Too Much Fun

Theme parks are a relatively recent addition to the leisure industry in Australia. While most of us have heard of them, there have been few Australian equivalents to Disneyland until the last few years. Who cares? You may well ask. Who needs roller coasters, Yogi Bear lookalikes, and mock pirate fights? Well, several American corporations and local investors think that we do, and since the early 'eighties, a spate of theme parks has sprung up, supposedly offering us poor deprived Australians new forms of pleasure.

Australia's Wonderland is one of them. Opened in December 1985, it occupies an enormous site on the western outskirts of Sydney, near Mt Druitt. Taft Broadcasting, the American company which produces Hanna Barbera cartoons, set up Australia's Wonderland in a joint venture with the State Superannuation Board and Leighton Holdings, a construction company. Finance has come from Westpac, and there is an array of corporate sponsors sponsoring various rides.

These economic details are important. When Taft approached the NSW government with its proposal, then-Premier Neville Wran apparently fell over himself with enthusiasm and support for the project. This seems to have had a lot to do with Taft's choice of site. In targeting the Western Suburbs, after several other sites were rejected, Australia's Wonderland was able to represent itself as the saviour of what is popularly depicted as Sydney's most economically depressed and culturally deprived region. Feasibility studies indicated Mt. Druitt as suitable for several reasons: people appeared to have more disposable income there than in the heavily mortgaged belt; the population of Sydney was moving west; fifty acres were needed for car parks and expansion; and it was close to a freeway. It had the essential ingredients: population, money and highway access.

Taft's promotion of Wonderland as an economic saviour of the west played on familiar themes about leisure and tourism industries as the growth areas of the future. The negative impacts of these sorts of developments were ignored in a blaze of publicity promoting a vision of clean, family fun offering non-stop entertainment as well as lots of profits and jobs. However, a close analysis of what many of these jobs are really like tends to challenge claims about the leisure industry as the saviour of the economy.

The majority of staff at Australia's Wonderland are young and employed on a seasonal basis. They have to comply with an extraordinary set of dress and behaviour regulations. The corporate philosophy at Australia's Wonderland demands that each worker acquire the art of what is referred to in the business as "aggressive hospitality" — a technique for ensuring that each visitor leaves with a feeling of individual attention. This is achieved via workers' use of phrases like "we hope you enjoyed the ride" and "please come again", maintenance of eye contact and continual smiling. Accompanying these behaviour regulations is a series of dress rules which ensure a uniformity of appearance among workers who are all expected to appear as wholesome, clean, "kids next door". As one of the training videos used at Australia's Wonderland continually urges:
“Creating fun for others can be frustrating and difficult work. The business of fun is hard work.”

While selection of the western suburbs was sensible inasmuch as it provided an enormous pool of unemployed teenage labour, the site has produced a range of other unforeseen problems. The western suburbs population was seen as an essential market. But, for the place to make a profit, all of Sydney had to be targeted. This has proved difficult. In the first year of operation, 1.2 million people visited, significantly less than the 1.5 million market research predicted. Subsequent years have not seen a dramatic increase in attendance, and investors are getting pretty anxious. This failure to reach estimates has been explained by management in two ways. Firstly, Australians’ supposed lack of knowledge about theme parks — “they need to be educated about them” — and secondly, by the fact that market research has shown a reluctance from North Shore and Southern Suburbs dwellers to venture west.

Much as promotions may claim that Wonderland is for all Australians, its site has connotations which are difficult to shake. The rest of Sydney does not see the western suburbs as a place to visit. It’s a place you drive through, past and out of on the way to the mountains or beyond. The popular depiction of Sydney’s west in sociological terms, as a place full of joblessness, welfare housing, single mothers and any other “social problem” you care to name, does not make representations of it as a site of pleasure and non-stop family entertainment easy to assert.

Yet this is precisely what Australia’s Wonderland is trying to do. Theme parks, like a lot of other leisure activities, are a culture industry. They are organised around the production and consumption of experience, with spectacle, entertainment, pleasure and fun as the central commodities. Tourism, sport, museums, historic sites and the like all trade in the consumption of anything from authenticity to unforgettable memories. They offer specific cultural forms as their product. These cultural products are produced within specific economic and political relations.

Analysing the economic and cultural organisation of Australia’s Wonderland offers a way of seeing how so much of what we experience as fun or pleasure nowadays comes from consumption. Wonderland sells its customers pleasure. Its design is devoted to producing a “good time”, and a lot of thought and attention to detail has gone into shaping the park in ways that guarantee that the customer is getting pleasurable experiences. A close investigation of the organisation of Wonderland shows how this place is coded for pleasure.

The most striking thing about the site for Australia’s Wonderland is its isolation. It sits off the highway and seems to pop out of rolling paddocks dotted with gum trees. There is nothing else around it except for acres and acres of car parks. There are no competing attractions or temptations — it’s not a place you stumble onto while doing something else. You go there as if on a pilgrimage. The site claims a space for culture, pleasure, fun, almost in the middle of the country. The first thing you see is the enormous curve of the rollercoaster. This makes its declaration of space very striking.

The second point about the site is that it’s a closed environment: you enter the gates and you enter another world, “Wonderland”, which is highly predetermined and structured. Landscaping makes the demarcation between the inside and the outside, between the real world and Wonderland, very sharp. Similarly, a sense of separation from the outside world is established via the single entry fee which, once paid, offers unlimited access to the plenitude inside. (Secondary consumption, i.e. of food and souvenirs is, however, economically crucial, and there are all sorts of enticements for this.)

On the inside money doesn’t exist; everything is free (almost); market relations disappear; every wish is apparently to be easily gratified. A central element in the consumption of pleasure is the apparent absence of money: freedom and desire are unconstrained by economics. Despite this illusion, however, most people’s evaluations of Wonderland focus on whether it was “good value for money”.

Single entry fees eliminate the dilemma of having to ration one’s finances in order to consume as many rides as possible, but they create a different tension — will you be able to get on everything in the duration of your visit? A compulsion to try everything.

Within the park there are three separate themed areas: Mediaeval Fare, Hanna Barbera Land and Goldrush. Each has a selection of rides, appropriately costumed staff and performers, games, food and souvenir venues. Rather than discuss each theme separately and therefore perhaps reinforce their superficial differences, I’d note three recurring concepts which occur in each theme in different ways: history and the past; Australia and national identity; pleasure, fun and entertainment. These concepts seem to be central to the cultural and economic organisation of Wonderland.

Over the last twenty years there seems to have been a rash of new kinds of historical products and new audiences for history — historical mini-series on TV, local history projects and museums, family trees, and so on. History seems to be represented everywhere — including, of course, the recent emergence of historic theme parks.

Australia’s Wonderland is not an historic theme park in the same way that Old Sydney Town is. It does not seek to represent some sort of authentic reconstruction of the past, nor does it have any obvious pedagogic intent.

The use and representation of history at Australia’s Wonderland is quite different from theme parks where history is the primary commodity as at Old Sydney Town, for instance. Wonderland history is commodified but with different intents and effects. Historical appearances are everywhere: you enter the main gates and come into a mediaeval square. This is about
history as representation. It's also about an imaginary past.

But in among this detailed construction of historical appearances are genuine discarded objects, "ruins", which have a completely different meaning. For a start, discarded objects in this highly ordered environment seem awkwardly real or "authentic". They also seem to claim an effect of history which is quite different to history as appearance or history as a certain "look". These are historical remnants, not historical appearances.

Aside from the concept of history, there is a different but related concept of "the past". This relates to a series of shops and characters which invoke nostalgia more than history. They seem to draw on notions about memory, about things which are familiar but only recently lost or gone — "the good old days". There is a photo shop where you can dress up in old clothes and get an old-fashioned photo of the family.

Similarly, the characters in Hanna Barbera Land have a particular resonance to parents. They invoke their childhood and the role of the media in producing popular memory. These cartoon characters speak to parents and kids in quite different ways. The souvenir venue "Return to your past today" draws on ideas about memory, loss and recovery. But they are highly controlled and ordered. The past is not connected to the present. Rather, it is framed by fixed references to popular representations of times lost: old-fashioned clothes; the cartoons you used to watch as a kid.

"Australianness" is a construct, only evident or identifiable in terms of who tries to define it and how. At Australia's Wonderland, representations of Australia are fixed within an imaginary past. The Goldrush theme is the single area which makes a gesture towards "Australian content". It is packed with symbols of Australia, familiar place names, references to natural wonders ("Snowy River Rampage" — a white water boat ride) and insects ("the funnel web" — a ride in the shape of a spider).

The architecture is classic nineteenth century verandah and post, with a hint of the Wild West about it. The reasons for this seem to lie in the economic demands of standardised commodity forms. In the transition of the Wonderland formula from the US and Canada to Australia, the Wild West theme has been modified to the "Goldrush days".

In relying on an ethos of Australianness that invokes an imaginary past, the Goldrush theme is not simply rural, but also summons up a bizarre assortment of towns (Ballarat, Broken Hill), myths (Lassiter's Reef), rivers and spiders. The connections between all these items are never established: instead, one is assaulted with a seemingly random array of references, each signifying Australia as a frontier.

While the remaking of the Wild West theme to suit some notion of Australian content was fairly straightforward, other elements of the Wonderland formula did not translate so well. In its first season of operation, Australia's Wonderland lost a lot of patronage due to a series of rules relating to consumer behaviour — specifically, a prohibition on taking food into the theme park, and definitions of appropriate dress (i.e. no Eskys and no bare chests). There was widespread resistance to both these rules, and after the first season they were dropped. The American formula was not as international as hoped: national cultures have to be negotiated.

The last word on Australian content should be left to tourists. They have not proved to be a big market for Wonderland. Market research has indicated that the main reason for this is the perception that this theme park, despite its name, does not offer anything distinctively Australian. The internationalisation of commodity forms in leisure (and other) industries means that tourists realise that theme park formulas tend to remain the same whatever country they are in.

Pleasure is produced at Wonderland in two forms: through the organisation of consumption, and through the rides.

At Wonderland there are different types of consumption. The consumption of those activities which are "free" (rides) which construct a pleasure in consumption based on immediate gratification and a sense of imaginary plenitude (although long queues tend to take the edge of this pleasure). There is also the secondary consumption of food, toys, mememtoes and so on. These forms of secondary consumption are central to Wonderland's economic viability, and there are strong enticements to indulge in them. This additional spending on frivolous items has been described as a form of working class conspicuous consumption — a form of consumption that is pleasurable precisely because it is removed from the usual economic constraints which structure the consumption of necessities.

Finally, there is the future consumption of a range of sponsors' products. The significant aspect of sponsorship at Wonderland is the ability to establish very strong links between sponsor and product. For example, Ampol funds the vintage car rides, Kodak the Old Fashioned Photo Shop, and Sitmar Cruises the Snowy River Rampage boat ride.

Apart from the pleasure of consumption, Wonderland offers a smorgasbord of rides which are central to the appeal of the park. They also represent a massive part of the initial and ongoing investment at Australia's Wonderland. There is pressure to add a new ride each year in order to attract return visits. This pressure is being tempered by a diversification into live entertainment. While there is some of this at Wonderland already, the plan is to develop a large live entertainment venue in order to combine big name performers with a visit to the park. Live entertainment is far cheaper than high technology rides.

While it may be tempting to dismiss Australia's Wonderland as yet another example of imported American culture, its economic and cultural organisation indicate a lot
about current changes in our leisure. More and more of our free time now involves consumption, and culture industries are the major providers in this area. Culture industries employ large numbers of people and their economic significance is growing. So, too, is their cultural impact: the manufacture of experience shows how difficult it is to assume that pleasure or fun are purely spontaneous or individually based. More and more, these sorts of experiences are produced by industries organised for pleasure.

This is not to say that the consumption of leisure makes us passive puppets, easily manipulated into laughing in all the right places. While the production of pleasure at Wonderland may be extremely disciplined, the consumption of it is much harder to control. Individual consumers at Wonderland use the place in different ways, and bring their own meanings to bear on the experiences and the pleasures it offers.

Gay Hawkins

GAY HAWKINS teaches in Leisure Studies at Kuring-gai CAE in Sydney.

Sticky Wickets

What is the future of first-class and international cricket in Australia? It is now more than a decade since the World Series Cricket 'revolution' and it is worth asking whether more fundamental changes are likely.

My own opinion is that, other than the South African controversy the present period in Australian cricket history is one of stability and consolidation — both on and off the field. In his excellent latest book, Street Fighting Years — An Autobiography of the Sixties, Tariq Ali writes that post 1975 period in Europe can be described as one of "history's enforced pauses, designed to make us think and reflect before the next wave". If revolutionary change is slow, fundamental shifts within cricket are even more pedestrian.

The advent of World Series Cricket in 1977 shattered the international cricket establishment. It was a watershed with few comparisons. In England the "restraint of trade" court action won by Tony Greig and others and World Series Cricket in the English High Court was one crucial factor in changing the working conditions of cricket professionals. After that landmark decision cricketers were free to sell their labour, like any other workers, to the highest bidder. The second decisive influence has been the growing strength of the Cricketers' Association which organises all first-class professionals in England and functions, in effect, as a trade union.

In the post WSC year since Australia a Players' Association was formed, but Ian Chappell recently commented that: "Apart from the fact that they are getting paid better I'd go so far as to say that (the players) are back to 1977. That really disappoints me. I think it is a pity the players didn't grab hold of the game more than they have ... the Players' Association (now the cricket committee) has been a paper tiger really."

For first-class cricketers in Australia the non-existence of an effective players' association could prove to be a major weakness. In England the professionals have achieved a greater voice and improved conditions only through self-organisation. The important point is that in Australia the game is becoming more professional and will continue to do so over the next few years. Leading state and test cricketers increasingly view cricket as their profession. Indeed, the demands of Sheffield Shield and