

Summaries in english

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Spectacle and architecture (See page 706)

For long ages spectacle was restricted essentially to the theatre, in classical antiquity. Then, to the Greek heritage, which also included spectacle in the shape of athletic contests, Rome added the circus; and the Christian Middle Ages invented the mystery plays.

In the Mediterranean cultures, then, a spectacle involves an assemblage of people present at a performance of some kind on a stage. What is the situation now? Is not the theatre, for instance, an outmoded formula, elitist, reserved for "initiates", in short, a class spectacle? Presenting a work of fiction to 400 or 4000 people an evening that could be viewed by tens of thousands daily in cinemas, not to mention the possibility of millions of spectators if shown on television, is not this an act that runs utterly counter to the entire contemporary movement, which is preoccupied with having the "masses" participate in culture?

It is not easy to resolve this question. Nevertheless, it remains true that the theatre is preserving its place in modern civilization as a research laboratory for advanced experiments ... which involves the risk of its being cut off even more from the bulk of society.

Paradoxical though it might seem, the construction of theatres has not been killed by the cinema and television. The proof: in the midst of a recession like the present one, the theatre is very much alive. New buildings designed for theatrical performances are going up in our country.

We may, perhaps, be astonished by this renaissance of the theatre, considering the paucity of new cinemas. But this is where television comes in. Television can compete successfully with the cinema, but it will never replace direct contact with actors. It can substitute nothing for the relation between audience and stage.

The fact remains that the vastest spectacles of our times are the Olympic Games, those immense athletic contests with their nationalistic character. The Olympic Games, every four years, require a riot of sumptuous constructions, an imaginative orgy on the part of the architects who design the gigantic lists for these bloodless tournaments ...

Next year in Montreal ... It is not yet entirely certain that the Olympic Games can take place in the huge installations conceived by Roger Taillibert, seeing that the project is paralyzed by interminable strikes, which have already delayed work for months, and the deadlines were very tight to begin with. Moreover, estimates have been outrageously exceeded, the mayor of Montreal, M. Drapeau, no doubt being partly responsible for this ... Finally, this flashy architecture, this architecture "à la Spirou", seems indeed pretentious in our world which is now oriented toward austerity and the recession ...

But this brings us to another comic strip: that of Walt Disney, the study of which Giovanni Brino has undertaken on the level of town-planning and architecture. A paradox? Perhaps. It remains true, however, that the parallels drawn by the author between Donaldville and Los Angeles are particularly enlightening, for the comic strip is also a "spectacle" for the masses, its "message" being an indicator of our civilization.

H. St.

Learning from Walt Disney

Giovanni Brino
(See page 741)

There is no doubt that the so-called *comic strip* is one of the most effective forms of visual communication. However, it has hardly been used at all by town-planners

and architects in analyzing the physiognomy of the modern city.

The critic Leonardo Benevolo, in a recent edition of his selected essays, briefly mentions it, without, however, really exploring in depth the inherent potentialities of this extraordinary means of mass communication, which came into being (like the cinema and the motor-car) at the same time as the modern city. It is therefore especially well suited as a means of illustrating the modern legend of Western man.

This article makes use of a particular comic strip, featuring Walt Disney's Donald Duck, in order to make visible the image of a city which lends itself very well to this kind of treatment, which is at once amusing and scientific: the city is Los Angeles.

One question strikes me as essential: Why does *Los Angeles*, with its special brand of post-industrial culture, lend itself to visualization within the Donald Duck strip to the point of identifying itself with ease, if not unequivocally, with the city of *Donaldville* conceived by Walt Disney? Los Angeles, as everyone knows, possesses in Hollywood its cultural matrix, one of the most authentic and original of our age.

Walt Disney was one of the most ingenious and characteristic interpreters of Hollywood. Working in his studio at Burbank to the north of downtown Los Angeles, Disney sited all the stories of Donald against the background, albeit idealized, of Los Angeles, a city that will be recognized only around 1970 by planners and architects as the urban prototype of capitalist society.

It is advisable to associate immediately with Walt Disney the name of his cartoonist, Carl Barks, who is in reality the creator of Donald Duck; he drew the Donald strips from 1942 until 1967, being several decades in advance of official culture; he shows Donaldville as a city entirely dedicated to the most *unbridled* consumption.

As is well known, Walt Disney was in fact the inventor of the two most singular experiments in American planning: on the one hand, *Disneyland*, realized in 1955 at Anaheim, a half-hour drive south of downtown Los Angeles, and, above all, *Disney World* at Orlando, Florida. These two experiments (which are themselves idealizations of the Los Angeles way of life) rightly entitle him to a place in the history of modern architecture and town-planning, even if some of our official critics have systematically ignored him or accused him of "kitsch".

I intend to "make visible" the image of Los Angeles with the aid of the idealized image of Donaldville.

The "post-urban" physiognomy of Los Angeles became perceptible only at the end of the 60s after completion of the network of freeways. The "linear downtown" along Wilshire Boulevard then became a reality.

The identification of Los Angeles with Donaldville (or *Duckburg* in the original edition) is not arbitrary, even if Donaldville is habitually considered by various Donald Duck specialists as the generic symbol of the American city or of the capitalist city in general.

There can be no doubt that Donaldville (like Los Angeles) is situated on the Pacific coast and, more particularly, in California, as can be deduced from several stories and from remarks explicitly made by the characters themselves. Moreover, it has a harbour. Donaldville, like Los Angeles, does not have merely one centre, but is made up of a multiform cluster of centres extending from the central zone of skyscrapers out to the residential zone of small suburban houses (where Donald himself lives, at 1313 Quack Street, with its supermarkets and its antiquated gas stations).

Donaldville is the synthesis of several large and

small urban communities scattered about and recreated by the imagination, exactly as Los Angeles is the "conurbation" of 60 different communities. The other characteristic shared by the two cities is mobility throughout an entire territory, and both cities are exceptionally vast in area. This accounts for the automatic resort to the motor-car, the helicopter or the private plane.

What's more, it is certainly not difficult for one who is familiar with the extraordinary natural surroundings of Los Angeles to recognize around Donaldville the most well-known recreational facilities of Los Angeles: its deserts, its forests, its amazing ghost towns (the abandoned gold-mining towns dating from the second half of the 19th century), its beaches, etc.

Likewise, certain especially extravagant cultural and entertainment features have a flavour that is deliciously typical of Hollywood and Los Angeles; examples are the "cake shows", the "dancing schools for obese persons", the "slimming diet clubs", or the uncommon museums, like the "Museum of Wax Figures", the "Museum of Infamy", etc. Also the aquarium and the zoo suggest the fantastically equipped institutions that have made Los Angeles famous throughout the world ("Marineland", "Lion Country Safari", etc.). Like Los Angeles, Donaldville is the typical city of the capitalist system: it is "a dynamic city undergoing ceaseless transformation and development in all directions" - (says Uncle Picsou rightly), it is a machine constructed to increase consumption, a trap composed of continual persuasions for stimulating superfluous needs (the range of necessary needs would be too restricted), where the job exists to meet the exigencies of consumption and leisure, and not to further mere production.

In Donaldville, as in Los Angeles, all activities take place in the tertiary sector (Donald's 110 meters and 31 pastimes are all located within this tertiary sector). Of the two poles of the capitalist economic process, production and consumption, Donaldville accommodates only the second, and in particular certain activities that are typical of Los Angeles, such as the electronic industry, the aerospace industry and the films.

In Donaldville, as in Los Angeles, everything is subject to commercialization; in Donald's hands every single element of the place becomes raw material capable of being transformed into money; this includes even human relationships, science and invention.

Space, and the industry that exploits it, that is to say, real estate speculation, is of outstanding importance in Donaldville, as in Los Angeles.

The theme of ecology and environmentalism in Donaldville (realized at Disney World on the town-planning level) no doubt constitutes the closest analogy with Los Angeles, in that it is precisely from Los Angeles that the vast ecological movement started that is such a dominant theme of the 70s in the USA.

However, the main proof of the identity of the constructed environment of Donaldville and Los Angeles is the little details of its urban equipment, like the "Pop" architecture of its symbolic buildings (a warehouse resembling, a steel strong-box, or the soft drink stand with the shape of a gigantic lemon, etc.), the use of street painting, the billboard environment along the business thoroughfares. Thus the advertising signs having the shape of a hot dog, a hamburger or an ice-cream cone, and on the scale of buildings, invite Donald to consume to excess.

In Donaldville nothing is woolly or left to chance. Everything is designed to create an atmosphere, a climate of persuasion and of incitement to consume, to indulge in ceaselessly renewed consumption, consumption that becomes increasingly pointless, exactly as in Los Angeles. ■