genuine difference from established gender definitions. Of course, Whitman provided a model for sexual identity, particularly the self-acceptance of the male homosexual artist for Ginsberg. And of course Ginsberg, too, felt troubled and oppressed by his inability to live out what Trachtenberg described as "the sort of open, loving relations Whitman celebrated as the defining praxis of democracy" (199). But the deviant masculinity divulged in poems such as "Howl" or in photographs showing him with male lovers also have a strong assertiveness of authenticity about them. When Ginsberg ends a poem entitled "America" with the words "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" (*Howl* 43), he not only refuses to let prevalent social standards obliterate part of his personality, he also redefines "Americanness" to include the "deviants from the mass sexual stereotype" (*Poetics* 332). As he realizes earlier on in the same poem: "It occurs to me that I am America. / I am talking to myself again, America" (*Howl* 41).

In their trenchant critique Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti don't only discredit American cultural discourse and practices as an ideological force-field – they actually go on to unmask cultural discourse and practices *per se* as nothing but signs, signs to boot in which the original signified has been lost. This notion appears with great frequency in the work of both authors. Ferlinghetti's treatment of the national anthem in "Baseball Canto" is a case in point. First the anthem is ironically discredited by bathos as mythological figures are replaced by the appearance of a flesh-and-blood baseball champion on the field:

³ Indeed, the similarity between the two pictures is striking. The iconography of the picture, clearly a pose, like innumerable other ones, suggests the fraternization of intellectuals with the working class.

... everybody stands up for the National Anthem,
 ... as if expecting some Great White Hope or the Founding Fathers to
 appear on the horizon like 1066 or 1776.

“But Willie Mays appears instead,”

Willie Mays, it goes without saying, was one of America’s professional baseball myths, one of the most exciting and talented performers from the early 1950s through the early 1970s, a flawless center fielder with an uncanny instinct for exploiting opponents’ errors while he was on the base paths. So, of course, in a sense, Mays’ appearance is no bathos at all but rather a climax – a modern consumer society myth displacing a foundational myth. But still, Ferlinghetti pursues the debunking of the national anthem, as it appears again later in the poem, in highly ironic refraction:

... some nut presses the backstage panic button
 for the tape-recorded National Anthem again,
 to save the situation

But it don’t stop nobody this time
 ("Baseball Canto")

This time nobody pays attention because the national anthem *qua* sign has no meaning – that is generated only in relation to a specific context, for instance in its function as an overture to a Major League game. On its own, the national anthem means nothing, has no power, is nothing but a prop, a piece of kitsch – a simulacrum. And so America, as a nation, as an idea, is a surrealist consumer landscape, criss-crossed by arbitrary significances and desires, but without any identity or meaning of its own: a Coney Island of the Mind.

Ginsberg’s poetry reveals a very similar but more intensely felt loss of orientation. In “Howl” he observes the best minds of his generation losing their minds in search of reference points, sense, identity, Americanness that the post-war society was no longer able to provide. It is all of this that Ginsberg’s second self is looking for when he pokes around in the neon lit supermarket in California in the poem with the same title. Hungry and tired he is “shopping for images,” images of a lost America when the strange ghostly figure of Walt Whitman appears, filling the void with his visionary presence. But although Ginsberg’s text incessantly claims the opposite, Whitman turns into a sign for absence. His questions are absurd (“Who killed the pork chops?”, irrelevant (“What price bananas?”) or lewd (“Are you my

angel?”). Their conversation is a series of unanswered questions (“Where are we going . . . ?” “Will we walk all night . . . ?” “Will we stroll . . . ?”) that throw the narrator back unto himself until he is as lonely again as before the encounter. And the climactic final question about the nature of America, then and now, remains for ever unanswered:

what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and got you out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

Still, despite the blatant absence of factual definition, the poem remains strangely assertive. Ginsberg’s appropriation of Whitman as a Virgil that leads him through the hell of contemporary America mythologizes his own poetry. This choice of myth as a narrative *mode* (Roland Barthes speaks of a *type* of speech) becomes a discourse in its own right, a discourse which not only endorses the existence and / or presence of absolutes, but also serves as an act of valorization: removed from both, reality and time, myths are by definition truths. Thus the strange meaning of “Supermarket in California” is that Americanness cannot be defined but it is a truth. Myth, as I have argued elsewhere, functionally addresses absence *in principle*, both as its record and its remedy. Myth always presupposes the separation from the presence it seeks as Geoffrey Hartman observed – and this turns it into a paradoxical double gesture (149). Myth is always both, the acknowledgement of absence as irremediable and the simultaneous attempt to overcome it. Ginsberg’s “Supermarket” is thus both yearning the absence of Americanness and the attempt at presencing it in the mythical overlap of an 1850s arch-American text with a 1950s arch-American reality.

Obviously Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti succeeded in discrediting the contagious ideologization of American reality but they were only able to supplant that gesture with the help of yet another set of simulacra, all of them direct derivatives of the ones they were supposed to replace. Invariably, both fall victim to Barthes’ “falsely obvious” by dressing up their version of “reality” as authentic, although it, too, is determined by selective historical and ideological manipulation. As they have recourse to signs which pass themselves off as natural, offering themselves as the alternative way of viewing the world, they too become ideologists. Their de-mythologizing of America is really only a re-mythologizing, the (conscious) substitution of one sign by another, *faute de mieux*: that is how counter-culture discourse differs radically from all preceding linguistic production and becomes postmodernist. Bercovitch claims (in a reversal of Perry Miller’s argument) that the 17th and

18th century reference point for national identity, *sola scriptura*, became *sola natura* for the American Romantics (cf. Bercovitch 152). Well, post-World War II America again redefined its point of reference as *solo simulacro*. The movement is thus one from scriptural theology to natural theology to a theology of the sign. Perhaps that is what Baudrillard means when he defines Disneyland as “a *religious*, miniaturized pleasure of real America” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12, emphasis mine).

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