

The Birth Of Escapism

World War 2 changed the world. This is an undeniable fact. The postwar era led to massive political, economic, and social changes, which we still feel the impact of today. But perhaps one of the biggest changes that continues to persist, is the birth of escapism. So, what is escapism? By definition, escapism is “The tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy.” And while the war had ended by the 1950s, millions of people had died in the deadliest conflict in history, and those who lived to return home suffered from PTSD and trauma, certainly an “unpleasant reality” to live in. Many people looked for an escape from everyday life, and this led to the beginnings of escapism as we know it today. Now, that begs the question: why the same thing didn’t happen after WW1? Well, it did. However, what followed WW1 was the Great Depression. People didn’t have time to ignore reality, they needed to get a job and work. But after WW2, there was quite the opposite, an economic boom.

This economic boom led to people buying homes, having families, and having more money in general. But people were trying to forget what had happened a few years before, and then something came along that gave them exactly what they wanted: television. Television sales increased drastically, and by the end of the 1950s, 90% of Canadian households owned a television. Most TV shows presented an idealized version of reality, which was great for many people because it made them forget about their responsibilities and problems, and families would gather around the TV together to be entertained. Many took notice of this rise in popularity, and the number of shows and programs increased to meet the demand, but there was one man who saw the potential that television truly had.

Walt Disney took the world of television by storm with his animated features and TV shows, which quickly became very popular with American, and Canadian, audiences. In 1955, he opened Disneyland, which became an instant success. To escape, you didn’t have to watch a TV show anymore, there was a literal fantasy world to go to. Disneyland has a plaque that says “Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, to tomorrow, and fantasy”. The park was a place where you could forget about your problems and responsibilities, at the mere cost of buying a ticket to get in. No wonder it became so popular. People visited the park not just from Canada, but the whole world.

The advertisements of the 1950s also took advantage of this need for an escape, and many advertisements emphasized or showed the idea of perfection or a perfect world, if you bought their product of course. Contrast that today, and you can definitely see the same thing happening. In fact, this whole idea of escapism is more prevalent today than ever, but why? WW2 happened decades ago, but people are still addicted to TV, as well as video games, streaming services, virtual reality and more. Well, I think this idea from the 1950s became so engrained into our culture, that it has simply stuck around for the long term. People like to be distracted from their problems and responsibilities, and who knows, with technology continuing to progress, maybe we will live in a VR matrix someday.