

The Theme Park and the Figure of Death

The Deadly Theme Park Figure

No big deal. Death always comes with the territory. I'll see you in Disneyland (Serial killer Richard Ramirez, just after his being given 19 separate death sentences).

In 1996, shortly after I had left my position as an employee trainer at a major U.S. theme park, a fellow employee and friend told me about a major accident on one of the park's roller coasters that had claimed the life of a mechanic. The accident was later detailed in local newspapers, as well as a few national ones, and some Internet sites dealing with theme parks and roller coasters. For those workers associated with the park, the roller coaster death signified an acknowledgement of the risk and tragedy that can impact places of popular amusement. However statistically rare, and regardless of the risk management strategies that are instituted to prevent it, death can be manifested in places that are constructed in opposition to fatality.

When actualized in the theme park, fatality impacts the social, psychological and functional arenas of organizational life equally. For customers, the immediate concern is to understand if the incident is a reflection of a larger pattern of poor ride safety or employee negligence. Some amusement landscapes, such as carnivals, are associated with a primal connotation of the "low"—rides that are faulty, cheaply-done games and attractions, monstrous humans or freaks of nature, and seedy employees whose bodies are covered in tattoos and may wield knives on their belts. Carnivals are distinctive from amusement and theme parks in many respects, and one of the most significant differences is the carnival's roots in transgressive politics (Bakhtin, 1984; Caron, 2001). Theme parks, beginning with the influence of Disney, established an aesthetic of cleanliness, security and safety, a transmutation of the carnivalesque into commercialism and normalized social relations. Today's amusement public expects safe rides, hospitable employees and attractions that feign danger and death only to a small degree. Accidents like the one that I describe can impact ticket sales at the gate, and, in many cases, theme park public relations offices eschew park responsibility by pointing to the negligence of park patrons. For the worker, an accident signifies a worst-case scenario, while a death connotes something deeper—the *objet petit a*, "that surplus, that elusive make-believe that drove man to change his existence" (Zizek, 1992, p. 8).

When a death occurs in a theme park, the worker is confronted with the immediate social and psychological reality of recognizing the loss of a co-worker, perhaps a friend. Though I was no longer working at the park, I had a strangely personal response when I heard about the accident. I never knew the mechanic, but I was somewhat close to the CRO—Certified Ride Operator—who sent out the fatal car on the roller coaster that hit the mechanic on the track. It later occurred to me that I may have trained the CRO on rides safety and park operations that year, or in a previous one, but it is uncertain given that our team of five training coordinators could train up to forty employees in a given day. When I thought of the CRO who sent the train out, I could not help but wonder how she personally dealt with the situation—a theme park death is rare, but being the person responsible for the death is rarer. When my friend described the chaos on park radios and the multitude of workers running to the scene of the occurrence, I was struck by the ways

in which the park's management reacted to the events with stability and stoicism. Controversially, management decided to keep the park open that day because it claimed that it did not wish to incite more panic in the public. As it was constituted in multiple social, psychological and functional respects, the mechanic's death signals a modern ethos of fatality that recognizes the possibility of death and responds to the risk with precise organizational strategies.

In contrast with the modern approach to fatality, there is a postmodern ethos that questions both the organicism of death as a social force and the strategies that a society, or organization, institutes to respond to that force. I associate this second context with my research on the cultural dimensions of theme parks. The experiences that I followed in my work as a trainer were eventually detailed in my doctoral dissertation, and in that work, I attempted to balance the traditional modernist concerns of cultural anthropology with the postmodern object of my research—the theme park. My initial reaction to the worker's death was thoroughly modern—I focused on how it affected the many co-workers whom I had known and how the organization would struggle through the affair. As I began to write about the circumstances related to the death, my response was postmodern. The accident signified something deeper about the organization that I had known for many years. It spoke to me as a paroxysm, as an indication of a convulsive existentialism that is neither discussed in anthropological writing nor the theme park literature.

In this article, I use the initial framing of this theme park death to analyze the figure of the theme park (under fatality) and its function in American public culture. I intend to analyze the social, psychological and existential role that death plays in popular culture, specifically the world of theme parks and themed museums. In addressing the fictive and real death present in themed spaces, I wish to identify the figure of death as the paroxysm that marks a characteristic tension within American amusement culture—one between a modern ethos and a postmodern one. First, I will identify the death of the social in addressing the interpersonal dimensions of theme park accidents and fatality. I will then speak of the prevalence of death in the American mind through an analysis of the simulation of death in amusements, a death of psyche. The fourth section deals with the death of the real and there I suggest that theme parks signify a mechanized approach to life that seeks to avoid meditation on the figure of death. I then discuss the death of safety and security, and in addition to suggesting the post-9/11 relevance of this topic, I argue that theme parks are reflections of wider risk economies common to globalization. To conclude the paper, I consider the death of culture and the nation that is represented in themed war and genocide attractions. Throughout the article I will suggest that the figure of death in popular amusement is best understood at the uncanny point of articulation in which the modern and postmodern reaction to fatality meet.

The Primal Accident

For us, defined as living beings, death is our imaginary. So, all the disjunctions on which the different structures of the real are based...have their archetype in the fundamental disjunction of life and death. This is why, in whatever field of 'reality', every separate term for which the other is its imaginary is haunted by the latter as *its own death* (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 133).

In his work *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot speaks of the difficulty that exists in attempting to represent the disaster (1986). In the days following September 11th, Americans, and others worldwide, sought to understand the terrorist attacks through the screens of television, newspaper and the Internet. In part because of the media saturation of news dealing with the tragedies of September 11th, Americans were confronted with the idea of a “primal accident” (Virilio, 1997)—an event that is commonly represented in the filmic world of action movies and science fiction. Against the backdrop of the horrific events and images of that day, the nature of death in the theme park would seem muted and mundane.

Following the September 11th attacks, Disney took the unprecedented move and closed both Walt Disney World and Disneyland. In fact, such a closure had not happened before—with the exception of the Kennedy assassination. Disney’s response to the massive deaths of September 11th is no surprise, for since the time of Coney Island, amusement and theme parks have reflected the social values of the United States and, as commercial institutions, they have responded to the trends of society as a whole (Kasson, 1978). In the aftermath of September 11th, some theme parks erected patriotic signage and planned events that emphasized the cultural strength of the United States. Disney’s closures and the patriotic response of other theme parks reflect a modernist orientation to death and its memorialization: in times of tragedy, Americans must reflect on and remember the dead—what amounts to a moment of silence of the social—and as such they must put their consumer behaviors on hold or redirect them to meet the patriotic life needs of the nation.

In March of 2003, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced “Operation Liberty Shield.” Part of the initiative included the definition of safe, no-fly zones that were deemed potential targets by al Qaeda, including the airspace around Walt Disney World and Disneyland (Anon., 2003b). In the same year, a planned event at Disney’s new concert hall in Los Angeles was cancelled due to security concerns (Anon., 2003c). A year prior, a suspected Al Qaeda agent was arrested and it was discovered that the individual had videotapes of the World Trade Center, Disneyland and some of the Universal Studios parks in Florida (Anon., 2002). The construction of major theme parks as potential terrorist targets is a unique facet of a nation that has become more commonly associated with a postmodern ethos of death. In 1970 a group of Yippies took over Tom Sawyer Island and staged a smoke-in at Disneyland, and in 1995 rumors circulated that Aum Shinri Kyo (“Supreme Truth”)—the group that attacked a Tokyo subway—planned to launch a sarin gas attack against the same park. Aside from these incidents, theme parks have remained sanitized from the effects of terrorism, with common street crimes—shoplifting, fights, vandalism—being the only signs of deviance in theme parks. The response of the U.S. government to September 11th necessitated that consumer spaces, including theme parks, Las Vegas casinos and shopping malls, be constructed as targets of potential terrorist attack. The uncertainty of death—in the idea that any space of popular life is a potential target—maintains the government’s ideological control of the aftermath of September 11th deaths. Interestingly, death is further channeled in the messages given by President Bush to travel, shop and, essentially, be a consumer. Symbolically, the effect of such a mixed message is to create an army of somnambulist

consumer-citizens reminiscent of the shopping mall zombies in George Romero's film *Dawn of the Dead*. The symbolic death of the citizen, confined to existence among theme park amusements, preserves the life of the state.

Two years after September 11th, I visited Disneyland and discovered that new organizational procedures had been implemented to deal with potential terrorist attacks. The most notable sign was bag screenings at the front gate of the park. For many of the patrons that I observed, the screenings were viewed as necessary and relatively unobtrusive responses to the perception of increased security threats. Prior to the construction of the theme park as a terrorist target, theme park management focused on the primal accidents that were the result of mechanical ride failures, worker or patron negligence. As Richard Le Gallienne once said, death "still holds a foremost place in popular amusements" (1905, p. 240). As the next section will suggest, for the patron, the feigning of death through the riding of amusement rides is a desired outcome of a theme park visit. For the theme park worker, limits on acceptable patron risk must be established, and the overall goal of theme park organizational culture is to produce varied and exciting entertainment that is devoid of accidents and death.

Of course, theme park accidents, though statistically insignificant, do occur. Though the emphasis on churning out new employees for a park's operation can sometimes result in faulty safety training, theme park operations commonly focus on safety procedures that are geared at eliminating accidents related to patron and worker negligence. Because of the general culture of risk of which theme parks are a part, when accidents do occur, they are telescoped and appear to be the norm in the public's eye (Walsh, 1996, p. 133). The Consumer Product Safety Commission is one of many associations that assess theme park safety. On the Internet a number of websites focus on strategies that patrons can take to avoid park injuries, while others highlight the specifics of deaths that occur in theme parks—a sort of Vietnam Memorial of the virtual. One such site addressed a slew of theme park deaths that occurred in the United Kingdom over a period of five days in 2004 (Mills, 2004). What is interesting about this site is not the detailing of the accidents and deaths themselves, but the discussion board that accompanies the narratives. Interested participants discuss their views on the deaths, including the dynamics of the incidents, the role of patrons in the events, as well as the park's liability. Jean Baudrillard once suggested that "death is something that is shared out...it is socialised through exchange" (1993, p. 166). In traditional societies, death is experienced through modernist constructions of the phenomenon as being a part of the intimate relations of society (*Gemeinschaft*). In the contemporary societies in which theme parks exist, death is guided by a postmodern social ethos: though individuals do not know the victims—either of the September 11th attacks or those on roller coasters and rides—people are connected, almost immediately, by the viral social networks that characterize society. Theme parks exemplify the idea of the death of the social, for the reflections that patrons make on potential or actual deaths are for the sake of grounding a self saturated by nameless deaths and media images.

Myth of Death

It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence. (Blanchot, 1986, p. 4).

Death is everywhere. It is a reality of a social world marked by violence, famine and genocide; it is found in imaginative subcultures like Goth; and it is reflected in popular culture that glorifies simulated violence and mayhem. Ironically, for all of its prevalence in our minds, death is something that is avoided, at all costs (Becker, 1973; Dumont & Foss, 1972). In the United States, a peculiar relationship to death emerged with the funerary industry—death is removed from the household and is transported to the secondary consumer space of the funeral home (Armour & Williams, 1980, p. 86). For a popular culture founded on violence, death must be manifested in the products of the culture and those who consume them. As the previous section argued, theme park death exemplifies a movement of the perception of death from the social to the individual realm. Like traditional societies, contemporary constructions of death in popular culture are created in the imaginary (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 131). In the world of theme parks, for fatality to be avoided, a powerful myth of death must be fashioned.

Theme park management is focused on the avoidance of accidents and fatality, with Disney representing the classic example of such avoidance—there are reports that Disney makes an effort of not declaring patrons who have died in the park dead until after they have left the park premises (Hiaasen, 1998). The mere perception of an unsafe ride can affect park attendance, while accidents and deaths can result in park closure and decline in ticket sales. Theme park deaths become embedded in our minds—three people fell from the Skyway ride at Six Flags Mid-America, a rope and attached metal cleat struck and killed a patron near the Rivers of America at Disneyland, eight teenagers burnt to death inside the Haunted Castle attraction at Six Flags New Jersey. Symbolically, those who die in theme parks condemn the rest of us—the living who continue to populate amusement spaces—to an equivalent death (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 127). In contrast with actual deaths that become etched in our collective amusement consciousness, simulated death operates along a different principle. In the recent popular novel and Hallmark film *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* the subject of theme park death is connected to human values and the afterlife (Albom, 2003). In the work, an amusement park maintenance worker is killed while trying to save others during a high ride mishap, and at the conclusion of the work the maintenance worker's hope to find purpose in his former life is fulfilled—he is told that the purpose of his life was to keep other patrons safe by maintaining the rides, and to ultimately save their lives.

As Ablom's novel illustrates, one of the most interesting mythic constructions of death in the theme park is found in the growing fictive literature of amusements. The earliest film to feature the concept of fatality manifested in a park was the 1977 *Rollercoaster*. The theme of the movie—in which a deranged saboteur plants bombs on roller coasters—would later influence other books and films dealing with theme parks. Robert Stuart Nathan's *Amusement Park* follows a similar plot, but extends the concern with human fragility to include a collapse of the park's many rides and attractions (1977). This theme is revisited in Lincoln Child's *Utopia*, but the emphasis is on the sabotage of park computer systems (2002). The made-for-television movie *Thrill* (based on the Robert Byrne novel of the same name) considers yet another fanatic who targets individuals on park rides. Following the airing of the NBC movie, some local news affiliates aired

informational segments with the topic, “How safe are theme parks?” One of the strangest reflections on death and amusements is Richard Stark’s novel *Slayground* (1971). The story involves a group of gangsters who stage a battle to the death inside a New York amusement park. Though these representations are rare, they interestingly reflect our psychological concern in the safety of theme parks. As the next section of this article will offer, theme parks and their rides function as well-tuned machines, guaranteeing both the safety and enjoyment of customers. In the case of the deaths and mayhem that are a part of the minor literature of theme park fiction, fatality is written as a “quilting point” into the narrative—as the reader, we imagine something other than a safe, joyful experience in the park (Zizek, 1992, p. 69). In fact, this same sense of anticipation and uncertainty is described by many theme park patrons before they board a ride: “I hope it doesn’t crash!”

For some consumers, the faux forms of risk associated with theme park rides, horror movies or video games do not suffice. Some psychologists have suggested humans exhibit a propensity for risk, in some cases, a death-drive. The rise of extreme sports and extreme tourism may confirm that risk-taking is a vital part of our consciousness. Existentially, the fear of being alone and insignificant in the world is negotiated by behavior that risks it all, even unto death. Recent books like *The World’s Most Dangerous Places* (Pelton, 2003) are geared at tourists who wish to escape the pre-packaged, safe experiences of traditional locales. A recent television show based on the same book follows the exploits of Pelton who challenges his limits by venturing to the world’s most dangerous places—from dense forests full of poisonous animals to barrios flooded with gangsters. Theme park designers and operators are cognizant of the diminishing vitality of amusements in popular culture, and through multi-experiential technologies, they strive to create attractions that will speak to the danger/death-drive that is common to American popular culture.

The amusement parks of the past were more willing to deal with death in explicit contexts. At Dreamland, death-related attractions included Fighting the Flames and Hell’s Gate—a ride that eventually led to the park ironically burning down—while at Luna Park attractions included Pompeii, the Galveston Flood and, in contrast with death, a baby incubator exhibit. One of the most notorious deaths of the Coney Island parks was that of an animal, an elephant named Topsy. Topsy was purported to have killed three men, and she was later sentenced to death and electrocuted in front of 1,500 onlookers. Years later, a memorial was erected next to the site of the elephant’s death (Anon., 2003a). Topsy’s death was utilized as a spectacle to attract customers to Coney Island’s parks. Today, the spectacle of theme park rides uses similar, albeit virtual, associations of danger and fatality to produce the myth of death in patrons. Roller coasters are most commonly associated with the psychological desires to experience danger and near-death. The most common expression of theme park aficionados is that riding roller coasters approximates both sex and death—an association that Georges Bataille considers as a mythic underpinning of humans (1986). A second major type of attraction that relies on the simulacrum of fatality is the dark ride. Such rides often use a gothic theme to convey danger. The Haunted Mansion of Disney is famous for its portrayals of ghouls, ghosts and the macabre. In the modernist parks of Coney Island, and in the great Hartford circus disaster of 1944 (O’Nan, 2001), death was monumental: in the massive fires that

engulfed the parks and circuses, animals and humans participated equally in the collapse of amusement façade. In today's theme parks, a postmodern ethos of the fatal results in the socialization of death—individuals are taught to desire death in as many and as varied ways as possible. In sum, as the myth is preserved through the ride, for those patrons who “survive” the journey, they can claim to still be among the living.

Machines of Life

It's kind of like a survival journey. Images of death, despair, destruction, of fright are being thrown at you, but you survive it. It's a very positive experience in the end because you have escaped that terror (*Fun House*, 1997).

When patrons get off a theme park ride, they commonly express how “alive” they feel. Riding a roller coaster, troika or dark ride is likened to exhilaration, joy, sex, an out-of-body experience. Anthropologist Victor Turner used the concept of liminality to refer to a state of betwixt-and-between, an “interstructural situation” (1967, p. 93). In riding a theme park machine, individuals not only experience the sensation of being alive—a cherished state given the pressures of contemporary work and life in the United States—but they also experience a social and existential connection with their compatriots. Rides produce liminality among passengers because, in their time on the machines, individuals are neither in the mundane spaces of work or home, nor are they walking through the park expressing their individual plans and desires; instead, they are part of a group, with each member of the ride lateralized. Riders forget the problems that they have to address when they are at work, and problems with the family are evaporated in the time that people move up and down lift hills. Because there are no social markers that distinguish theme park riders, a state of limited but shared consciousness is achieved. In a society in which the workweek has expanded and in which wages have remained stagnant, theme park rides offer life to citizens who are, existentially, the walking dead.

Ezra Pound, in a pseudo-fascism that approximates that of the Futurists, once spoke of machines as the contemporary person's equivalent to the “savage's” forest (1996, pp. 78-9). For the Futurists, machines were deified, and it was believed that the utopian society was one run by machines. The idea of the social world being transformed for the better by the machine is present in many radical political philosophies, including the work of Valerie Solanis—the artist who shot Andy Warhol—and the new religious Raelian movement, whose practitioners believe that genetic engineering and technology will lead to the elimination of work. As an archetype of the theme park, the ride exemplifies the faith in the machinic ideology common to industrial society. Riders are asked to accept the ride fully, and for the two or more minutes that they are aboard the machine, everything—experience, control and life—is given over to the machine. For some ride junkies, one ride is not enough and repetition upon repetition of riding is desired. A question about the “life” that is portended in the rider's experience on the theme ride is whether it is indeed a giving of life to the rider or if it is a further “death” imposed by the hegemonies of contemporary society, a false consciousness rooted in machinic pleasures? For both Marx and Adorno an analysis of the theme park ride would likely conclude that the rider's desire for authentic leisure is merely a reflection of such false consciousness and succumbing to the culture industry. On the ride, one thinks that one is alive, but like the oblivious junkie, one is slowly dying.

As John Kasson illustrates in his historical study of Coney Island amusement parks, *Amusing the Million*, park layout, attractions and rides allowed for a civilizing effect that would transform an unruly mass into a docile populace (1978). While moving from one attraction or ride to the next, the individual is caught up in a “web of references to other rides, and, ultimately, to the [theme park] as a whole” (Bennett, 1995, p. 238). Theme park rides function as social machines—they occupy an individual’s time and energy while she or he is in a park and they keep an individual in line, in the manner suggested by Kasson. For many patrons, a tourist machine accompanies the visit to a theme park. Guidebooks, maps and a variety of insider tips are utilized to increase the efficiency and enjoyment of one’s park visit. Tourist machines are reflections of processes of rationalization that have increasingly impacted the forms of leisure in contemporary society. On the Internet a number of theme park activists have spoken to the need to bring life back to theme parks. Many such discussion groups have focused on the direction of Disney rides and attractions, and the idea that park machines have become too standardized and corporate in nature.

For some enthusiasts, a good theme park ride “kicks one’s ass,” and being shaken up, including being bruised or having one’s head spun, is akin to the explorer who overcomes the harsh conditions of the journey in order to discover a new world (Lukas, 1998). The legendary Harry G. Traver’s Crystal Beach Cyclone is considered the most dangerous roller coaster ever built. Fraternities would use the ride as an initiation test, and a full-time nurse was stationed at the exit of the ride to assist patrons who were hurt on the journey (Munch, 1994). The earliest loop-the-loop coasters were designed as perfect circles, meaning that riders would lose consciousness on the rides because of the powerful G-forces. As ride technologies evolved, measures were taken to lessen the negative effects of machines. The Rattler at Six Flags Fiesta Texas was the subject of multiple lawsuits in the 1990s. In response to many neck injuries on the ride, the park redesigned the angle of a drop to make the ride less vicious. During a local NBC news broadcast immediately following the roller coaster movie *Thrill*, a reporter presented the following to viewers: “Ask yourself, how much do you know about that ride and are you riding at your own risk?” Even though the accidents and deaths occurring on theme park rides are statistically insignificant, news shows responded to the fictive representations of fatality in movies like *Thrill* by fashioning an ethos of fear—a subject addressed in the next section. Theme park ride designers and park management face a balance of the desire of riders to experience more dangerous attractions and insurance underwriters who insist on the safety of park rides and attractions.

As Baudrillard has suggested, contemporary notions of death are dominated by the concept of the machine and function—“a machine either works or it does not” (1993, p. 159). Whereas the modern ethos of death teaches us to trust machines, whether they are theme park rides, automobiles, life-support systems or home appliances, the postmodern ethos of death suggests that in addition to protecting us and giving us “life,” machines can increase the illusion that we have escaped reality. In his novel *The Tragic Kingdom*, author Stanley Elkin focuses on a group of terminally ill children whose end-of-life wish is to spend time at Walt Disney World (1985). For those riding the attractions of Disney,

shortened lives are extended by the effects of the rides and the various simulacra of Walt Disney World. Like the cyberpunk fantasy of “leaving the meat behind,” for the terminally ill children of *The Tragic Kingdom*, riding a theme park ride excuses the mind from the body, and reality, itself, is sacrificed.

Risk Economies

Fear is not fundamentally an emotion. It is the objectivity of the subjective under late capitalism (Massumi, 1993, p. 12).

Risk is always associated with loss—whether financial, physical or psychological. Theme parks are, by definition, economies of risk. When Time Warner sold its interest in the Six Flags theme park chain to Premier Parks, it acknowledged the uncertain nature of the industry. Theme park operators face an increasingly differentiated demographic market and pressures from the public to build new and more amusing attractions. Theme park rides and attractions connote risk—riders are taken into new worlds where feigned danger, personal transformation and psychological surprises are the norm. Of course, theme parks must minimize the actual forms of risk that can result in lowered ticket sales and poor public relations.

Theme park operational schema are based on the concept of risk assessment. The two forms of risk that are most closely monitored are accidents and deaths. While I worked as a theme park trainer, one of my major duties related to employee safety management. Upon entry as workers in the park, new employees were subjected to a rigorous array of seminars, tests and on-the-job training that focused on safety and efficiency. Though our training department stressed the need for on-the-job safety, we encountered some ride captains who felt that park safety procedures were overly strict or inapplicable to their ride or area. Coupled with this confound was the need to train employees to be cordial to customers. The “guest first” philosophy, as it was called then, focused on providing patrons with a total experience, and our training program emphasized various dramaturgical metaphors to stress the need for friendly service in the park. As Hochschild has suggested, the service industry promotes a putting of the self on hold for the sake of the customer (1983), what I have come to understand as emotional death.

Risk assessment, as an “industrial prolongation of death” (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 178), focuses on eliminating situations that could lead to accidents and death. For the theme park worker, a discursive economy develops around the stories of park accidents and deaths. For many of the employees new to our training department, a first question asked was, “Has anyone died in the park?” For the outsider, such discourse may seem to be rooted in mere curiosity, but for the theme park insider this question is a reflection of the unique physical, psychological and social nature of work in a theme park. It is a job in which tens of thousands of unpredictable people converge in a place that can span many acres and in which fast, moving machines are around every corner. Tales of patrons being crushed inside the motors of the park’s rides, however gruesome, provide theme park employees a ground on which to consider their own mortality as well as the unpredictable nature of their work. Park patrons also attempted to participate in this discursive economy, but park management instructed all employees to refrain from discussing accidents and to stress the park’s positive safety record with patrons.

Interestingly, the chance of being hurt on an amusement park ride is 1 in 124,000 rides, with death rated at 1 in 150,000,000 rides (Gravitz, 2002), but for the theme park patron there is a constant mode of fear that accompanies the park visit. According to Brian Massumi's study of the relationship between U.S. popular culture and fear, "capitalist power actualizes itself in a basically uninhabitable space of fear" (1993, p. 23). Just like the mixed messages of the Bush administration in the weeks following September 11th—beware of shopping malls, go to shopping malls—theme park owners have traditionally told patrons to have a carefree time at their parks but, at the same time, patrons are asked to play it safe—to watch their kids so they will not get abducted, to not run in the park, and to be alert for shoplifters or others who might ruin their happy day. The notion of an overwhelming fear of mayhem, ending in death, is a psychological apparatus employed by the state. In a culture of surveillance (Staples, 1997), parents and managers are especially effective in channeling risk into social action.

As an employee trainer, I was often assigned to conduct audits at various park locations. Management's philosophy was that employees needed to operate their rides safely as well as interact with customers in a jovial manner. In the theme park, safety and positive customer service are intertwined, and this speaks to the connection of risk assessment and consumerism under capitalism (Lukas, 1999). The policing of workers' bodies, in the name of preventing their injuries or deaths, is referenced by Michel Foucault's concept of biopower. For all the emphasis on watching workers, it could be argued that management is merely looking out for the interests of employees. In fact, as documentaries like Frontline's *A Dangerous Business* suggest, the state needs a steady workforce and in cases in which employees are dying on the job, major U.S. corporations evade prosecution for their deaths. Biopower also operates through the cooperation of park patrons, especially parents with children. Prior to the summer tourist season, many television shows and newspapers address theme park safety. One such report entitled "Killer Rides" expresses a litany of safety procedures that can be undertaken by parents: conduct research and acquire the park's safety inspection sheets, check the cleanliness and maintenance of the grounds, watch ride operators before boarding rides, assess the rides themselves, and adhere to all rules (Polaneczky, 1996). In the panoptic culture of the theme park, patrons are asked to ironically do the work of the state and, in the process, their enjoyment, and that of the worker, is killed.

In the modern era, risk was applied to the entirety of society—in times of war, whole cities and nations were likely to be impacted by violence. In this sense, security was lateralized across a community. In the era of postmodernity, security is individualized and each citizen is asked to place her or his own safety and happiness above all others. The obsessive parent who insists on checking her or his child's lap restraint on a ride, and thus doubting the ability and goodwill of a park worker, exemplifies the movement of security into the realm of individual sovereignty. As forms of risk assessment become further embedded in the consumer state, individuals will be resigned to living in a culture exemplified by the death of security. In consumer society and in theme parks, the use of technologies of simulation will further extend the power of the state to police and entertain simultaneously, assuring its life to the detriment of its citizens.

Themed Lands of Horror

Death itself demands to be experienced immediately (Baudrillard, 1993, pp. 186-7).

As theme parks begin to utilize more immersive forms of simulation, a claim is made that experience becomes more intimate such that even the most unimaginable human events and conditions can be represented. This “return of the real” redirects the modernist ethos of death—the direct experience of death, such as those who lived through the Blitz—to a postmodern indirect experience of death in which individuals accept the equivalence of death in its simulation. Theme parks are characterized by an overdetermination of simulation—a semiotic situation in which signs outpace reality and take on a life of their own. In the case of mass death—whether through genocide or a natural or human-caused event—a similar overdetermination of reality occurs. One of the most contemporary issues of representation in the theme park world is the issue of “representing the unrepresentable” (Gottdiener, 1997, pp. 121-125); namely, how do theme parks represent death that is beyond the scale of history and human understanding?

In 2004, during a quarter teaching in London, I had the opportunity to visit a number of theme parks and historical sites in the United Kingdom. I was surprised by the fact that theming was so prominent in restaurants, museums and historical sites. The United Kingdom’s rich history and its culture cognizant of the horrors of war were reflected in the many popular attractions related to death that I visited. Chain restaurants, like Frankenstein in Scotland, reflected a public more able to tolerate gothic experiences alongside their hamburgers and chips. Venturing to other attractions, from the Viking museum Jorvik in York, the war theme park Eden Camp outside the same city, the Museum of London, and the Imperial War Museum in London, I noted a culture steeped in the modernist experience of war as a direct, empirical phenomenon, but one willing to experiment with the postmodern technologies of theming and computer interactivity to focus that experience.

When theming ventures into representing death on a massive scale, social controversies erupt. In some cases, nations use horrific events of the past to attract tourists to their sites. In Japan, the prison-themed restaurant Alcatraz BC, and the disaster-themed Titanic [sic] Café reflect a connection to a public imagination obsessed with death, paralleling, in some respects, the U.S. fascination in the *Faces of Death* films. In some cases, the public is unwilling to accept death as an appropriate theme for consumer venues. Following September 11th, public outrage led to the cancellation of plans to build the airplane disaster Crash Café in Boston (Lukas, 2005). Prince Charles opposed a controversial planned Dracula theme park in Sighisoara, Romania, perhaps in part for its use of a gothic theme. Some critics have taken issue with the fact that some theme parks and “living museums” have not addressed death explicitly enough. In the case of the recreations at Colonial Williamsburg, some members of the public have decried the museum’s lack of attention to the harsh conditions and deaths experienced by slaves (Handler & Gable, 1997). Not surprisingly, Disney has been the subject of much of this controversy. Current attractions, such as the Hall of Presidents, relegate the horrors of warfare like Vietnam to obscure and unspoken symbolic references (Fjellman, 1992, p. 106; Wallace, 1996, p. 164).

One of the greatest theming controversies also references Disney. In 1994, the U.S. Senate heard testimony related to Disney's efforts to build a Civil War theme park in Manassas, Virginia (Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, 1994). The fact that the corporation planned to build a theme park atop the "black spot" of Civil War battlefields (Rojek, 1993) led to outcry that the company was planning to desecrate the grounds on which so many Americans had died. Ultimately, Disney dropped its plans to build the park, and perhaps this decision illustrates the fact that the public is unwilling to accept a postmodern approach to death in its public spaces. Reactions to how death is publicly represented in museums and theme parks are, however, culturally embedded. I was shocked to find "Smells of the Blitz" bottles and war-themed candies at the gift shop of the Eden Camp war theme park, and I believe that it would be unlikely that similar theming would be accepted for the austere subject of war in the United States.

During an educational visit to Los Angeles in 2004, I had the opportunity to visit two Holocaust museums—the famous Museum of Tolerance and the smaller Museum of the Holocaust. My visits occurred on the same day and, in retrospect, I realized that the different approaches of the two museums reflected a divergent yet concomitant representation of genocide in American public culture. The Museum of the Holocaust utilizes a model of a Nazi death camp, newspaper clippings, photographs and narratives of Holocaust survivors to convey the modernist horror of the Holocaust, while the Museum of Tolerance uses interactive screens, group activities, a gas chamber mock-up, and fast-pacing of intense narrative to project a postmodern approximation of the Holocaust on the minds and bodies of viewers (Marcuse, 2000). The politics of understanding the massive deaths associated with genocide's attack on the nation make representing such horror impossible, yet the horror must be represented, in some way. While visiting these two very different museums, I was saddened, moved and horrified by what I witnessed, and the same can be said of my visits to Eden Camp and the Holocaust exhibit at the Imperial War Museum. In all cases, I found myself focusing on the ways in which lives had been taken, not on the theming or technologies of representation themselves. It is difficult to study the events of history that should have never occurred, and even more complex when such events are re-presented on video screens and interactive computers.

As a researcher of theme parks, I have often encountered critiques of my work that suggest that my studies of themed spaces are insignificant given the horrors and deaths that are a part of our social worlds. In the same world we find the Museum of Tolerance and Walt Disney World—two places, as I have emphasized in this writing, that reflect different understandings of death and its relationship to our psychological, social and existential selves. In my continued research to analyze the variety of themed spaces in the world, I hope to be able to understand how death has, and continues, to play a role in our lives and how it is represented in spaces like theme parks.

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