

## Ted Friedman: The World of *the World of Coca-Cola* (1992)

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“*[They are] the children of Marx and Coca-Cola.*”  
Jean-Luc Godard, *Masculin-Feminine*

In August of 1990, the Coca-Cola Company unveiled *the World of Coca-Cola* in Atlanta, Georgia. The institution describes itself as “a tribute to a unique product and the consumers who have made it the world’s favorite soft drink” (Visitor’s pamphlet, 1990). It tells a loose chronological history of Coke through an annotated, museum-like display of advertising memorabilia, punctuated by video presentations, live demonstrations, and interactive technology. There is a chance to sample the beverage, and ample opportunity to buy souvenirs at the end.

The Coca-Cola Company views *the World of Coca-Cola* not as a source of income, but as a \$15 million public relations investment (Mooney and Goodman, 1991). It charges too little to visitors (\$2.50 for adults) to pay for its expenses. Ultimately, the Coca-Cola Company would like the World of Coca-Cola to serve as a geographic icon for Coke, an image which instantly connotes “Coke” to consumers the same way, for example, that the familiar shot of the Hollywood Hills connotes “movies.” To that effect, Coca-Cola has begun using the World of Coca-Cola as a site for press conferences, photo ops, and media events that traditionally would have been staged at their corporate offices. The photo of Chairman Roberto C. Goizueta in a recent article in *Business Week*, for example, shows him seated in the “Club Coca-Cola” lounge area (Konrad, 1990: 94). And the makers of the film *Live in Large*, which is set in Atlanta and features heavy Coca-Cola product placement throughout, were so anxious to include shots of *the World of Coca-Cola* that they set up tables and chairs on the courtyard and converted it into a cafe for a scene.

In the gift shop at *the World of Coca-Cola* is sold a book entitled *Coca-Cola, Superstar*. If Coca-Cola is a superstar, then *the World of Coca-Cola* is Coke’s Graceland: the institutionalization of that superstardom. Or, to use another metaphor, it is the Vatican of Coca-Cola, the ideological locus of the drink. *The World of Coca-Cola* is the place where the Coca-Cola Corporation can pull together under one roof the many meanings that have been made of Coca-Cola over 105 years, and forge them into an official history of Coca-Cola, and an official Coca-Cola ideology. To create that history, *the World of Coca-Cola* must address questions about the connections between corporations, consumer products, and individuals.

Looming over all of the exhibitions at *the World of Coca-Cola* is the question of control: who owns Coca-Cola? Again and again World of Coca-Cola impresses upon visitors that it is a “consumer’s-eye view,” a cultural history of Coca-Cola. But it is a strange kind of cultural history, told not from the bottom-up, but from the top-down. It tells its story almost exclusively through materials generated by the Coca-Cola Corporation. The very value of the Coca-Cola Company depends on its maintaining a constant struggle to control the popular meanings of its product. Coca-Cola has invested 105 years of advertising into molding its product’s identity. Every commercial Coca-Cola makes, every marketing campaign it initiates, builds on that investment in one way or another. Every rival definition of Coke is competition to these messages, a threat to the investment. And so while *the World of Coca-Cola* often claims that Coke belongs to everybody, it is engaged in a continual effort to circumscribe the way Coca-Cola is defined to include only corporate-originated communication.

In choosing how to define that product, *the World of Coca-Cola* must grapple with another question: what is the relationship between the bundle of meanings it associates with Coca-Cola, and the actual liquid? *The World of Coca-Cola* is unusual among corporate museums and attractions in the way it answers this question: it tells the story not of its product’s production, but of its marketing. This “consumer’s-eye view,” recounting the history of Coca-Cola’s symbolic construction, is what allows *the World of Coca-Cola* to so thoroughly delineate the official meanings of its product. But telling the history of a product through the history of its packaging also holds a danger: it continually

risks implying that what's inside the package is of little significance. The drink itself at times threatens to disappear behind the Coca-Cola logo. *The World of Coca-Cola* attempts to counter this threat by placing its history of the packaging of Coca-Cola within a framework which insists that the liquid itself is an intrinsically valuable substance.

To give this history of Coca-Cola an aura of respectability, *the World of Coca-Cola* takes on many of the trappings of a museum. At the same time, however, it is geared to appeal to a mass audience as a tourist attraction. Its very name recalls Disney attractions; the two sections of EPCOT, for example, are titled "Future World" and "World Showcase."

The use of the word "World" implies something else about *the World of Coca-Cola*: that it shares the Disney ideology of utopian internationalism. This vision derives from the notion of the "Family of Man": the idea that although different cultures may have many fascinating and picturesque superficial differences, deep down we're all the same. Roland Barthes' description of the theme of the original "Family of Man" photographic exhibition could safely describe the notion behind Disneyland's famous "It's a Small World" ride as well: "man is born, works, laughs and dies everywhere in the same way; and if there still remains in these actions some ethnic peculiarity, at least one hints that there is underlying each one an identical 'nature,' that their diversity is only formal and does not belie the existence of a common mold" (1972: 100).

*The World of Coca-Cola* differs from this tradition, however, in what it envisions as humanity's common bond. In Coca-Cola's utopian internationalism, it is not nature, but to the universal consumption of a commodity—Coke—which ties people together. Its implication is that if every person in the world drank Coke, we would all live in peace and brotherly love. This vision was articulated most memorably in Coca-Cola's famous 1971 "Hilltop" commercial, which *the World of Coca-Cola* commemorates. A chorus of children from dozens of nations unites, Cokes in hand, to sing, "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony/I'd like to buy the world a Coke to keep it company." What is left unstated in the "Hilltop" commercial is the flip side to Coca-Cola's internationalism: the implication that what binds the world together is a specifically American product.

*The World of Coca-Cola* tells its official story of Coke in a carefully structured, coherent narrative. There is only one, chronological path through the exhibit, and the visitor must follow it from beginning to end. To understand how that narrative is constructed, this essay's structure follows that of the site itself, walking through *the World of Coca-Cola* step-by-step. *The World of Coca-Cola* is also, however, an incredibly busy place, filled with overlapping noises, flashing videos, and distracting special features which create a perpetual atmosphere of excitement and sensory overload. The visitor is continually presented with many choices of what to look at and listen to. And so I will not confine myself to any strict chronological order, when jumping from one exhibit to another is appropriate.

As I walk through *the World of Coca-Cola*, my analysis will attempt to address not only what *the World of Coca-Cola* intends to do, but how it succeeds. Some parts of *the World of Coca-Cola* are hits, others flop; many features are not received in exactly the way the Coca-Cola Corporation intended them to be. Unfortunately, information on audience response to *the World of Coca-Cola* is limited; my request to see *the World of Coca-Cola*'s evaluations of filled-out visitor comment-cards was denied, and I didn't have an opportunity to conduct interviews with individual visitors. What follows, then, is based on the limited evidence available: the available press materials and historical evidence, what I could learn from tour guides and other Coca-Cola employees, what I could observe of other visitors' reactions, and my own personal responses.

*The World of Coca-Cola* is located in the heart of Atlanta's tourist district, connected to the newly-renovated Underground Atlanta mall by a large stone courtyard and a lighted fountain. It is usually photographed at an angle from which the gleaming gold dome of the Georgia state capitol can be seen peeking above its left shoulder. A more somber but equally official-looking government building stands to its right in the photo. This perspective doesn't overstate the power of the Coca-Cola Corporation in Atlanta. Coca-Cola executives have served as mayors, benefactors, and civic leaders of the city throughout the Twentieth Century. *The World of Coca-Cola* itself is also of great significance to the city of Atlanta. Currently, while Atlanta is very popular as a convention site, most conventioners stay for only a few days, and

don't bring their families. The city is trying to reach a "critical mass" of tourist attractions, so that visitors will perceive Atlanta as not just a stopping-point, but a vacation destination. Located at the heart of Atlanta's tourist district, *the World of Coca-Cola* is central to this effort (Harotunian, 1991). Atlanta hopes the site will become an international symbol for the city, the equivalent of New York City's Empire State Building or San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. This process has already begun: the credits of some local newscasts now roll over a shot of the building's facade.

The most prominent feature of *the World of Coca-Cola*'s exterior is a giant red neon sign which hangs suspended above the main entrance. The rotating, two-sided disk (one side says "Coca-Cola," the other, "Coke") is enclosed in a black, globe-shaped grid. In case journalists covering *the World of Coca-Cola* miss the point, Coca-Cola press materials make clear the significance of the grid: "the sign is surrounded by a 'longitude and latitude' framework globe representing the earth" (Coca-Cola press release, 1990). From the very first, *the World of Coca-Cola* very literally stakes out Coke's claim to be at the center of the world.

Several news accounts have described the sign as the "centerpiece" of *the World of Coca-Cola* (UPI, 1990). The building's unusual entrance forecourt, which is covered by a green canopy supported by a yellow pole, is structured around the demands of hanging such a heavy object (Nesmith, 1990: 76). As one journalist pointed out, "it's possible this is the first building ever designed around a sign" (Brackey, 1990: 5B). The sign continues to structure the visitor's experience inside *the World of Coca-Cola*; as Architecture magazine explains, "the architects established an orienting circulation pattern among exhibits by allowing visitors to traverse the atrium space on bridges with views that almost always include the neon Coke sign outside" (Nesmith: 76). Like the Magic Castle for Disneyland, the giant sign is often used as an icon for *the World of Coca-Cola* as a whole. The cover of the pamphlet handed out to visitors inside *the World of Coca-Cola*, for example, is a close-up of the sign. Likewise, the official World of Coca-Cola logo is a drawing of the sign in the center of a grid of black boxes.

The Coca-Cola Company has done much to emphasize the significance of the sign: press materials boast of its massive dimensions, and

a special lighting ceremony was even held for it, three months before *the World of Coca-Cola* itself opened. As many press accounts have noted, the sign holds particular significance for Atlantans, because it finally replaces one of the city's most-missed landmarks: a giant Coke sign that had hung in nearby Margaret Mitchell Square from 1948 until 1981. The sign is potent symbol, a perfect example of how *the World of Coca-Cola* yokes together conflicting messages to invoke the power of both sides: it simultaneously signifies local culture and international breadth, long-standing traditions and modern technical mastery.

Having walked under the giant sign and into the building (following, if it's a busy weekend, a wait which can last up to an hour), purchased a ticket from the courteous World of Coca-Cola staff, and passed through some high-tech turnstiles, the visitor walks down a short hall to an elevator entrance. This hallway is lined with windows which look into *the World of Coca-Cola*'s extensive souvenir shop, "The Coca-Cola Trademart." This initial peek primes visitors for what will be the conclusion to their trip, making the purchase of souvenirs seem an inevitable, necessary part of the circuit.

Reaching the elevator, the visitor is taken to the third floor of *the World of Coca-Cola*, where the exhibits begin. The elevator empties into a small foyer leading to the first room of exhibits. There, a staffer welcomes visitors to *the World of Coca-Cola* and hands each visitor a descriptive pamphlet. Interestingly, the pamphlet does not contain a map, as most museum and attraction pamphlets do. The only available diagrams of *the World of Coca-Cola* are posted at unobtrusive locations on each floor. *The World of Coca-Cola*'s omission of maps reinforces the building's narrative structure, discouraging viewers from zigzagging through the rooms out of sequence.

Standing in the entrance foyer, the visitor is on the threshold of the first of *the World of Coca-Cola*'s exhibition galleries. Running through that doorway, and overhead above the foyer itself, circulate a loop of Coke bottles. Following these bottles to their source, the visitor encounters a contraption which seems to be filling and capping hundreds of Coke bottles. A plaque labels it the "Bottling Fantasy: A Salute to the Bottlers of Coca-Cola around the World."

The Bottling Fantasy presents a highly abstracted, aestheticized version of the Coke bottling process. Empty Coke bottles shuffle forward in two symmetrical bins at the bottom. From there, the bottles seem to be pulled up, sent through an elaborate loop, filled from a giant vat of soda at the top, capped, and sent off. Bottling is an allegory for the marketing process that *the World of Coca-Cola* will chronicle throughout its exhibits: it is the physical act of packaging the product. Bottling is also the closest *the World of Coca-Cola* ever gets to detailing a process of production. Nowhere in any exhibit is there a word about the most fundamental function of the Coca-Cola Corporation: making Coca-Cola syrup. (Until recently, in fact, Coca-Cola's profits came exclusively from selling its syrup; Coca-Cola bottlers were legally independent from the Coca-Cola Company (Tedlow, 1990: 41-7).)

It's significant, in this context, that the Bottling Fantasy doesn't actually work (although guide-book accounts of the exhibit describe it as if it did). The viewer closely examining the sculpture realizes that the machine is composed of many independent parts which simply move back and forth. The empty bottles on the bottom, for example, aren't actually lifted; they just rotate back and forth, while a separate loop of bottles make a perpetual climb up one side of the structure, and decent down the other. Likewise, the bottles aren't really filled; one loop of empty bottles disappears into the vat, while a second loop of filled bottles reappears out the other side. Coke surely could have created a structure which actually fills bottles. But instead of demonstrating the bottling process, the Bottling Fantasy abstracts, aestheticizes, and mystifies it. We see not bottling process, but bottling fantasy, rendering production a magical, unknowable event. Significantly, no human hands touch this moving sculpture; part of this fantasy of production is having no workers to worry about.

*The World of Coca-Cola* does recognize that the Bottling Fantasy's abstractions can't account for the bottling process by itself; the omission of more factual information would be too glaring. So *the World of Coca-Cola* complements the Bottling Fantasy with a display behind it that recounts "achievements in Coke bottling from the early 1900s to present" (Visitor's pamphlet). Most prominent in this display are two continuously running videos: one is a document of the bottling process filmed in 1919, the other shows that process today. The contemporary

video is particularly interesting, because it's the one place in all of *the World of Coca-Cola* which professes to inform the visitor about a part of the physical production of Coca-Cola. But the video, a lightning-paced, incoherent montage of scenes from several different bottling factories, is no more enlightening than the Bottling Sculpture. The focus of the video is not the process, but the Coca-Cola bottles and cans, which are shot in the same glistening, hyperreal high-resolution as they are in Coke commercials. The result is another round of mystification and aestheticization. And by depicting the bottling process as a whirl of activity, the videos evade the reality of labor for each worker: eight hours of mind-numbing repetition.

The three plants Coke chooses to present in the video are in America, England, and Japan. *The World of Coca-Cola* proclaims the international consumption of Coca-Cola to be a means to world unity. But addressing the flip side, the international production of Coca-Cola, is more problematic. Working conditions at Coca-Cola bottlers throughout the world vary greatly; franchises in several countries have been responsible for severe human rights violations.<sup>1</sup> Rather than evoking the spectre of exploited Third World labor, the bottling video limits its coverage to plants in industrialized countries in which workers clearly enjoy a relatively high standard of living.

Having concluded its prelude on bottling, *the World of Coca-Cola* is ready to begin telling the history of Coke, appropriately beginning with the story of the drink's invention. If the role of the bottling exhibits is to give Coca-Cola flesh, the role of the invention exhibits is to give it a soul. *The World of Coca-Cola* must represent the Coca-Cola formula itself as being intrinsically valuable, so that the 100 years of marketing history which follow will seem to be the natural expression of the worthiness of the liquid, not the empty, manipulative creation of demand. The story of the invention of Coca-Cola is the perfect opportunity for *the World of Coca-Cola* to ascribe unique, powerful qualities to the drink.

<sup>1</sup> Henry J. Frundt's *Refreshing Pauses: Coca-Cola and Human Rights in Guatemala* documents the Coca-Cola Company's long period of inaction in the face of continued evidence of a Guatemalan bottler's use of violent union-busting techniques. According to Frundt, "Coke has faced similar problems in Texas, South Africa, Uruguay, and Ecuador" (1987: 232.).

The World of Coke tackles this story in two ways. Starting along the right-hand wall as one enters the first room, the historical display begins with the invention of Coca-Cola. But first, one is drawn to the sound and light coming from a large-screen video screening nook on the left, which a poster advertises as “The Search for Refreshment.” Dom DeLuise stars in this six-minute comedy, playing what the visitors’ pamphlet describes as “a series of historical characters—all in search of the perfect beverage.” Socrates unwittingly quenches his thirst with hemlock, Dr. Jeckyll thinks he’s discovered the perfect refreshment and instead turns into Mr. Hyde, and so on. Each of the characters is a foreign stereotype; at times the caricature borders on the offensive. DeLuise’s Japanese warlord, for example, spouts pseudo-Japanese gibberish and quickly commits hari-kari.

The tone of the video changes abruptly, however, when Coke is discovered. DeLuise is now incarnated as a 19th century American soda jerk. Asked for a soda, DeLuise accidentally hits the soda water spigot, adding carbonated water to the syrup in the glass. The result, as a narrator interrupts to tell us, is a “happy accident”: the invention of Coca-Cola. Although the idea that Coke is “the ultimate refreshment” might seem to have a hint of irony in its overstatement, the claim is played without the trace of a smirk. It is not coincidental that Coke is discovered by Americans. “The Search for Refreshment” uses comedy as an excuse to indulge in *the World of Coca-Cola’s* only example of blatant ethnocentrism. That ethnocentrism is a clumsy prelude to the more subtly ethnocentrist internationalist ideology Coca-Cola will later elaborate: it establishes that Coca-Cola is at its core an American product, and a superior one for being American.<sup>2</sup>

Because it is a piece of entertainment, the “Search for Refreshment” is not bound to historical accuracy in the same way that other displays in the World of Coke are. In reality, it is unclear how and when the mixture of Coca-Cola syrup with carbonated water actually took place. Even if the mixture was a happy accident as depicted in the video, it was hardly as startling an innovation as the video suggests. As business historian Robert Tedlow points out, “the epiphany in Atlanta in 1886 did not yield a distinctive or original product. Carbonated

<sup>2</sup> Since this paper was written, “The Search for Refreshment” has been replaced by a new video, “First Things First,” which I have not seen.

water flavored with syrups of various kinds had been around for years, in bottled form as well as at the druggist’s fountain” (1990: 25-6).

In contrast to the myth-making of “The Search for Refreshment,” the opening segment of the historical display tells a factual account of the invention of Coca-Cola. It dispenses with the early days rather quickly. The reason for this may be that Coca-Cola has something of a disreputable past, a liability for a company whose prime asset is its association with tradition and consistency. Most notoriously, many sources claim that the drink originally contained cocaine (Watters: 17; Maltby, 1989: 139; and others). The Coca-Cola Company vociferously denies the allegation, and the World of Coke avoids it altogether.

Even if these claims are false, there’s no getting around the fact that Coca-Cola started out as not a beverage, but a patent medicine. As the product’s popularity grew, Coca-Cola came to realize that it had more potential as a beverage than as a medicine, but for years advertising continued to have to deal with the legacy of its early history. As Tedlow notes: “Coca-Cola advertising was designed not only to sell the product to the end consumer, but also to defend Coke against the many charges that it contained dangerous amounts of cocaine, alcohol, or caffeine. [...] Even a casual glance through the first four volumes of Coca-Cola advertising reveals the efforts made to fight charges that the beverage posed a health risk” (3-19,391). A similar glance through the World of Coke, however, tells no such story. Advertisements of that type are systematically omitted.

Leaving the first gallery, the visitor encounters a small area opening onto the second gallery. This hallway contains several touch-screen video booths built in the shape of Coke cans. These are the “Take 5” booths, which show short films which integrate the history of Coke into American history. This first section covers 1886, the year of Coke’s invention, to 1940, in 11 installments covering a five-year span each. A second group of booths on the floor below continues the story to the present.

Most viewers approaching the *Take 5* terminals seem somewhat confused. For one thing, the videos rather awkwardly obstruct the hallway. Furthermore, their Coke-can shape gives no idea what the terminals’ actual function is. Still, many viewers are attracted by the chance to play with the screens, and wander up to make a choice. Once

they realize that all they're getting is a five-minute history lesson, however, most simply walk away in the middle of the video. The reason the videos exist at all, in fact, has more to do with political exigencies than with the flow of *the World of Coca-Cola* as a whole. *The World of Coca-Cola* stands practically across the street from the Georgia state capitol, which every Atlanta sixth-grade class must visit. Coca-Cola would like this visit to include a trip across the street to *the World of Coca-Cola*. Atlanta's Board of Education was receptive to the idea, but was concerned that there be enough clearly "educational" content to *the World of Coca-Cola*. In response, Coca-Cola agreed to create these *Take 5* videos. And so during the school day, *the World of Coca-Cola* is filled with busloads of classes. Ironically, it seems unlikely that classes visiting *the World of Coca-Cola* see much of the *Take 5* videos in particular, since they're designed primarily for individual use, while the kids spend most of their visit in groups led by the guest relations staff.

The *Take 5* videos are of modest significance, then, for most visitors to *the World of Coca-Cola*. The majority probably don't view a single clip, and hardly any watch more than one on each floor. (For one thing, there are usually other visitors waiting behind for their turn.) Nonetheless, the *Take 5* videos hold a very significant place within *the World of Coca-Cola*. They are the cornerstones to its claim for the respectability of an education-oriented museum. Furthermore, they are *the World of Coca-Cola's* link to the outside world—the one place where *the World of Coca-Cola* tells a more general history, and situates itself within that history. They provide the historical foundation for *the World of Coca-Cola's* utopian internationalist ideology.

The structure of each *Take 5* video clip is essentially the same. Each five-year period is organized around a central theme, such as inventions, urbanization, westward expansion, etc. Each video begins with a narrator introducing this theme. The first half-to-two-thirds of the video chronicles events in this period of history which fit into the theme. Then the final portion of each video documents how the story of Coca-Cola during this period parallels that of America or the world as a whole. In some segments, the connection is obviously forced; in a few, it is underplayed. But the overall impression, and the one fostered by most of the videos individually, is that Coca-Cola is literally at the

center of history. Each historical period seems to be encapsulated by and to need Coca-Cola.

But the *Take 5* videos are more than simple boosterism. As the foundation for *the World of Coca-Cola's* utopian ideology, they must at least make some gestures toward presenting a populist historical vision. In fact, *Take 5* videos are surprisingly progressive. They most closely resemble another piece of public history sponsored by Coca-Cola, "The American Adventure" at EPCOT. As historian Michael Wallace observes, the American Adventure is notable for breaking, at least in a limited way, from Disney's traditional "great white men" approach to history (Wallace, 1985: 52). Like the American Adventure, the *Take 5* videos play down the injustices they chronicle, presenting history as a continual series of triumphs over social challenges. But they take another step toward honest social history, going further in their criticisms of American society while portraying solutions as the result of collective action rather than individual heroism. The segment on 1911-1915, for example, entitled, "The Stopwatch and the Factory," addresses labor struggles, a topic the American Adventure doesn't dare address. It begins with words of praise for the new levels of productivity made possible by the assembly line, but goes on to criticize Frederick Winslow Taylor's dehumanizing time-saving techniques as a "tyranny of the clock." The organized labor movement, working with corporations, emerges as the hero of this piece. Together, labor and capital collaborate to use the techniques of mass production to produce "better conditions, better wages, and more leisure time." In the end, of course, the video subordinates labor issues to the imperative of consumption: the narration continues, "but most of all, factories produced products: in particular, the newly designed Coca-Cola "hobble-skirt" bottle.

The *Take 5* videos run into greater difficulties as they approach the more recent past. But where the American Adventure simply avoids conflict by condensing all of post-World War II history into an insipid feel-good medley of images, the *Take 5* videos take some surprisingly controversial stands. At first, the videos' attempts to tap into the spirit of the '60s rings hollow: the 1961-1965 video, entitled "Help" (and featuring a clearly ersatz version of the Beatles' song), ends with an awkward non sequitur: "Wherever people were helping each other and

themselves, they often found that things did go better with Coke.” But as the videos develop the internationalist, “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing” ideology, they are forced to take a few sides. For the most part, they can stick to safe issues such as environmentalism and brotherly love. But the 1971-1975 video, “Teach the World,” goes much farther, depicting peace protests and draft card burning to the tune of (the real version of) Buffalo Springfield’s vague but clearly anti-war “For What It’s Worth.” The narrator hedges this apparently sympathetic portrait of the anti-war movement, reminding us that there were “no easy solutions” for the problems of the day. But the clip’s conclusion is at least an endorsement of the principle of activism: “as long as people care, get involved, there will be hope [...]” Forced by the logic of Coca-Cola’s idealistic rhetoric to take at least few real stands, the *Take 5* videos suggest that for all its limitations, Coca-Cola’s utopian internationalism is a step forward.<sup>3</sup>

Past the first bank of *Take 5* terminals arches the entrance to the second gallery. This room covers the history of Coca-Cola from the mid-1920s through the 1950s. The first thing in the room the visitor is likely to notice is “Barnes Soda Fountain,” a simulation of a soda fountain from the 1930s. Two walls and a window filled with period Coke advertisements separate the fountain from the gallery area around it. Inside, a staff member dressed in the costume of a “soda jerk” periodically demonstrates how Coke has been prepared over the years. The visitors’ pamphlet promises, “You’ll feel just like folks did back when they met in soda shops like this to greet and chat with friends.” Actually, you’re more likely to feel like a visitor to Disney’s “Main Street.” Barnes Soda Fountain does not recreate the past, but presents a distilled fantasy of it. Like the buildings along Disney’s Main Street, the soda shop is smaller than life-size. And as on Main Street, visitors do not really participate, but only observe. While there’s room for a few visitors to sit at the fountain or at the few tables, during peak hours most stand toward the back. And the “soda jerk” makes only one glass

<sup>3</sup> In a similar encouraging vein were Coca-Cola’s commercials tied into 1992 Winter Olympics. While many other advertisers played on recession-driven xenophobia and hyped American athletes, Coca-Cola ran a series of ads featuring Olympians from all over the world, concluding with the information that Coca-Cola sponsors national athletic programs in 154 countries.

of Coke, sampled by only a few visitors in the front. The fountain is designed, in fact, to discourage actually socializing, since it needs quick turnover so that the soda jerk can repeat his bit for the next bunch of visitors. The real guests’ lounge is at the end of the tour.

Along one wall of the soda shop stands a jukebox stocked with what the visitors’ pamphlet describes as “songs about Coca-Cola from 1907 to 1948 and Company-sponsored radio programs from 1930 through the 1950s.” While the radio clips are genuine period pieces, the twenty songs which praise the virtues of Coca-Cola aren’t exactly what they appear to be. Their placement on a period jukebox, in the period soda fountain, implies that the songs were a part of the popular culture of the time. The liner notes to a tape of the songs sold in the Coca-Cola Trademart claim that “all pieces capture the essence of Tin Pan Alley in its heyday and reflect a growing affection for a singular soft drink, Coca-Cola.” But what isn’t apparent to the visitor at the jukebox is that almost all of these songs were never recorded, or even published, in their own time. Even the two songs which actually were popular, Fanny Bryce’s “Oh! Mother, I’m Wild” and the Andrews Sisters’ “Rum and Coca-Cola,” are presented in cover versions.

Barnes’ Soda Fountain feigns to represent Coca-Cola’s broader meanings in popular culture, but in fact it presents only company-originated product. A fuller representation would impinge on *the World of Coca-Cola*’s monopoly on the definition Coca-Cola, and risk introducing voices which many include some criticism of the product. And so while *the World of Coca-Cola* brags that Barnes’ Soda Fountain is a reproduction of an actual fountain in Baxley, Georgia, where author Caroline Miller would sit sipping Coca-Cola while writing her 1934 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Lamb in his Bosom*, it makes no mention of the many works of independent American authors, photographers, filmmakers and artists in which Coca-Cola is actually represented, addressed, and discussed. Likewise, *the World of Coca-Cola* includes on its wall several advertisements for Coca-Cola painted by famous artists, but no independent art which incorporates Coca-Cola iconography, such as Andy Warhol’s Coke bottles or Walker Evans’ photographs.<sup>4</sup> And among the dozens of quotations about Coca-Cola

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Warhol is quoted at one point in *The World of Coca-Cola*. Perhaps his association with the drink is so strong that Coca-Cola felt that ignoring him would be a

annotating displays, all but a few are from Coca-Cola executives. (In some cases, in fact, sayings are attributed to Coca-Cola executives which were clearly first made by others. Most startlingly, Coca-Cola Chairman Roberto Goizueta is credited with the aphorism, “Think globally, act locally.”)

The rest of the second gallery continues the history of Coca-Cola, concluding with World War II and its aftermath. World War II was crucial to the cementing of Coca-Cola’s American image, and to its conquest of world markets. The end of World War II left Coca-Cola with unprecedented international reach. *The World of Coca-Cola* soft-pedals the link between American military prowess and Coca-Cola’s international expansion, concentrating instead on the respite the drink provided for Americans during the war. But the end of World War II is a turning point; as the last display section in Gallery II is entitled, Coca-Cola stood “At the Crossroads of the World.”

From Gallery II, a hallway leads to the last section of the third floor, a theater where what the visitors’ pamphlet describes as “a 13-minute celebration of life and Coca-Cola around the world,” “Every Day of Your Life,” is continually screened. “Every Day of Your Life” is designed to dazzle viewers. It was filmed in more than a dozen countries on six continents, and is shown in the United States’ first large-screen High Definition Television theater. The bulk of the film is non-narrative, showing short clips of Coca-Cola related activity in one glorious locale after another. Some of the clips are thematically linked; one segment, for example, spotlights a string of vacation spots around the world. At times, the video grows more abstract, panning across giant vistas. At other times, it segues into small vignettes, such as an episode in which a Thai rock star converts a Coke truck into a stage for his concert. Whatever the setting, the film’s cinematography is lush, the activities it chronicles appealing. The film is *the World of Coca-Cola’s* grand expression of Coca-Cola’s internationalist ideology: the notion that the universal consumption of Coca-Cola unites a picturesque but only superficially diverse world in brotherhood.

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glaring omission; the quote they do use, in any case, reads so deadpan that it could pass for ad copy: “You know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke, and no amount of money can get you a better Coke. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good.”

The parameters of this internationalism are laid out in the most extended vignette in “Every Day of Your Life,” which appears toward the end of a film. In a busy airport in Tokyo, a small American boy is separated from his family. He wanders confused through the airport, unable to read the strange signs or speak the language to ask directions. Suddenly, he spots something familiar: a Coca-Cola machine. Reaching the machine, he is reunited with his family, who were likewise drawn to this island of American culture in a sea of foreignness.

This scene is probably the most effective piece of drama in *the World of Coca-Cola*. It elicits a wave of recognition from travellers who have had similar experiences of stumbling upon an oasis of American culture in the midst of otherness. The scene serves to remind us of the subtext to the rest of “Every Day of Your Life”: that what unites these many peoples around the World is a distinctly American product. This subtext can’t be too explicit, or Coca-Cola’s moralistic claim of providing international unity will be sullied by the transparency of American cultural imperialism. On the other hand, it can’t be ignored altogether, for part of the appeal (to Americans) of Coca-Cola’s internationalism, is the unstated promise that America be at the center of the international order. Coca-Cola internationalism would probably be a lot less interesting to Americans if America were just another country.

The Tokyo airport segment’s role, then, is to invoke Coca-Cola’s Americanness while putting American cultural imperialism (what many throughout the world have labeled “Coca-Colonization”) in the gentlest possible light: Coca-Cola does not transform other countries’ cultures, but is just a useful ambassador of Americana abroad. The role of the Coca-Cola machine in the vignette, in fact, is exactly that of an American embassy, providing shelter for expatriates. It’s no accident that the episode takes place in Japan, a country which to most Americans is less likely to seem a victim of cultural imperialism than a perpetrator of it.

As the centerpiece to *the World of Coca-Cola’s* internationalist ideology, “Every Day of Your Life” addresses not only the global function of Coca-Cola, but also the global role of The Coca-Cola Company. For that purpose, the globe-spanning, multicultural film is bookended by clips of a single white American man. He introduces himself as Don Keough, president of the Coca-Cola Company. Keough’s

speeches are the only moments in *the World of Coca-Cola* where the visitor is engaged directly by a person representing the Coca-Cola Company. Acknowledging the role of the Coca-Cola Company is problematic for *the World of Coca-Cola*, which invests a lot in the notion that Coca-Cola is at core a product, not a system of symbolic or economic relations. Just as advertisements cannot be seen as constructing Coca-Cola, but as reflecting its virtues, The Coca-Cola Company cannot be seen as a business producing Coca-Cola for its profit; rather, the intrinsically valuable Coca-Cola must be seen as the *raison d'être* for the business.

Keough makes this distinction by describing Coca-Cola as less a product than an international resource. The function of the Coca-Cola Company is simply to be the caretaker of that resource: "You know, in the final analysis, Coca-Cola really doesn't belong to us. It belongs to you, to anyone and to everyone who has ever shared a moment with a Coke." Keough repeats this point in his conclusion: "As I said at the beginning, Coca-Cola doesn't belong to us, it belongs to all of you."

Keough has a point; all over the world, the consumers of Coca-Cola claim it and shape their use and understanding of it to their needs. But Keough's claim is also disingenuous, for *the World of Coca-Cola* is the keystone to the Coca-Cola Company's continual efforts to reclaim its product and mold an official definition of Coca-Cola. The Company may assert that the people own Coke; but that won't stop it from suing any of those "owners" who infringe upon the Coca-Cola trademark.

Although Keough denies The Coca-Cola Company's struggle to control the meanings of Coca-Cola, he does acknowledge its economic significance: Every day, over a million people worldwide earn their livelihood from Coca-Cola—this simple bit of refreshment. These men and women make up the largest production and distribution network in the world. The world-wide Coca-Cola system contributes over 50 billion dollars a year to the economies of local communities in every corner of the globe. Keough's language is echoed in other areas of *the World of Coca-Cola*, which counter the notion that the Coca-Cola Company engages in economic imperialism by claiming that Coca-Cola is a boon to local economies. This assertion is to some degree true; even a work critical of Coca-Cola's human rights record, Henry

J. Frundt's Refreshing Pauses: Coca-Cola and Human Rights in Guatemala, points out that "Local autonomy [...] created an alliance between the national and world business communities that demonstrated a commitment to the local economy. [...] It thereby created an image of friendly cooperation that challenged the assumption of exploitative foreign investment. [...] Coca-Cola became a recognized leader in using the franchise system to develop local independent businesses that other transnational firms subsequently imitated" (1987: 279). But whether this system of autonomous foreign bottlers will continue is unclear; as Tedlow notes, "In recent years, the soft drink companies have moved to increase their control over bottling. Where possible, they have been buying up their bottlers and consolidating operations" (357).

In any case, Keough does not want to claim that Coca-Cola is really about economics. And so he makes the same shift in emphasis from labor to consumption that the *Take 5* videos do: "Yes, *the World of Coca-Cola* is big, but we never lose sight of the fact that Coca-Cola has a very simple purpose, and that is to offer people of the world a moment out of the day to relax, to enjoy and to be refreshed."

After Keough's final comments, the audience is directed through exits on the opposite side of the theater from the entrance. The exit leads to stairs which take visitors down to the second floor. Upon descending the stairs, the visitor reaches the third and final gallery, "The Real Thing," which completes the history of Coca-Cola advertising. The busiest of *the World of Coca-Cola's* galleries, it is filled with the sounds of Coca-Cola commercials. In one corner stands "Coke's Greatest Hits Radio Kiosk," which plays Coke jingles recorded over the years by an impressive array of pop music performers. Across the room, "Perfect Pauses Theater" plays a loop of selected Coke television commercials. And along one wall, a terminal plays "Hilltop Reunion: The Making of a Commercial." Meanwhile, the history displays run from the 1950s through the 1980s, covering Coca-Cola's international expansion and diversification.

The display concludes by addressing a topic of particular significance to the narrative of *the World of Coca-Cola*: the New Coke controversy. In 1985, the Coca-Cola Company announced that it was changing the taste of Coca-Cola. The public response, at least according to

most media, was outrage. Protest organizations were formed, boycotts were started. After a summer of turmoil, the Coca-Cola Company responded to the groundswell by reintroducing the original formula as “Coca-Cola Classic,” while continuing to market new Coke as well. Some observers have labeled the entire episode an incredible gaffe; others have suggested that it was all a cleverly orchestrated publicity stunt to introduce a new product while reviving public interest in the old one. *The World of Coca-Cola* skirts this question; understandably, it does not want to paint the Coca-Cola Corporation as either bungling or Machiavellian. Instead of concentrating on the corporation’s decision, it focuses on the public response: “one of the greatest displays of consumer loyalty in the history of commerce.”

*The World of Coca-Cola* uses the New Coke incident as the historical display’s final object lesson, proving what Donald Keough asserted in “Every Day of Your Life”: that Coca-Cola belongs to the consumers, not the company. As Goizueta told an interviewer in 1988, “There is not another company in the world like the Coca-Cola company, not one. I’m not saying we’re better, I’m not saying we’re worse. I am saying that there is none other like it. If proof is needed, all you have to do is go back again to the summer of 1985. It was then that we learned that if the shareholders think they own this company, they are kidding themselves. The reality is that the American consumer owns Coca-Cola” (Beverage Digest, 1988, as quoted in Tedlow: 60). The affair is also used to prove the sanctity of the Coca-Cola product: the defeat of the marketers’ New Coke scheme implies that the appeal of Coca-Cola is not simply constructed by advertising, but is rooted in the objective qualities of the beverage itself.

But this argument fails to account for the reason that Coca-Cola changed its formula in the first place: in blind taste tests, consumers preferred the new formula to the old one by substantial margins. What fueled popular outrage over the replacement of old Coke, then, may have been not the change in taste in itself, but the betrayal for what Coca-Cola stands for which that change implied. Coca-Cola had invested untold millions over a remarkably consistent 99-year advertising history to identify itself with American tradition; the very concept of a “New Coke” was a betrayal of that tradition. And to wantonly change the formula implied that the claims that the Coca-Cola liquid

in itself was special were lies; that Coca-Cola advertising really was the creation of demand out of any old kind of sugar water.

The popular rebellion, then, didn’t necessarily mean that taste itself matters, only that Coca-Cola’s construction of that taste matters; the change in 1985 heedlessly disregarded this history of representation. If Coca-Cola had gradually replaced the old formula with the new one without publicity, it’s likely most consumers would have never noticed—or at least not felt as betrayed by a radical shift in representation—and would have ended up preferring the new version. In fact, since 1985 Coca-Cola has changed its ingredients from fructose to corn syrup, which does result in a sweeter taste. But because it didn’t publicize the move and did not contradict its traditional image, the change has not been widely protested or even noticed.

The uproar over New Coke, then, didn’t prove the intrinsic worth of the old Coca-Cola formula. It did to some degree demonstrate the power of consumers to check a corporation’s caprice. But to claim that this limited accountability proves that Coca-Cola drinkers “own” Coca-Cola is a distortion; it was the Coca-Cola Company which recognized the consumer revolt, packaged it, and sold it back to consumers again.

Exiting the third gallery, the visitor crosses a short hallway containing only two red-and-white garbage cans to encounter a blaze of neon, set off by black walls and a stark black-and-white checkerboard floor. This is Club Coca-Cola. On the right is the neon: a row of logos representing each of Coca-Cola’s current American soft drink products brands (including Coca-Cola Classic, New Coke, Diet Coke, Caffeine-Free Diet Coke, Sprite, and Minute Maid Orange Soda). Below the logos are a row of futuristic-looking red soda dispensers. These are the “Spectacular Soda Fountains.”

Here’s how they work. First, the visitor fills a 12-ounce cup with any amount of ice, from a dispenser in the middle of the room. When the visitor then steps up to any of the fountain stations, sensors trigger overhead spotlights to automatically turn on. The visitor places the cup down, and an ultrasonic sensor automatically senses the amount of ice in the glass. A series of sound effects then signal the start of the action. In front of the dispenser, under the soda sign, liquid begins to bubble at the bottom of a neon tube. Then, neon begins to light up,

tracing a path from bubbling liquid to the top of the column. When it reaches the top, a stream of liquid, colored by overhead lights, leaps back and forth in arcs over 20 feet across the fountain area. After zig-zagging its way toward the visitor's cup, is finally caught in a basin by the dispenser. Sound effects simulate the liquid rippling around and around the basin, then lights simulate the liquid's final voyage from the basin to the nozzle of the soda dispenser, and into the visitor's cup.

The display is truly stunning, *the World of Coca-Cola's* piece de resistance. Visitors ooh and aah at the fountain the way they do nowhere else in *the World of Coca-Cola*; some run back toward the historical displays, to drag their companions over to see the fountains right away. The fountain is crucial to *the World of Coca-Cola* because it is the one moment where the product itself is finally revealed. The challenge is to make that product, after a century of build-up, not seem like an anti-climax. The soda itself, stripped of all packaging, must still seem magical. The fountain accomplishes this project stunningly. The soda appears to be the motive force of the fountain, willing itself from afar into the visitor's cup. Of course, the liquid which makes the 20-foot journey isn't the stuff that ends up in the cup, but the illusion is powerful.

Across from the magic fountain is the other half of Club Coca-Cola: "Tastes of the World." Here, visitors are given the opportunity to sample 18 soft drink flavors which Coca-Cola sells in other countries, but not in the U.S. There's Cappy, a non-carbonated sour cherry drink from Czechoslovakia; Mone, a Japanese honey and lemon drink; Beverly, an Italian quinine aperitif; and so on. The sodas are distributed from three cafeteria-style dispensers; above, a TV screen provides information about each country represented.

The crowd reaction to the Tastes of the World has startled Coca-Cola. Not only are visitors curious; they insist on tasting all 18 drinks. The level of traffic around the small area backs up the whole room; on weekends, it's impossible to get through, and the floor grows sticky with soda spilled in the commotion. Past the soda room, there's a lounge where designers expected visitors to rest while consuming their beverages, but instead visitors insist on drinking while standing, then going back for more. Eventually, Coca-Cola plans on fixing the prob-

lem by redesigning the area, relocating an expanded Tastes of the World along the back wall of the lounge.<sup>5</sup>

The overwhelming popular response to the Tastes of the World suggests a gap between Coca-Cola's internationalist ideology and popular response. As we have seen, *the World of Coca-Cola* consistently spouts a rhetoric of internationalism, but that internationalism is rooted in the assurance that at its center will be the irreducibly American Coca-Cola. The Tastes of the World, on the other hand, offer visitors a chance to experience something just a little bit closer to real difference. The names of the drinks are unfamiliar, the logos never-before-seen, and, most importantly, the tastes are actually new. Nothing in all of the rhetoric about internationalism prepares the visitor for this; that was about sameness, this about difference.

Of course, that difference remains a very mediated one: presumably traditional flavors (such as "Japanese sweet flower") are sweetened, carbonated, and homogenized into a "soft drink." But it remains difference on a level greater than that of, say, EPCOT's World Pavilion, because rather than being ersatz ethnic food, the Tastes of the World really are exactly what is drunk in other countries, and are legitimately unusual for American taste buds. Some of the drinks seem jarringly alien; visitors quickly spit them out. The massive popularity of Tastes of the World suggests the limits of the power of Coca-Cola's brand of internationalism—the homogenizing message of the universal consumption of a single beverage creates a thirst for real difference.

Before visitors exit *the World of Coca-Cola*, there's one more room to get through: the "Coca-Cola Trademart," 4500 square feet of "the largest selection of Coca-Cola merchandise available anywhere." Visitors can buy a vast range of souvenir items, from Coca-Cola clothing to reproductions of Coca-Cola serving trays to histories of Coca-Cola to dancing Coke cans. The Trademart is a recapitulation of *the World of Coca-Cola*, and its logical conclusion. It turns around and commodifies the story of commodification it has just presented, offering for sale reproductions of much of the memorabilia it has displayed. In this final triumph of packaging, the Coca-Cola liquid finally disappears beneath the logo. Coca-Cola becomes a designer label, a sign of value

<sup>5</sup> This redesign has now been accomplished; Coca-Cola has also added *Tastes of the U.S.*, which offers regionally available Coca-Cola flavors such as the Fanta line.

for anything it touches, from clothes to model trains to keychains. Nowhere within the Trademart, however, can the visitor buy a soda.

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