This paper investigates North American concepts of nature and wilderness as they are represented in the themed environment of the Wilderness Lodge at Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Disney’s many representations of nature draw on long social and cultural histories of the concept of nature in America, incorporating ideas and stereotypes about wilderness, nature and national parks and constructing simulated experiences. Disney’s use of themed experience in the Wilderness Lodge is part of a pervasive pattern of hyperreality which challenges concepts of reality and make moral judgments about experience and reality difficult. We argue that the impact of such simulated places and experiences may be a distancing from actual nature, and the erosion of reality and the value of authenticity.

Journey into the Imagination

Today, as in the past, ideas about things natural must be examined and criticized not only for ways they help us understand the material world, but for the quality of their social and political counsel. Nature will justify anything. Its text contains opportunities for myriad interpretation. (Winner 137)

Disney’s Wilderness Lodge in Orlando, Florida is one of thirteen themed resorts that claim to offer guests a seamless themed experience; the chosen theme is constructed into the hotel and its environs and is highlighted at every possible level in order to provide the visitor with a

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1 Our greatest appreciation goes to the informants at Disney World who gave generously of their time to make this project what we hope is more than a cultural snipe. They are deeply committed to their work and have done an extraordinary job in bringing the Wilderness Lodge to a mass market. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided funding for this research. Comments following presentations of earlier versions of this work – to Higgs’s graduate research group in the University of Alberta’s Department of Anthropology, at the Technology and Character of Contemporary Life conference in September 1995, and the 1996 Society for Ecological Restoration conference – helped refine the essay. We are also very grateful for Andrew Light’s astute comments and wise counsel on how to configure this essay.
real experience of the themes. The Wilderness Lodge offers guests an experience similar to one they might have in a National Park Lodge. In distilling the essence of National Park lodges found throughout the United States and Canada, Disney draws on a long social and cultural history of America since first contact in the statement and representation of this theme.

But there is more. Disney wants to offer its guests the opportunity to stay in a hyperreal National Park Lodge: the real thing only better, wilderness without dirt or danger. While other Disney hotels offer guests an “authentic” Polynesian experience, or a taste of turn-of-the-century Florida, the Wilderness Lodge is billed as a “tribute to the great lodges of the early 20th century” with the motto “don’t just stay, explore.” The Lodge and its surroundings are entirely human-created, offering the visitor a natural experience in an artificial setting. As a part of Walt Disney World, Disney’s Wilderness Lodge takes its place as another attraction in a theme park which deals largely in the world of fantasy achieved through the “careful screening out of undesirable elements and the staging of special activities expressing archetypal ideals” (Real 51). The special event in this case is the Lodge, and the archetypal ideals are nature, wilderness, the frontier spirit, the great outdoors, Native Americans and the myth of the West.

As part of the tourist industry, Disney is in the business of constructing, organizing and selling experience; in doing this Disney is intimately involved in the production of landscapes and the selling of stories about nature. Disney World uses space to create and reinforce ideologies, particularly ideologies which support capitalism and consumption. Disney World is “a kind of spatial analogy of a monopoly

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2 The words “real” and “natural”, prove endlessly confusing in the context of this essay. What is a “real” experience of an artificially “natural” setting? There are few adequate words to express the subtle distinctions that exist between something that is real in the sense of have a “telling continuity and commanding presence” (as Albert Borgmann argues; see discussion below) and something that is merely apparent, or in the case of natural, between something that is self-generating, authentic and spontaneous, and something that tries to mimic such qualities. After careful reflection, we have opted not to use any stylistic conventions to highlight these distinctions. Be warned that there are ironic uses of both phrases.