
GETTING A SENSE OF THE THEME:

Immersion via the senses in Contemporary Theme Parks

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Introduction

What could be more sensation-full than a visit to a theme park? From the moment you arrive until the moment you leave, your senses are sparked, challenged, and jostled to and fro. As George Tilyou, founder of America's first amusement park on Coney Island stated in 1909, "We Americans want either to be thrilled or amused, and we are ready to pay well for either sensation" (Tilyou quoted in Kasson 1978: 58). Since the utterance of this seminal statement almost a century ago, theme parks have adapted from their amusement park forebears and attracted enormous commercial and cultural power. From the time Disneyland opened its doors in the mid 1950's, the contemporary theme park has become ingrained in our imagery of the fanciful and the fun. In this report, I will postulate that it is the creative, innovative, and increasingly aggressive use of the senses by the theme park industry that generates the commercial and cultural momentum of these spaces. However, despite self-conscious attempts to be so, theme parks are not seamless spaces, and the interplay between the theme park and the patrons reveal how sensory dynamics form our ideas of immersion, intimacy, and authenticity. By way of exploring statements and advertisements generated by the theme park industry, we will examine what theme park architects and marketers are trying to do. However, through exploring the traveler's reviews generated by theme park visitors as well, we will see how a

sensory ethnography of the theme park echoes David Howes' statement that "consumption is an active (not a passive) process, where all sorts of meanings and uses for products are generated that the designers and marketers of those products never imagined" (Howes 2005: 294).

Sensing the Theme Park

Imagine yourself embarking upon a visit to a theme park. As you enter the gilded gates (often in the form of a ticket wicket, where a substantial sum is paid upon entry), your senses are assailed by a plethora of stimuli. The rides are whirring, whizzing, and clanging. The shrieks coming from the roller coaster compete with the buzz of excited conversation and shouting, which in turn competes with the country music band playing loudly in the Western themed sector. The sun beats down on your face, and other excited patrons bump in to you as they run to join the line for the theme park's most frightening ride. As you walk through the park, you stop in the misting station, incidentally emblazoned with the logo of the corporation that owns the park. As you feel the cool mist hit your body, your eyes dart to the nearest food stand. The taste of cotton candy, milkshakes, and hot dogs immediately spring to mind. The smell of food and the distinct scent generated by the kinesthetics of a large crowd (read: sweat) generates an olfactory character unique to the theme park. Colours, lights, fellow patrons, and the oft chimerical architecture give your eyes an unlimited range of things to feast your eyes on. In this sensationally sensory experience, you are a part of the action. No longer are you watching others experience the fantastical and the phantasmagorical on the silver screen, no longer are you going through the motions of the banality of diurnal life: you are a participant in this fantasy land, and your senses tell you that this is true.

Immersive Environments: Theme Park Architecture and Experiencing through the Senses

One would think that the above account of the theme parks sensory plenum pretty much sums up the sensory dynamics of the contemporary theme park. Think again. The theme park, distinct from the amusement park in its focus on themes (Mexicana, Western, and Oriental, to name a few), has generated an entire sensory

industry within what Pine and Gilmore call the “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore quoted in Howes 2004: 000). Let us begin by summarizing a chapter entitled “Creating Immersive Environments”, part of a larger text written by theme park architects, *Introduction to Theme Park Design*.

This text is available online at <http://www.themedattraction.com/sense.htm>; all further quotations in this section will be from this website unless otherwise noted).

As the authors note in their short introduction to the chapter:

Like storytelling, illustration, or musical composition, the design of immersive theme park attractions is very much an art form. An artist’s canvas is limited in that it can only be seen. A motion picture or a stage production is limited to sight and sound. But an immersive theme park attraction utilizes all the senses in order to seemingly take a person on a journey to the ends of the earth, or beyond. This experience oriented architecture is much more complex than many forms of art or entertainment because it must be catered to all the senses.

The authors here highlight one of the fantastic elements of the theme park: since your body is situated within the entertainment zone, rather than outside of it as when you are at the cinema, the theme park experience is an embodied one allowing the senses to be engaged in the spectacle.

Seeing is Believing

Let us begin, as the authors do, with sight and the use of visual imagery in the theme park. We live in a highly visual culture, with the eyes being the most heavily utilized and accepted channel for taking in information. The authority of empirical judgement, the authors allude, applies strongly to the theme park. Since the theme park environment is expected to be immersive, we are not supposed to have any visual cues that will remind us that this spectacle is a fabricated facade: “each visitor will enter a themed attraction and then judge whether or not he believes what he sees”. The first step is to ensure that the architecture will make the guest feel as if he is “completely engulfed in a new world (...) the goal is to create a complete envelope around the guest”. All architecture must not only be in keeping with the theme being displayed, it must also not allow the visitor’s imagination to be offset

by “design pitfalls where some of the outside world leaks inside”. Immersive environments, of course, suggest immersion – and it is hard to be immersed when your senses keep reminding you that you are in the midst of one big fabrication, subject to the aesthetic imperfections of the ‘real’ world. The importance of greenery and foliage are also mentioned by the authors, which they emphasize with the statement “greenery is to architecture what make-up is to a model”. Without lush and beautiful foliage, theme park architecture runs the risk of looking bare, phony, and even worse: unbelievable. The integral aesthetic qualities of good lighting and lighting’s correlation with believability are also emphasized. The association of theme parks with bright and flashing lights and signs is not an accident. According to the authors of this text, lighting is essential to setting the mood. Above all, the authors highlight the importance of playing on the strong authority of visual information to create an aura of believability in themed spaces.

Sound: The Mood Setter

Imagine entering a theme park where no music is playing and the rides are not making their usual whooshing and clanging noises. Such an experience doesn’t quite match up to our expectation of what the theme park should be; sort of like watching an action movie on mute, or sitting in an empty restaurant where there is no din of fellow diners and no jazz playing on the stereo. As the authors note, “there is no more effective tool for shaping the mood in a space than sound”. That sensations and sentiments are aroused by sound leads the authors to suggest that all themed spaces should include “the power of sound (...) whether it be through a theme song a special effect or story enhancing dialogue”. An interesting side note on this topic pertaining to the exhilarating auditory dimension of theme park rides is the following quote by Russel B. Nye: “though engineers are quite capable of designing relatively noiseless cars, they know that the sound of the ride is an integral part of it, and that the rattles, squeaks, and thunderous roar of the wheels impart a sense of speed and danger that adds immeasurably to the total effect” (Nye 1981:72). Sometimes, sounds aren’t there because they are necessary - on the contrary sounds are sometimes intentionally placed within the environment because of the cognitive associations that they invoke.

Tactile Tactics

In a world where you are expected to look but not touch, theme parks are one of the places where you can in fact touch things and be touched by them. As the authors of the themed attraction text aver: “consider the effect of a spray of mist on the face would have on a guest in a tropical themed adventure ride, or how the cold iron bars in a dungeon might feel to a visitor of that attraction”. Not only does tactile stimulation make you feel good, it draws you in to the narrative of the themes being displayed as well. Theme park architects are aware of how touch creates immersive environments, and also how much people enjoy tactile stimulation. Games situated throughout the park often involve throwing or hitting things, and petting zoo areas or sea life themed parks involve petting the goats and being kissed by the dolphins. Even the experience of the wind hitting your face as you are thrust through the air in a rollercoaster is a highly tactile experience.

A Taste Sensation

In combining the senses of taste and scent in this section, the authors of the text note how “a well placed scent can provide that final touch of realism that will make the experience a memorable one”. Indeed, when I look back on my own memorable experiences, at theme parks or otherwise, scent is a distinct and very intimate mnemonic device. The smell of apple pie baking in autumn, the smell of mulled cider at Christmas time, the smell of my crass and uncivilized brothers after their soccer practices...each of these scents bring back distinct memories, both good and bad. When we turn to theme parks, then, scents can be deployed, just as sounds are, to help the visitor create cognitive associations, thus intensifying their immersion in the environment. For example, the authors ask us to “consider how the smell of smoke could enhance a burning building set, or how that distinctive aroma would contribute to an ocean themed attraction. Imagine how the wafting smell of rain would make a visitor feel before entering a ride featuring a tornado or thunderstorm”. The authors also include part of a 1981 text published in Epcot Center Today (Epcot Center being one of Disney’s main attractions). The text focuses on how Disney imagineers (designers, in less cutesy terms), developed what they call “smellitizer

machines”, which mist scents into the air in order to “enhance the realism of experiences in the Future World and World Showcase”. Not only does visual imagery convince the theme park visitor of the believability of the attraction, but olfactory dimensions as well.

One writer for www.mouseplanet.com, a website created and maintained by and for Disney enthusiasts, opines of the smellitizer: “A little further down Main Street, we pass the Blue Ribbon Bakery. Notice the smell of fresh chocolate chip cookies as you pass. But wait! Is that really fresh-baked cookies that you smell? No, it isn’t. Disney’s smell specialists have crafted a “fresh-baked chocolate cookie” smell that is piped through a vent directly over the door to the bakery” (Goldhaber 2003: <http://www.mouseplanet.com/articles.php?art=mg030911mg>). While actually eating the cookies is undoubtedly a lovely aspect of the sensory experience, the smell of them is sure to be powerful as well. Even the olfactory qualities of an already olfactory rich space, the bakery, are intensified; both in order to draw crowds in as well as to make the experience of walking by the bakery seem all that much more vivid.

The Sensory Tourist

The authors conclude their chapter on the senses and immersive environments in the contemporary theme park with the statement “when done well, the lines between fantasy and reality are blurred, and a truly memorable guest experience is created. But to be effective, these attractions must effectively stimulate all the senses”. The effective blurring of fantasy and reality can only be achieved when the total effect is strong and overpowering enough so that the visitor is able to forget that he or she is in a fabricated environment. As Scott Lukas notes, “authenticity, as a semiotic-sensory property, is created when signs no longer draw attention to themselves” (Lukas 2007:7). What are some ways in which these fantasy/reality blurring senses are marketed commercially in the effort to actually draw the crowds in? Let us examine two of the advertisement blurbs used by Anheuser Busch owned theme parks (all emphases added, original texts available online at <http://www.southwest.com/hotfares/anheuser.html>).

Sea World (Orlando, Florida; San Antonio, Texas; San Diego)

"There's no place in the world like SeaWorld® Where else can you challenge thrill-a-second rides one minute and **touch** a stingray the next? Take in numerous attractions, exhibits, and shows, including Believe – the entirely new, **visually stunning Shamu®** show that will take you on a sensational, breathtaking journey of curiosity and wonder. **You'll see Shamu in a way you never have.** Until now. **Touch a world that touches you®.**"

Here, the sense of touch is combined with sight in a promise to offer you an experience that, barring a career in marine biology, you definitely couldn't get anywhere else. Sea World is a sea-life themed park that offers you the chance to get up close and personal with the marine animals, often including the experience of a dolphin jumping out of the water and jabbing your cheek with its nose in what is supposed to simulate a 'kiss'. Others wait extra time in line to sit in the 'splash zone' at the Sea World show, where sitting in the first row of the bleachers during the show affords you the opportunity to be splashed by water as Shamu jumps into the air. As one excited visitor notes of the 'splash zone': "Without question - make time for Shamu - it's a great show and you MIGHT get splashed!" ([http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g34515-d102412-r13454141-SeaWorld Adventure Park-Orlando Florida.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g34515-d102412-r13454141-SeaWorld_Adventure_Park-Orlando_Florida.html)). The statement "touch a world that touches you" is perhaps the most evocative element of this advertisement: not only can you interact with the exhibits, they are part of their own authentic and natural world. As one visitor mentions: "The big difference between Disney and Seaworld is that at Disney people are fascinated by fakery, here you are fascinated by the natural world." While petting zoos are a common occurrence in theme parks, the centrality of the animals to the theme and to the experience leaves the visitor feeling like this was a real experience rather than a simulated one.

Busch Gardens Africa (Tampa Bay, Florida)

Where does once in a lifetime happen all the time? At a place just east of unforgettable. North of heart-pounding. And west of wow. **Your map might say Tampa Bay, but your senses tell you this is Africa.** Travel across exotic terrain and **explore wildlife, wild rides, and world-class performances.** And **indulge in mouthwatering foods** and amazing shopping. You can make a connection in a whole new direction. All in the Worlds of Busch Gardens Europe.

This advertisement tells us that through using our senses – and perhaps suspending a little bit of disbelief – our experience at Busch Gardens Africa will be as exhilarating as travel to a foreign country, with each new corner revealing unexplored terrain. Busch Gardens Africa is seen as, overall, a visceral experience, with the sensational location of the park being “north of heart-pounding”. The statement “your map might say Tampa Bay, but your senses tell you this is Africa” implies that the sensory experience within the park will be enough to make you feel as though you have left the urban jungle of Tampa Bay and entered the deep and exotic jungles of Africa. Africa? With thrill rides? With the technology and creativity employed by theme parks, the exotic locales of the world can be combined with American amusements enabling the visitor to “make a connection in a whole new direction”.

In the theme park, the sensory tourist is able to leave the every day world without actually leaving the country. In a world where travel to exotic locales is a heavily romanticized and attractive yet increasingly unaffordable activity, the locale themed park allows the middle class to enter into the simulation of travel for an affordable price. As David Howes notes of the early department store, “the department store thus appeared on the scene as an enormous candy store with a cornucopia of goodies to satisfy the taste of the bourgeoisie for fashionable but affordable style” (Howes 2005: 285). These spaces were appealing because they enabled the consumer to participate in a world charged with sensory experiences that were previously unavailable to them. Has the theme park taken the same type of place for those unable to travel far and wide as the department store did in the 19th Century for burgeoning consumers? An African themed park is furthermore much less intense and different than travel to Africa itself. As Scott Lukas notes, “under conditions of tourism, the senses produce culture shock, while under the conditions of theming the senses institutionalize culture shock” (Lukas 2007: 88). While real-life travel to Africa may be too extraordinary for the average lust for the exotic, an Africa themed park is a suitable replacement for an extrasensory experience.

Disney’s Ancestors: Coney Island as the Precursor to the Modern Theme Park

Theme parks have long been thought of as an opportunity for travel and escape

from the hum-drum of diurnal life. Perched on a small peninsula just off of Brooklyn, Coney Island was the home of America's first turn of the 20th Century amusement parks. Embraced by New Yorkers of various social classes, Coney Island was seen as a place to escape the banality of every day life (Sally 2007: 40). As she notes of Dreamland, one of the parks situated on the Island: "[...] Dreamland was designed to be the antithesis of New York City's noise, crowds, and congestion" (Sally 2007: 44). However, this does not mean that theme parks are the equivalent to a meditation session – instead, they break visitors out of the every day by offering them extraordinary sensory experiences that regular life cannot. As Nye notes, "the modern amusement park, then, was never a pastoral retreat. It was not a place of quiet self-evaluation but one for participation, noise, jostle, light, color, activity" (Nye 1971: 65). As we have seen, theme parks are expected to break us away from the world and place our bodies in a thrilling, fantastical, and electrifying space. This goal is achieved, beyond any other method employed by theme parks, through engaging the senses.

The stirring of the senses is often intertwined with the social order. Take, for example, Lynn Sally's analysis of two of Coney Island's amusement parks, Luna Park and Dreamland. One of the most popular attractions at both Luna Park and Dreamland was a daily performance wherein a tenement style building was set on fire as firefighters attempted to diffuse the flames. The heat of the fire, the smell of the smoke, the spectacular visual imagery of the flames licking and curling across the sky – the performance corresponds well with Lukas' statement when he notes "in their use of total sensory experience, designers create what is essentially a form of experiential hypotyposis in which the customer's senses, social interaction, and physical body, are drawn into contact with a themed space" (Lukas 2007: 7). The theme park, just as the amusement park, does not exist in a vacuum, and the social and political climate will inevitably influence the park's attractions and sensory dynamics. The popular exhibits, Sally speculates, were so heavily attractive because they "staged Manhattan's process of becoming, and attempted to control, contain, and put order to the inevitable chaos of fire and the unpredictability of the growing metropolis" (Sally 2007: 47). That the performance reflected upon some of the social anxieties of the populace recalls Howes' statement from his 2005 article *Architecture of the Senses* that "the perceptual is cultural and political, and not simply (as psy-

chologists and neuroscientists would have it) a matter of cognitive processes or neurological mechanisms located in the individual subject” (Howes 2005). While surely the sensational experience of seeing a tenement engulfed in flames would amuse a theme park visitor today, it would invoke different cognitive or emotional frames now than it did to the turn of the 20th century pleasure seekers living amidst the Second Industrial Revolution.

In fact, the rise of the amusement industry itself took place within its own social context. As the Coney Island historian John F. Kasson illuminates, the rise of Coney Island took place in opposition to the more accepted Victorian values turn of the 20th Century America. While Victorian culture typically conjures up ideas of propriety, decorum, and respectable behaviour, the precursors to the contemporary theme park such as Coney Island instead conjure up ideas of action, noise, and crass indulgence. Genteel values, however, depended on genteel hegemony, and as the working class and immigrant populations swelled in urban centers, the upper and middle classes began to lose their control of the dominant cultural character. Eventually, the industrial nouveaux-riche began to eclipse the authority and wealth of the established elite (Kasson 1978: 5-6). In turn, the “cultural custodians” of the genteel middle class attempted to assert their authority by typifying “the great industrialists as cultural barbarians, without education, refinement, responsibility, or restraint” (Kasson 1978: 6). Victorian restraint implies an effort not to indulge the senses with the vulgarity of popular culture and instead to refine the senses with a preconceived ideal of what ‘high culture’ is composed of. Despite their efforts, genteel values began to lose their sheen and mass culture began to emerge. As Kasson notes, “the most striking expression of the changing character of American culture [...] lies in the new amusement parks that were developed at the turn of the century” (Kasson 1978:7).

A trip to Coney Island offered the factory worker or the new immigrant an opportunity to indulge the senses in an aesthetic plenum of hustle and bustle, separate from and much more fantastical than that offered by the busy streets of Manhattan. As Kasson declares:

“By the turn of the century the managers of mass culture sensed new markets both within the urban middle class and spilling beyond its borders to “high society” and the largely untapped working class, all eager to respond

to amusement in a less earnest cultural mood: more vigorous, exuberant, daring, sensual, uninhibited, and irreverent” (Kasson 1978:6).

Indulgences that were once thought of as uncivilized became accepted and encouraged within the amusement park, a place which broke down social boundaries and barriers in the pursuit of sensory pleasures unavailable in every day life.

Breaking Social Boundaries: Sensory Indulgence and the Suspension of Norms

Indeed, one can say that when looked at from the angle explored with Coney Island above, the contemporary theme park is not very far removed from this tradition of pleasure places breaking down social boundaries. In the theme park, you are granted permissions that are not exactly accepted at the supermarket. For example, many rides involve tactility between other participants – such as bumper cars, hitting targets and fellow riders with foam darts and lasers, and spraying water as integral parts of the rides. These interactive rides are becoming increasingly common, as theme park architects attempt to create more shocking and experiential rides in order to set their attractions apart from the countless other theme park rides available to consumers. In an individualist society where tactile interaction such as accidentally bumping in to a stranger on the street can be considered offensive, these rules are reversed at theme park rides and attractions where such tactile interaction is expected and encouraged. I myself remember my first bumper car experience at a theme park in Ontario at the tender age of seven: as I felt the shuddering jolt of a bumper car as it hit my own, I was initially shocked and abhorred that the less than gentle joggle had come from a stranger. As I came to understand that regular social norms and conventions did not apply in this context, I too delighted in the jarring of others with my vessel.

Let us take a look at some examples of such tactile rides and attractions, and how they make use of themes in order to bring sensory dynamics into a narrative. The three rides showcased are all from the Legoland theme park in California, a park that builds its themes on the popular Lego blocks for kids. Don't forget to click on the links provided: most theme park rides showcased on theme park websites come with short videos or a series of pictures of the ride in progress, full of colour and sound in

order to draw you in to the sensory fun even before you arrive at the park.

LOST KINGDOM ADVENTURE

<http://www.legoland.com/park/parkoverview/landofadventure.htm?>

Based in ancient temple ruins, Lost Kingdom Adventure puts you inside an all-terrain roadster and takes you on a journey to recover stolen treasure by **blasting targets with laser guns along the way**. Your score is recorded and competition is fierce as skill and determination are the keys to a successful expedition. Brave riders encounter ten different scenes along the journey including a spider's lair, professor's lab, mummy relics and a skeleton band that **requires riders to hit the correct targets to make the band play**. A LEGO® pharaoh, standing more than 16-feet tall, guards the entrance to Lost Kingdom Adventure staring down at all those who dare enter

SPLASH BATTLE – PIRATE SHORES

<http://www.legoland.com/park/parkoverview/pirateshores.htm>

Experience Splash Battle with its ship-themed vehicles that put you behind your own water cannon as you navigate through pirate-infested waters. **Aim your cannon and take your best watery shot at spectators and other riders.**

But this is pirate territory so **beware, because all of your targets are armed and ready to retaliate**. All the while you'll be surrounded by magnificent blustery pirate scenes of detailed LEGO® models.

These two attractions focus specifically on a war or battle theme, where you are permitted to shoot not only targets, friends, and family, but strangers as well. These rides show how the theme park, by institutionally sanctioning tactile interactions as they do, is a place where regular social restrictions need not apply.

The rides at Legoland, as with most rides, are technically designed for children, but we all know that adults flock to theme parks in the pursuit of the euphoria brought on by thrill rides as well. Some rides are more catered to adults and teenagers, however, such as Universal Studios' "Fear Factor Live" attraction. Fear Factor is a tel-

evision show where contestants are pitted against each other to see who can endure the most sensory overload – either by eating bugs, plunging their hands into fish guts, or having their bodies submerged underwater as slimy creatures swim around them.

FEAR FACTOR LIVE

http://www.universalorlando.com/usf_attr_ffl.html

See if you have what it takes at the most extreme audience participation show ever - Fear Factor Live at Universal Studios. Perform gravity-defying stunts in front of thousands as you compete against other guests.

The entertainment themed theme park of Universal Studios here places the visitor in an 'as seen on TV' environment where they are to engage in strange sensory experiences against other guests. Not only are you competing against strangers for the most part, you are also engaging in activities not normally engaged in during every day life. While this attraction focuses more on gravity-defying stunts, rather than bug eating and fish gut touching (most likely due to both palatability and health code issues), it still places the visitor into a strange, ultra sensory space with other visitors. Again, the participant becomes a part of the action, rather than a mere spectator. Theme park rides echo Lynn Sally's statement when she avers that this sense of stepping outside of reality "ordered subjects through their desire to suspend their social norms and participate, through purchasing power, in a fantasy world" (Sally 2007:40).

Please do Not Step Across the Line: Theme Parks and Control

While theme park rides paint a picture of a space free of constrictions, the liberties given to the visitors are in fact highly controlled, and visitor and employee activity is subject to strong surveillance and enforcement. As Scott Bukatman notes in his article on the use of the hypercinematic at Disney, visitors are by no means free to engage in whatever sensory freedoms they please when interacting with the rides:

In the early days of Disneyland, one Tomorrowland attraction was the Autopia, where youngsters could drive actual, though miniature, automobiles. Disney intended these young citizens-to-be to thus learn traffic safety at an early age and hence to be prepared to enter the L.A. freeway system.

Unfortunately, the children took “demented delight” in crashing the cars, and the ride had to be put on tracks.’ One can hardly blame the kids for resisting the park’s immaculately conceived system of guidance, but the Disney ethos could not tolerate these signs of technological breakdown (Bukatman 1991:2).

Theme parks are meticulously and self-consciously constructed by theme park architects and designers in such a way as to order sensory experience via accepted and predesigned channels. Where rides and food stalls are placed is by no means coincidence, and fit in to a larger schema of directing visitors in directions anticipated to increase sensory stimuli and thus magnify the incentive to purchase the items discursively placed throughout the park. As Susan G. Davis notes on the controlled spatiality in the contemporary theme park:

“Unlike the rock concert and more like the shopping mall, the theme park depends heavily on the construction of a landscape and the careful planning of human movement through space. The spatial rationale of the theme park is to cluster commercial opportunities represented by concessions, including everything from hot dog stands to designer boutiques, around attractions, which can range from rides and simulator theaters to animal, human, or robotic performances. Event scheduling, architecture, and landscaping help move customers through concessions at speeds and intervals that have been carefully studied and determined to enhance sales” (Davis, Susan G. 1997: 13).

To return for a moment to the Themed Attraction chapter explored above, we have already seen how an immersive experience is needed in order for theme park patrons to lose themselves in the moment. In order for a patron to lose themselves in the moment, however, one must feel as though “a complete envelope”

(<http://www.themedattraction.com/sense.htm>) has been wrapped around their body. As noted by Lukas, “one of the most overlooked aspects of the themed space’s relationship to culture and to humans is the way in which theming implicates the body” (Lukas 2007: 78). Your body and effectively all of your senses must be drawn into the narrative in order for the theme to have any coherent relevance to the experience. Theme parks take great pains in order to ensure that sensory experience within the theme park is controlled so that the proper effect can be drawn. For example, before embarking upon the academic study of theme parks, Lukas was a theme park employee trainer, and the following narrative that he provides illustrates

how strongly emphasized a complete – and controlled – sensory experience is in theme park culture:

“In my work as a former theme park trainer, I consistently informed employees of the importance of creating effective sensory experiences for the customer. Vision was implicated as employees were told to maintain effective dress code and to convey a positive image with gestures and body language. The auditory sense was stressed as we told employees to present a positive greeting to customers and to not discuss back-of-house matters in earshot of the guest. The other senses – olfactory, touch, and taste – were further referenced in general theme park mandates on delivering satisfying food, gaming, rides, and grounds control practices” (Lukas 1997: 78).

Lukas also notes in his endnotes to the chapter that many employees were fired for failing to uphold the sensory dynamics necessary to construct an effective themed experience (Lukas 2007: 91). The performative importance placed upon the theme park employee signals just how tightly controlled and defined these spaces are. While not speaking of back of house matters in front of guests seems reasonable in any customer service environment, some theme parks have especially advanced systems put in place to ensure the sensory dynamic is not interfered with. The highly sophisticated garbage removal system used by Disneyland and Disney World consists of a complex and highly advanced system of underground tunnels, constructed so that patrons wouldn't have to bear witness to the less aesthetically pleasing aspects of the consumer universe. As Goldhaber notes, the 'Utilidor' underground office, staff room, and garbage removal system was constructed when Walt Disney himself saw “a cowboy walking through Tomorrowland because there was no other way to get to his work location in Frontierland, [and] Walt decided that there needed to be an easy way to get from one part of the park to another while remaining off-stage” (Goldhaber 2003: <http://www.mouseplanet.com/articles.php?art=mg030911mg>). Disney's Utilidor system further ties into the rubric of theme parks being a dream-like space, where the cold hard realities of sewage, garbage-removal, and employees taking their mealtimes do not interfere with the ambiance.

Liminality at the Theme Park

Both the suspension of social norms and a high degree of control present in theme parks, as explored above, invoke the essential elements of the liminality and *communitas* induced by ritual as studied by both Van-Gennep and Victor Turner. Alexander Moore's 1980 article, "Walt Disney World: Bounded Ritual Space and the Playful Pilgrimage Center" postulates that the contemporary theme park, such as Walt Disney World, has taken the space of religious pilgrimages and has become a place of playful pilgrimage (Moore 1980: 207). As Moore notes:

"We are now realizing that both play and ritual are expressions of the same metaprocess. Both are symbolic, transcendent, or "make-believe," both allay anxieties and prepare the organism to act; both are related to changes of interaction rates over daily, yearly, and generational cycles, and to interaction across population boundaries" (Moore 1980: 208).

In the theme park, patrons are suspended in the state of being 'betwixt and between' the ordinary, mundane world, and the fantastical, idealistic, and dream-like world that lurks in the consumer imaginary. While they are permitted some sensory liberties not sanctioned by every day life, they are also in a state where their actions and movements are highly controlled and set according to accepted methods of playing out the ritual. Having your body, and by extension your senses, drawn into the experience is important as it allows the other essential element of ritual, *communitas*, to develop. The liminal aspect of the ritual allows for social norms to be suspended, and the *communitas* element provides for the "routinized, organized, supervised...result of assembling large numbers of strangers at the same place at one time" (Moore 1980: 211). Ritual, of course, is heavily focused on the body, and as Davis notes, "the theme park creates a closed circle of participatory spectatorship in which "being there" is the main form of doing" (Davis 1997: 17).

Losing Yourself in the Wonder and Magic

Much as participation in a ritual depends on believing in the belief systems upon which the ritual is based, believing in the utopic imagery utilized by many theme parks depends on the patron's credence and appreciation of the narrative. As we have seen, sensory dynamics pump up the ability to be suspended within that narrative, and theme park architects and designers draw from various cognitive

frames of reference in order to ensure that this is done well. The unity of a theme is achieved, as Michael DeAngelis notes:

“Not only by the symbolic sector-coding of the names of stores, concessions, arcades, and rides, but also by other iconic and stereotypical visual and aural clues. For example, the Nottingham Village sector [of Six Flags Astroworld] connotes ‘medievalism’ through a uniformity of rough stone formations that dominate the space, suggesting that the patron is in the presence of an immense castle. Such visual cues are less coherent in the Mexicana sector, but here the mariachi music emanating from loudspeakers helps to remind the patron of where he or she is” (DeAngelis 1997: 115).

Such sensory cues become especially useful in theme parks where signage often is unclear, and the maps provided at the entrance can be next to useless. In what DeAngelis calls ‘orchestrated disorientation’ the theme park patron often finds themselves in a rather confused spot in attempting to find rides and attractions. As DeAngelis goes on to write:

“What soon becomes apparent to the uninitiated patron of AstroWorld is that the map more often impedes than facilitates one’s ability to move through the park. In effect, one might conclude that the park encourages the patron to move in an ambient fashion through its space, to develop individual “interpretations” of the space through the act of wandering attentively yet leisurely” (DeAngelis 1997: 116).

This echoes one visitor’s account where the patron writes of Disneyland: “Why not put simple posts with arrows pointing in different directions, with the ‘main’ area attractions on the arrows ? at least SOME general idea.. i couldnt believe it. but maybe thats by design.. maybe you are just supposed to ‘lose’ yourself in the wonder and magic of disneyland..” (http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g29092-d103346-r13222179-Disneyland_Resort-Anaheim_California.html).

This disorientation, DeAngelis postulates, is mediated by the euphoric symbol of the roller coaster, as “there is no more efficacious directional indicator in AstroWorld than the visual perception of the roller coaster [...] While AstroWorld makes it challenging to perform motivated movement from Oriental Village to the Western Junction, the means of directing oneself to the nearest roller coaster in sight is a relatively simple matter of approach” (DeAngelis 1997: 118). However, as we well know, the roller coaster is by no means a purely visual symbol. Instead, riding a roller

coaster engages the entire sensorium in aggressive and jolting ways. The euphoria generated by the roller coaster, as DeAngelis goes on to explore, is yet another orchestrated experience, “designed to produce specific sensations that are not a regularized part of the rider’s cognitive, spatial lexicon” (DeAngelis 1997: 122). The spatial displacement offered by the roller coaster ride is designed to challenge the senses, in such a way that the time spent on the roller coaster ride stands in sharp contrast to the time spent on the ground.

These rides become increasingly intense - and increasingly sensory – in order to set themselves apart from the crowd, and as DeAngelis opines, “there is ever more fierce competition among these chains to offer innovative, distinctive, and superlative features that will lure patrons to the parks” (DeAngelis 1997: 111). By orienting the theme park around the euphoria produced by roller coasters and other thrill rides, the sensory experience of the park is aggressively marketed in both tacit and not so tacit ways. For example, take a look at this thrill ride blurb for Universal Studios’ Spiderman ride:

THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF SPIDER-MAN

http://www.universalorlando.com/ioa_attr_spiderman.html

Your **Spider-Senses Will Be Tingling**. Put on your 3-D glasses for an **eye-popping, pulse-pounding, first-of-its-kind 3-D Spider-Man thrill ride**. **Careening through the streets and swinging high above the city, you’ll see, hear, and actually FEEL the action of Spider-Man’s most amazing adventure ever.**

As the ‘first of its kind’, this ride promises to fully catapult the rider into a thrilling adventure – not only will you see and hear the action, you’ll actually FEEL as though you are *a part of it*. By organizing the senses into a narrative of Spiderman’s adventures, the rider has both the thrilling sensations and the cognitive association of the Spiderman narrative to both orient and disorient himself within the ride.

Blackpool, England’s Pleasure Beach theme park includes a ride quite aptly called “Infusion”, which also promises to assail the five senses:

INFUSION

<http://www.blackpoolpleasurebeach.com/rides/infusion/114/1/>

Prepare for an exhilarating infusion of the elements, soars to amazing heights and be taken through a whirlwind water experience to amaze and astound the senses. Five incredible loops plus a double line twist await you on our thrilling suspended looping coaster.

Here again a ride markets itself specifically to the theme park visitor in pursuit of extraordinary sensations. Sensory dynamics, we have seen, do not only apply to the architecture, lights, sounds, and tastes of the theme park. Engaging the sensorium, and explicitly so, is also an essential part of the euphoria that roller coasters are expected to induce.

Hedonists in the Garden of Consumer Eden?

Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Morris B. Holbrook wrote in the Summer 1982 edition of the *Journal of Marketing* that “hedonic consumption designates those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products” (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982: 92). Theme parks definitely fit into the spectrum of multisensory marketing, and as we have seen, fantasy and emotions are an integral aspect of the effectiveness of these strategies. Hirschman and Holbrook’s term ‘hedonic’ references the Ancient Greek philosophy of Hedonism, which coveted above all else the pursuit of sensual self-indulgence and pleasure and the avoidance of pain, standing in sharp contrast to the Stoics of the period. Hedonistic pursuits therefore invoke pleasant imagery of pleasure gardens and epicurean feasts, reflecting Hirschman and Holbrook’s statement that “hedonic consumption acts are based not on what consumers know to be real but rather on what they desire reality to be” (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982: 94). As we have seen, the theme park is in many ways a symbol of a break from the run of the mill sensations of the every day. However, hedonism also sometimes conjures up negative connotations of overindulgence, greed, and ignorance of the harsher realities of the world of work, strife, and pain. Are we really hedonists running around in a pleasure garden while at the theme park? Are our senses and our perceptual abilities truly so malleable, uniform, and easy to infiltrate via multisensory marketing strategies?

Robert Jütte writes of the aggressive use of the senses in the consumer world in his text *The History of the Senses* that “the end product is a trivialization that literally knows no bounds, a process that does not make the senses more acute as numb and deaden them” (Jütte 2004: 1). This passage suggests that the use of the senses in consumer culture has led to a generation of consumerists with senses so unrefined that they are merely bombarded with sensory cues and eventually become unable to attribute meaning or coherence to their sensory experience. Just as television is envisioned to rot the brain, so multisensory dynamics in the theme park or elsewhere are expected to produce generations of replicas of the scorned image of the tourist, with their fanny packs, stark white running shoes, and unrefined sensory perception. However, is it possible that perhaps instead of our senses being numbed and deadened, we are in fact developing ways of sensing that correspond to the world around us, and in many ways actually honing the senses? As we saw with our exploration of the genteel opposition to mass cultural phenomena such as Coney Island, there is often an opposition between emergent ways of sensing and the perceived ways of sensing that are considered civilized and accepted. These oppositions are not merely related to the perceptual, instead they are in many ways related to cultural politics of legitimacy and representation.

Being There: Visitor’s Accounts of the Theme Park Experience

Visitor’s accounts of their experience at theme parks put in to perspective the fact that perhaps hedonistic consumption is not so easily defined or clearly demarcated. Sensory preferences in this context illuminate the opposition between what the theme park architects are trying to do in terms of aggressive sensory marketing and identity, and what the visitors actually experience. It often seems that no one reveals their sensory preferences or prowess more than when they are complaining. Take for example the following set of visitors accounts from some prominent theme parks. While some appraise the theme park being reviewed, others tear the sensory dynamics to shreds: both exhibit a discerning and judicious understanding and finesse of sensory dynamics and the meanings that they invoke.

DISNEYLAND (ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA)

<http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g29092-d103346-r16814448-Disneyland-Resort-Anaheim-California.html#TOPC>

"Monolithic Crowds: it was impossible to walk two steps without tripping over a stroller. Great, heaving, sticky, sweating, tattooed, pierced, and sunburned masses"

"The Calif Screamin roller coaster is a good thrill. You feel like you've been shot out of a cannon. Skip the Ferris Wheel - even a 6-year old knows boring when she sees it, and she could not get off this worthless contraption fast enough. Nice strolling, wide open spaces and good ambience, though."

"The firework show at night was worth staying for, even if it meant being herded like sheep into an enclosure. Baaaaaaa."

"Autopia is another one that you can skip. Do it if you have little ones who want to experience what it's like to drive a car, smell gasoline fumes & be stuck in traffic."

"The parts of the ride featuring Nemo and company are clearly on videoscreens, and it sort of ruins the illusion of the ride."

"It was quite fun, and the fact that you get to use lasers and shoot targets makes it more fun than your average dark ride"

WALT DISNEY WORLD (ORLANDO, FLORIDA)

<http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g34515-d143394-r13499460-Walt-Disney-World-Orlando-Florida.html>

"I always like to steer clear of places where hot, sweaty, and crabby crowds congregate (i.e. food courts, hot photo stops, etc.) and instead take the less-taken paths. They are some of the most beautiful and overlooked places in the resort. Take the time to appreciate all of the little things the park has to offer, not just the big rides- its amazing how much it can improve the quality of your vacation."

"My last visit was in March 07 and I have to tell you I was so disappointed. The park was packed full and for the very first time I noticed the staff were tetchy and impatient. The queues were endless and the rides were breaking down. For the first

time I wondered "is Disney letting in too many people"? I think they are and its ruining the experience."

"The safari trip was cool, but they go reeeeeaaaalllly fast. One time the guide said 'look! A baby elephant!' then he hit the gas and zoomed us away before we could even get our cameras up."

"Oh, I forgot to mention - I have heard all kinds of things about how friendly and nice the "cast" is - it is completely untrue. They all are extremely rude and unfriendly, and most of them look like they would rather be anywhere but in a stupid costume in a dirty theme park. Oh, it was dirty too."

"Unless you're under five years old, I can't believe people actually queue for hours in the beating summer heat to go on these things."

"So much for the Imagineers...90% of these rides are just varying versions of the same thing. Like travelling through a tunnel of slow-moving robotics (Snow White, Great Movie Ride, It's a Small World, Buzz Lightyear (except spinning), Dinosaur (albeit at a faster speed), Figment, etc, ad infinitum."

BUSCH GARDENS AFRICA (TAMPA, FLORIDA)

http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g34678-d107648-r13157723-Busch_Gardens-Tampa_Florida.html

"There is nothing aesthetically pleasing to look at while in line, it's just a big long wait with nothing to do, no TV's, no artifacts...nothing. The park seems dirty and the floor is ALWAYS wet."

"The best Ride is definately the Sheikra - when you see this ride your body literally goes into shock. As you queue to get on this Ride you start to think its the worst mistake of you life! But after you've gone on this ride, no other ride can compare! The thrill is brilliant and in the end its not as scary as it looks! The Most disappointing ride is the Gwazi - this wooden rollercoaster was one of the most painful experiences in my life..the high speeds and shakey tracks make you jerk around in your seat and hit your head off everything."

"I was impressed by the atmosphere of the park, the thrills of the coasters (if you like these then this is probably the best park to go to), the green/park areas, the lack of

loud piped music, the short lines (I did go in early Sept when schools had returned - makes a huge difference), the Brewery tastings and complimentary beer (although American lager still doesn't taste of anything in my opinion!), and the variety of animals/habitats."

"The foliage throughout the animal observation areas, particularly the area for observation of the apes is well done with very opportunistic window areas to view the animals without intrusion."

"The cleanliness of the park is uncommon among parks in Florida. We are season pass holders and have seen it in and out of tourist season. Beware the heat of Florida in a setting such as this in September! We do not cool off here in this month!!"

"Also, I really liked the Busch Gardens band that plays at the entrance- what a warm welcome that was! Put it this way, if we hadn't gone to Busch Gardens this trip, it would have been a waste of a vacation!"

BUSCH GARDENS EUROPE (WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA)

http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g58313-d141842-r13229977-Busch_Gardens-Williamsburg_Virginia.html.

"They put a lot of effort into landscaping with frequent new plantings- I've never seen a dead/dying plant. And I love the lush, mini-zoo atmosphere between Ireland and France. Don't miss beer school, officially known as the Brewmaster's Club- make sure to reserve space at this free beer tasting (same day reservations, by phone or at reservations desk in the park)."

"The maps were inadequate, and the signage was terrible. Over the course of the day, I am certain that we spent about \$400 including food and drink. The food was not good. The bathrooms were filthy. The highlight of the day was a visit to the first aid station."

"Yes the park itself was clean but the bathrooms were filthy and the paper towel machines didn't even work! Hows about that for 70.00 a person! Don't even get me started on the food. It was so expensive"

ADVENTURE ISLAND (TAMPA, FLORIDA)

http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g34678-d117474-r13157228-Adventure_Island-Tampa_Florida.html.

"This park is a thrill seekers goldmine .It as everything from the hulk to dueling dragons ,dr doom it also as quite a lot of water rides which is a god send on red hot days."

"We caught the big rides first before the lines got too terrible, and then spent the rest of the day cliff jumping, fluming, hydrotubing, and floating in the lazy river. Adventure Island has done a great job of offering areas for little kids and big kids to play. The toddler section with all of the water fountains is great, as is the big kid area with lots of different colored slides, some of which go faster than the big flumes!"

SEA WORLD ADVENTURE PARK (ORLANDO, FLORIDA)

http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g34515-d102412-r13454141-Sea-World_Adventure_Park-Orlando_Florida.html.

Quote: "Bored with Disney World, we were grateful to visit something with real animals rather than animatronics, and not only that, but animals you could interact with."

"Other hotspots include stingray pool - be sure to put your in hand in the water - very gentle."

"Also on hand are all sorts of exhibits and tanks. You can stroke a ray for instance, touch and feed dolphins and, in quite a challenge, feed seals. I say this is quite a challenge because you have to drop or throw your fish into the enclosure, and the amount of birds that take advantage of this and snatch the fish out of the air is quite surprising, but that's fun in itself."

"At the Shamu show, if you sit in the front you will get splashed. It is no secret and it says so on the seats. Please note, while it is nice to get cooled off this is fishy salt water you get splashed with."

"The park has several misting areas to cool off in and in the kiddy section by the small scale rides they have a water area where they can play in the water."

"With several big projection screens in the background and the heart thumping

surround sound playing music while Shamu leaps out of the water is truly breathtaking. I think one of the best things about this park is the interaction with the mammals. The sting ray petting tank was amazing and feeding the dolphins was really cool too. Also, the food here is impeccable. We had lunch at the Anheuser Busch deli and I can't brag enough about how fresh the meats were and I've never seen tomatoes so red and lettuce so green! And best of all, you can't beat the FREE beer! One more thing- if you love roller coasters, Kraken is one of the tallest roller coasters in all of Florida! It will surely get your adrenaline pumping!"

"The Shamu show while very well done, featured a movable big-screen TV that only about half the pixels worked on. It was OK, but with a stadium full of people that paid a small fortune to get in, you would think they could do some maintenance."

The senses of the modern theme park consumer as presented above are not numbed and deadened, but in fact negate Jütte's statement. As David Howes writes in his article "Hyperesthesia, or the Sensory Logic of Late Capitalism", "a space has opened up where people can 'make sense' of things in all sorts of non-commercial, 'non-rational,' but aesthetic ways" (Howes 2004: 298). The theme park tourist does not merely absorb all the multisensory marketing strategies as they are anticipated to be absorbed by the theme park architects. The complexity of responses to theme parks reveals how our perceptual abilities are finely honed in order to decipher authenticity and feelings of immersion, and re-imagine the imaginaries that theme park architects and designers attempt to proliferate. Perhaps, in the midst of all this sensory overload, connoisseurs of the experience economy are being developed. Coming to understand and appreciate our sensorium has even become a theme of some theme parks. The "Sensory Experience Theme Park" in Austria (<http://www.leoganger-bergbahnen.at/en/sommer/sinnepark/our-senses/>) and "El Valle de los 6 Sentidos" (http://www.diputaciondevalladolid.es/valle_del_esgueva/desarrollo.shtml?idboletin=819&idarticulo=29833&idseccion=7413), in Spain, both brand themselves as sensory themed parks, where all of the activities and attractions are designed to explicitly engage, confuse, and challenge the senses. As Austria's Sensory Experience Theme Park states on its website: "Experience your senses in the sensory experience theme park: Find out how the eye sees, the ear hears, the nose smells, the skin feels, the foot understands, the hand grasps...It's all waiting for you

in the sensory experience theme park". While multisensory marketing may be a large part of themed spaces, our own interest in perception and the senses are what makes that marketing work.

Conclusions

Theme parks often take some flak for being 'fake', 'phony', or 'simulated' spaces. Why? Because it is constructed? Because it generates profit? Are museums not constructed and profit generating spaces? Why is a trip to a museum considered a more 'genuine' activity than visiting a theme park? The infinite criticisms of consumer culture based on its inauthenticity and replication of cultural forms instead of being a cultural form itself are reflective of the same debates waged by the Victorian genteels against the Industrial nouveaux-riche. As Lukas notes:

"Like any form of consumer society, theming reflects deep cultural traditions, varied ideologies, and foundational qualities of life. Unfortunately, many people have been unable to accept theming as a legitimate form of culture because of the assumption that it produces stereotypical, inauthentic, and simulated reflections on people, things, cultures, places, and moments in history [...] regardless of one's opinion on theming and the social relations that are a product of it, themed spaces are, inherently, highly gregarious sites of popular culture" (Lukas 2007: 183-184).

Theme parks are spaces where visitors are able to form interpretations of their surroundings and engage in a ritual process of being betwixt and between an ordinary world and a fantasy land. Sensory dynamics may be aggressively asserted by the architects and designers of these spaces, but ultimately the visitors form their own interpretations of whether the sensations and narratives deployed fit within their cognitive and emotional frameworks. Instead of becoming pawns of consumer culture, the statements generated by the theme park visitors that we explored demonstrate how theme park visitors are instead critics and evaluators of consumer culture.

So what is in store for the theme park in the future? As Jack Rouse of the themed attraction architectural firm, Jack Rouse and Associates states: "While it is true that the experiential design industry began in North America, those of us who live in

North America and grew up with the industry must realize that we no longer have a lock on truth or on great ideas” (Rouse 2008: <http://www.blooloop.com/Article/The-Future-of-Themed-Design-A-Search-for-Identity/68>). While this report has focused mainly on North American theme parks, theme parks are becoming equally gregarious cultural institutions worldwide, with theme parks now not only dotting North American interstates and highways but Europe, Asia, and the Middle East as well. As sensory dynamics are an integral factor in the representation of the theme being displayed (recall our discussion of Busch Gardens Africa), this use of the senses in representation is now being adopted and adapted cross-culturally. Aesthetic and sensorial sensibilities, as we have seen, are a large element of the way we construct and interpret that which surrounds us. Perhaps it will be the theme park that we ultimately look back upon to see how we understood both ourselves and each other via the pastiche of our sensory imaginaries.