

# CONSIDERATIONS ON THE THEME PARK MODEL AS SHORT-TERM UTOPIA.

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The hermit turns his back on the world and will have no truck with it. But one can do more than that; one can try to re-create the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one's own wishes.

Sigmund Freud. *Civilization and its Discontents*, 1930.

(Resumen)

Este artículo analiza la relación entre el concepto de la utopía y los parques temáticos que pueden ser considerados como utopías a "corto plazo." El estudio de parques temáticos reales, novelísticos o filmicos y su dependencia económica, geográfica y emocional del mundo real a la vez que pretenden un aislamiento e independencia utópica de ese mundo, revelan importantes contradicciones paradójicas de nuestra sociedad postmoderna. El cambio de "roles" llega a cuestionar cuál de las dos realidades es la hiper realidad o virtud y la auténtica realidad, cuando se observa que esta última empieza a fagocitar la realidad del parque temático.

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## ***1. INTRODUCTION***

It seems undeniable that of all the definitions ever provided of the concept of utopia, the etymological one is likely to be the most widely accepted. The well-known "good place which is nowhere" has reached the status of abiding truth and is often recalled before any discussion on the nature of specific utopias or dystopias takes place. Notwithstanding this, it is my intention in this essay to introduce a new variable. At the basis of my comments are theme parks understood as short-term utopias, as they are meant to provide a condition of happiness different and superior to that of the world outside, a condition which automatically disappears upon reentering the actual world.

In this sense, a theme park can be regarded as an artificially developed habitat which can be created or modified at will, on condition the shareholders find the changes necessary and the management of the park can convince them to provide the required funding.

## ***2. THE ILLUSION OF HAPPINESS***

Theme parks always try to create an *illusion* of happiness. This does not imply a rejection of the notion that theme parks can actually provide pleasurable moments to their visitors. As a matter of fact, everything in a theme park is devised to convince visitors that despite its fences, it is not a prison but rather a new version of the Garden of Eden. From colors to textures, from food to beverages, from shows to background music, from personal appearance to faked smiles, everything is aimed at creating an illusion of complete

happiness, which (among other things) helps us ignore the endless waiting periods before every attraction or ride.

The illusion of happiness relies on three factors. First of all, paraphrasing Coleridge, a complete willing suspension of disbelief. Theme park visitors must be willing to admit, for instance, that for all its artificiality the New Orleans area is just a replica of Bourbon Street in actual New Orleans. Certainly, another point which suggests the visitors' suspension of disbelief is voluntary is the amount of money they have to pay to be granted admission. Secondly, the illusion of happiness is to be achieved by means of faint or overtly explicit references to the real world or to cultural icons which in turn can be either real or virtual. Thus, it is not infrequent to find theme park areas devoted to exotic places like China or Polynesia, to romanticized images of the past like the Wild West, or to cartoon heroes. Finally, the illusion of happiness is completed by providing a danger-free, family-friendly environment where nothing can possibly go wrong.

Another point which requires consideration is the question of total isolation. The idea that worlds of pristine innocence can survive like soap bubbles in an ocean of warring hostile forces sounds rather naïve at the turn of the millennium, to put it mildly. If it is obvious that within a theoretical framework the idea of complete isolation is more than questionable, in practice that notion is simply untenable. In neither of the films discussed below do we find a totally isolated environment. In Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1992) the park is located on an island off the coast of Costa Rica. In Michael Crichton's *Westworld*, (1973) the park is some hundred miles into the Sahara desert. In neither case, however, does the concept of isolation really work because this would mean economic autarchy, an idea which, apart from its intrinsic difficulties, is unintended, and goes against the latest economic trends, which have enthroned globalization.

### 3. THE FALLACY OF AUTARCHY

In the first place, the autarchy mentioned above is extremely difficult. In *Jurassic Park*, the island has no resources but vegetation. Therefore, it cannot support the population of dinosaurs nor the human population plus the visitors. In *Westworld* the case is even clearer. Surrounded by the desert, the park relies on external materials and goods to survive.

Secondly, autarchy is also unintended. First of all because such a situation might awaken in its visitors a wish to remain there forever, which would eventually lead to the economic collapse of the capitalist framework from which the park sprang. Thus, both parks are meant to be short-term utopias so that visitors can leave, draw a comparison between the park and the world outside, and develop a craving for the security and ease offered by the former. In other words, both parks are built upon the traditional principle of need-creating and the exploitation of the subsequent wish to fulfill one's desire.

Finally, total isolation in a world in which individuals are quickly learning to *think global* is simply an entelechy. Furthermore, the very nature of a theme park – a First World capitalist commodity which requires huge investments – makes its millions of visitors an absolute necessity if it is to succeed as a profit-making activity. In spite of this, there are examples, particularly in the case of Disney's theme parks, which confirm a deeply embedded fascination with utopian autarchy. A remarkable example is the so-called *Disney dollars* that may be exchanged and used as legal tender at Disneyland Resort, Walt Disney World Resort and The Disney Store in the United States and Puerto Rico. Disney dollars

look basically like their real counterparts but have lost the negative connotations of real money. Apart from a cheerful layout achieved by the inclusion of Disney characters, Disney dollars grant the illusion of economic independence by enhancing the idea of the park as a world apart.

#### **4. THEME PARKS, REALITY AND NOSTALGIA**

A theme park is essentially a (re)construction of reality. However, reality may adopt various presentations. We may speak of *mimetic reality*, which would define parks with copied ecosystems such as Seaworld in San Diego, CA. It is also possible to speak of *hypothesized reality*, which would be the case of Jurassic Park in Spielberg's movie. Finally, we can speak of *wished-for reality*, which would encompass any examples related to the world of fantasy, e.g. Fantasyland in Disneyland. Curiously enough, Disneyland is based on virtual characters and so are Westworld and Jurassic Park, so an analysis which places them on the same level seems befitting.

On July 17, 1955 Walt Disney declared the following:

To all who come to this happy place: welcome. Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past... and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future. Disneyland is dedicated to ideals, the dreams and the hard facts which have created America... with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to the entire world. (*Dedication to Disneyland*)

The previous message becomes particularly illuminating when it is read bearing in mind Linda Hutcheon's concept of *nostalgia*, especially when she states that nostalgia implies evasion of the present and idealization of the past. Furthermore, Disney's vision includes "the challenge and promise of the future" which, from a utopian point of view, hints at several assumptions. Firstly, the present socio-economic status quo is found to be valid despite its imperfections. There is, therefore, an automatic emphasis on the Western philosophical notion of progress as something unstoppable, continuous and everlasting. Secondly, as a consequence of the previous remark, the prevailing economic doctrine of (neo)capitalism emerges unquestioned and revitalized.

Let us consider now Disneyland (Anaheim, CA) and Universal's Port Aventura (Salou-Vilaseca, Spain). Opened in 1955, Disneyland represented the materialization of Walt Disney's fantastic universe previously developed and successfully tested through his cartoons. At present, the park is divided into the following areas: Adventureland, Frontierland, New Orleans Square, Fantasyland, Critter Country, Tomorrowland and Mickey's Toontown. Adventureland hosts, among others, attractions related to Tarzan and Indiana Jones. Frontierland uses elements of American literary culture like Mark Twain and Tom Sawyer. Being the mildest area, New Orleans Square displays among other attractions a sweetened Hollywood-style vision of the age of pirates. Fantasyland plays with the visitors' familiarity with fairy tales and so references to Alice, Peter Pan, Pinocchio, Sleeping Beauty or Snowwhite often illustrate the name of attractions. Critter Country includes Davy Crockett among its main rides. Tomorrowland focuses on space exploration and the development of ground transportation. Finally, Mickey's Toontown is a concession to younger visitors where most attractions feature Disney characters who lend their name to gentler rides.

Port Aventura opened in 1995. After a troubled pre-opening period, it has become one of the most successful theme parks in Europe rivaling Disneyland Paris (previously Euro Disney) in number of visitors. In 1999, Universal Studios entered the body of shareholders with an aggressive plan of expansion for the near future which included the transformation of its name into the trademark Universal's Port Aventura. As of today, the park is divided into the following theme areas: Mexico, China, Polynesia, Mediterrània and the Far West. The inclusion of these areas can be accounted for by a number of reasons. In the case of Mexico, the obvious affinities in language, religion and culture with Spain were the leading factor for its inclusion as a theme area. In the case of China, the element of mystery and exoticism it has always had for most Europeans ever since Marco Polo came back with his fabulous chronicles doubtlessly account for its inclusion. The name Polynesia automatically recalls vivid images of lush vegetation and sandy beaches of virginal whiteness while at the same time is reminiscent of pseudo-utopian civilizations barely touched by Christianity and its concept of guilt. The Far West area (as the Wild West is known in Spain) is a constant reminder of "the good old times" many visitors experienced years ago when political correctness had not yet entered everyday life and when it was easy to distinguish between the baddies and the goodies after a night's rest in the open air. Finally, Mediterrània is a clear concession to locals and the thousands of tourists that year after year overcrowd the summer resort where the park is located.

Even a quick glance confirms that all theme areas display great doses of nostalgia, be it *nostalgia for a place* (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, California, etc) even though most visitors may not have been there; *nostalgia for a time* (a nebulous "before" which may basically refer to our own youth); or *nostalgia for a condition* (the so-called age of innocence in which concepts were simple and unequivocal). And the same could be said of the theme areas in Disneyland.

### **5. ESTRANGEMENT, FAMILIARITY AND SECURITY**

Talking about Disneyland, Umberto Eco contends that:

In this sense Disneyland is more hyper realistic than the wax museum, precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced. (43)

And he goes on to say that:

When there is a fake – hippopotamus, dinosaur, sea serpent – it is not so much because it wouldn't be possible to have the real equivalent but because the public is meant to admire the perfection of the fake and its obedience to the program. (44)

Both remarks hint at the need to take up the concept of short-term utopia introduced above in which visitors willingly enter the park enclosure and do not mind playing the game they have previously negotiated upon buying their ticket. As Disney put it, "I don't want the public to see the world they live in while they're in Disneyland. I want them to feel they're in another world" <[www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Boulevard/1977](http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Boulevard/1977)>. That is to say, apart from the elements mentioned above, for a theme park to be recognized

as a utopian landscape three more elements are required: estrangement, familiarity and security. The idea of estrangement is provided by the physical reality of the park. Theme parks are fenced enclosures separated from the outside world. After a while, their visitors are absorbed by the landscape and chronoscape and lose physical and emotional contact with the outside world. Likewise, what goes on within their boundaries can only be suspected or anticipated by the passers-by, as they are not granted access without a ticket. All in all, a situation which allows both sides to lead separate lives until the park closes at midnight and virtuality and reality merge again.

Notwithstanding this, theme parks cannot ignore reality. In fact, they need it to maintain the impression of a danger-free, family-friendly environment as it is only when visitors draw a comparison between life inside and outside the park that the former may be valued.

Finally, the idea of security is reinforced by the previous two factors plus an array of minor details that contribute to the visitors' well-being. They must have easy access to a variety of food and beverages. Restrooms must be easily available and be spotlessly clean. Likewise, it is absolutely necessary that young male and female employees be sporadically seen doing various jobs and attending the slightest needs visitors may have. Their perennial smiles are a *sine qua non* condition which sweetens the atmosphere, controls potential stress (for instance before unknown rides or endless queues) and creates a general feeling of complicity which materializes in the cheerful atmosphere to be found in all theme parks. Finally, gift stores must deploy an overwhelming array of souvenirs and gadgets so that visitors can take home at least a portion of the happiness they have experienced while in the park.

## 6. ACTUAL THEME PARKS AND CINEMA REPRESENTATIONS

Four theme parks have been mentioned throughout this essay. Two of them actually exist (Disneyland and Universal's Port Aventura) and two of them are cinema constructs (Westworld and Jurassic Park). Although it is undeniable that theme parks are an American export and that all four share many features, three of them are culturally closer. Disneyland, Westworld and Jurassic Park are by-products of the American way of life and are therefore molded according to American tastes and expectations. Consequently, in the following pages especial attention will be given to these three.

Westworld is the name of one of the three areas into which the theme park Delos is divided (the other two are Roman World and Medieval World). Written and directed by Michael Crichton in 1973, *Westworld* was an MGM/UA release starring Yul Brinner, Richard Benjamin and James Brolin. In turn, *Jurassic Park* is based on Michael Crichton's 1991 best-selling novel. It was produced by Universal/Amblin in 1992. Sam Neill, Laura Dern, Jeff Goldblum and Richard Attenborough played the main parts and were directed by Steven Spielberg.

As regards their similarities, Disneyland, Westworld and Jurassic Park are examples of controlled nature. It may be argued that Westworld and Jurassic Park are far from inhabited areas, whereas Disneyland is part of the L.A. conurbation. This argument, however, only reinforces the impression that theme parks are examples of domesticated nature. In fact, Disneyland seems to be a step ahead of its cinema counterparts. The logical evolution for both Westworld and Jurassic Park would be to locate some of their services outside their grounds, thus starting a process of gradual relandscaping and urbanization.

All three parks use natural, semi-natural or nature-looking artificial elements processed or manufactured from original materials, an obvious suggestion that humans can handle everything in nature. All three have reordained their territory and turned it into a safe enclosure which looks real and fantastic, historical and a-temporal, rural and urban at the same time. The three of them show distorted images of history which, to mention just two critics (Hutcheon 1998, Jameson 1991), float between pastiche and irony or, in other words, between gullibility and fallacy. Finally, all three have succeeded in selling representations of other times, places and situations, which is exactly what visitors are willing to pay for. In short, all three illustrate in various ways that (neo)capitalism has won the battle of entertainment. In the case of Disneyland, this is carried out by means of pre- and post-visit marketing techniques continually reinforced by a powerful film industry which ensures the park is a tangible representation of the screen images. In Westworld, cinema audiences and park visitors learn simultaneously that the premises are excellent because "our team of engineers have spared no expense in this re-creation, precise to the smallest detail" (Crichton 7). At the same time, we notice that most visitors are successful executives or upper-middle class individuals.

In turn, Jurassic Park takes a step forward and deploys a fascinating marketing technique which affects visitors and cinema audiences alike. Months before the movie premiere, the world was literally flooded with thousands of images and gadgets of Spielberg's forthcoming blockbuster. Likewise, months before the park opens, thousands of images and gadgets are meant to circulate so as to trigger people's curiosity. The climax of this marketing operation was reached, however, when Spielberg devoted a full sequence of the film to showing the Jurassic Park gift shop. Real audiences were thus given the chance to glimpse the items they had been offered for weeks, and which they were supposed to buy with their real money once back in their real world.

As may be noticed, it is relatively easy to discover common elements when the three parks are compared. Their taming of nature and their obsession with re-landscaping it in a harmless way, their distortion of history and their assimilation of elements of the world of fantasy, and finally their use of similar marketing methods confirm that they share the same cultural origins and the same economic purpose. There is, however, one element which separates the three parks and which grades them differently according to their proximity to utopia, namely their approach to technology.

The perception and use of technology (techno science) is radically different in all three parks. Whereas Disneyland clearly offers an optimistic view of a successful America and its glamorous future, Westworld shows a distinct concern for a technology that may fail or turn against its creator at any moment. Lastly, Jurassic Park epitomizes total disaster as not only is high tech impossible to control, but (neo)capitalism and human greed appear too and destroy the utopian dream.

Although few can deny that aesthetically and technologically Disneyland is slightly obsolete, it is also undeniable that it has kept the glamour of Disney's fantasy world and above all, the appeal of a long-gone (or never fully-achieved) America. The "memories of the past" and the "challenge and promise of the future" expressed in 1955 by Disney may nowadays be said to increase the general sense of fatigue perceptible all over the park. And yet, details like the films shown in some rides to make waiting periods seem shorter still speak of a future suburban America where the automobile is king. Also to be found are rockets aiming at the Moon and ready to depart in search of adventure. But most of all, it is very revealing that one of the visitors' favorite rides is called "Autopia"

(remodeled in summer 2000), a closed circuit where gas-powered miniature cars patiently run endlessly after one another thus providing an illusion of individual freedom which soon proves as short as the circuit itself. In short, when observed in perspective, Disneyland recalls a society ready for economic change and eager to jump into space to spread the good news of a political system which allowed and encouraged national pride.

Westworld voices the subterranean conflicting forces present in Western societies – particularly the United States – on the eve of the first oil crisis. The very reasons that attract visitors to the park are far from Disney's naively patriotic rationale. Most of the visitors, we are led to believe, pay \$1,000 a day for an incursion into the limits of the forbidden. Married men in search of extra-marital sex, bored wives seeking their knight in shining armor, overstressed executives in need of violent outlets for their repressed anger, all of them form a gallery of discontented individuals created by the *utopia* outside the park. Curiously enough, they are willing to pay for another ticket to happiness, though this time they demand the certainty that they will not be disappointed, and so all characters in the park are re-programmable robots posing as humans.

Unfortunately, after a while robots and machinery in general begin to collapse. Robots turn against their creators in an allegory of apocalyptic proportions. Eventually, the *utopia* inside the park proves just as frail and overstressing as life outside the park. As could not be otherwise, the ending of the film is in accordance with the gloomy prospects of the times. Alone and exhausted, the main character projects a look of horror and puzzlement as he ponders his plight. Needless to say that the failing and subsequent collapse of Westworld can be read as an anticipation of the impending socio-economic crisis of the early seventies. Consequently, the park cannot work as a social haven as it cannot offer the security utopias are expected to provide.

Finally Jurassic Park offers an even more pessimistic analysis of technology and its repercussions inside and outside the park. As Crichton's novel explains,

The basic idea of science – that there was a new way to look at reality, that it was objective, that it did not depend on your beliefs, that it was *rational* – that idea was fresh and exciting back [in the Middle Ages]. It offered promise and hope for the future, and it swept away the old medieval system, which was hundreds of years old. The medieval world of feudal politics and religious dogma and hateful superstitions fell before science. But in truth, this was because the medieval world didn't really work any more. It didn't work economically, it didn't work intellectually, and didn't fit the new world that was emerging.(311)

The above text prepares the reader for a darker interpretation of technological progress and, indirectly, for the breakdown of the park as a hypothetical neocapitalist utopia of the nineties. Throughout the novel, the reader apparently faces the moral dilemma of bringing dinosaurs back to life. The park is to work as a bubble of happiness, a tribute to science and wonder, an island paradise where visitors will be able to regain faith in the human species and its capabilities. However, the main conflict is actually economic. The novel tries to convince readers that this is a new Promethean struggle. Science is to challenge nature in order to eradicate boredom and misery and – for a short while – scientists faintly recall Victor Frankenstein in his battle against human grief. In like manner, the collapse of the park acquires a particular dimension when it is observed from a Christian standpoint. After all, the park itself is a sacrilegious act which triggers the wrath

of God. Nevertheless, disaster occurs because an unreliable employee decides to smuggle out frozen dinosaur embryos to sell them to a rival company. As the text suggests,

At the same time, the great intellectual justification of science has vanished. Ever since Newton and Descartes, science has explicitly offered us the vision of total control. Science has claimed the power to eventually control everything, through its understanding of natural laws. But in the twentieth century, that claim has been shattered beyond repair. (312)

As a product of the nineties, the park cannot offer something it was never intended to. Throughout the movie the words “we’ve spared no expense” or “no expense was spared” are repeated on several occasions. Curiously enough, these words had already been used by Crichton in the script of *Westworld*, though perhaps not as emphatically. Much like Disneyland or *Westworld*, *Jurassic Park* is meant to be another short-term utopia, though its nature is corrupted from the beginning. In this case, faith in technology is almost blind and widespread, except for the cryptic remarks of a postmodern-type expert in chaos theory called Malcolm. The park authorities even consider the possibility of designing “a slower, more docile version [of dinosaur] for our park” (123), an implicit acceptance that due to economic constraints their original idea has been transformed into a money-making monster.

In short, Disneyland, *Westworld* and *Jurassic Park* offer the promise of a short-term utopia in a rather conventional way. As is well known, the idea of safe enclosures of granted happiness cannot be detached from the history of utopian writing. From Thomas More’s seminal text to Swift’s peculiar nations, from Huxley’s islands and brave new worlds to C. Perkins Gilman’s all-female valleys, from Shangri-la to Metropolis, the history of utopian writing is rich in examples which associate secrecy and isolation with happiness and order. What makes theme parks different from traditional representations of utopia is that they literally sell two-way tickets to happiness and that, as outgrowths of capitalism, they discard isolation in favor of mass consumption. Likewise, the inherent element of boredom present in most utopias has receded in favor of pseudo-adventure and calculated risk. That is, perfection and coherence are less valued than thrill and special effects. All in all, a petty-bourgeois attitude which becomes increasingly obvious as one takes a chronological look at Disneyland, *Westworld* and *Jurassic Park*.

A final comparison reveals that Disneyland *continues*, *Westworld is destroyed* and *Jurassic park has to be destroyed*. At first sight, it might be argued that their respective fates are related to the fact that one of them is real and the other two mere screen fantasies. However, their survival or destruction must be observed from a twofold perspective. On the one hand, the three parks discussed share the same cultural framework. On the other hand, their future is different because they have sprung from disparate socio-historical moments. It is therefore predictable that they respond differently to the various forces at play in their respective historical moments. Similarly, the specific nature of their fate seems clearly related to the innocence of their original purpose. Thus, *Westworld* puts an end to an act of hubris (humans against divine law) with another act of hubris (robots against humans). Crime and punishment are not separable any more so the park collapses and only one witness is left alive to warn the world. In the case of *Jurassic Park*, the attempt fails because of human greed and carelessness. As chaos theory had anticipated, the park runs out of

control and its dinosaurs have to be killed before they reach the mainland. But the seeds of evil have not been eradicated. At least one of the main characters is left considering the possibility of building the park again somewhere else. So the lesson has not been learnt.

Only Disneyworld, despite its limitations, or perhaps thanks to them, has been able to survive both economically and emotionally. The magic potion for its success was anticipated by Disney himself: "fond memories of the past" (however distorted or manipulated the past is) and "the challenge and promise of the future" (as long as that future is never reached). So the bubble of happiness reappears in full strength. In Gaillard's words:

The spirit of the times is in fact neither one of terror nor one of revolutionary messianism, but rather, as we are told on every quarter, one of tranquil hedonism and grasping individualism thirsting for immediate pleasures, all against a backdrop of economic and political liberalism. (143)

All in all, a perfect description of the limited emotional needs of Disneyland visitors nowadays. The future may be outside, but utopia can only be apprehended, even if only briefly, inside the park.

## **7. THE UTOPIAN ELEMENT. CONCLUSION.**

Throughout the previous sections it has been illustrated that, given their nature and purpose, theme parks may be regarded as short-term utopias. The fact that they share some basic features with traditional representations of utopias places them at least on a similar level. However, as Moylan notes when considering utopian texts: "utopian writing in its many manifestations is complex and contradictory" (1). The same might be said of the theme parks discussed in this article and of the notion of *theme park* in general. After all, they are tangible representations of previous texts which have eventually materialized into examples of virtual/actual (hyper)reality. Moylan goes on to say that "produced through the fantasizing powers of the imagination, utopia opposes the affirmative culture maintained by dominant ideology [as it] negates the contradictions in a social system by forging visions of what is not yet realized either in theory or practice" (1). Finally, he concludes that "in generating such figures of hope, utopia contributes to the open space of opposition" (2). Indeed, it is precisely in the intrinsic subversive value that Moylan attributes to utopias that the difference between traditional utopian representations and theme parks may reside.

Ever since Disneyland was opened, interest in theme parks has grown steadily. What at first was observed as the mere materialization of a visionary's dream has come to be understood as a major force instrumental in the development of a specific territory, as the disputes over the exact location of every new park demonstrate. Most companies, however, struggle to maintain the aura of optimism and faith in the future required to obtain the green light from local authorities and to lure their potential customers. This is precisely one of the points where Moylan's analysis cannot be applied to theme parks. As outgrowths of a particular historical moment whose appearance has been encouraged by a distinct socio-economic backdrop, theme parks do not oppose but rather endorse and reinforce the dominant political values. Disneyland appeared as the representation of a future America profoundly rooted in the WASP tradition. Westworld was to be read as a warning but never questioned the validity of the economic status quo. At best, it hinted at the fragility of the

economic system. Moreover, it implicitly asked the Western Hemisphere to regain control over its future, carelessly left in the hands of oil producing countries. Jurassic Park perfectly portrays Jameson's visions of "late-capitalism". The dreamer's dream is controlled by the anxiety of the shareholders and disaster is triggered by the economic betrayal of one of the experts who make the park function. Finally, Universal's Port Aventura has proved a big economic success because it has been able to capture the attention of millions of tourists in a tourist-oriented economy like Spain's. In short, none of these parks opposes the prevailing economic system, but rather take advantage of it to produce parallel realities attractive enough for potential consumers.

But what sort of reality is *projected* by theme parks? If, as has been contended, a theme park is an enclosure of granted temporary happiness, we might wonder about the features that make it superior to the external world. It is by acknowledging such a condition of superiority that the park may be accepted as a more perfect example of social organization.

Theme parks have often been presented as paradigms of modernity or, we may say, as representations of the future on hand. Their use of technology and their persistent display of safe pleasure associated with their island-like nature might favor their identification with utopian landscapes. However, the reassessment of the idea of modernity, and the enthronement of postmodernism as a *sine qua non* feature of the last years of the twentieth century demand a new reading of the theme park as utopia.

In his *Travels in Hyperreality* Umberto Eco explains:

When, in the space of twenty-four hours, you go (as I did deliberately) from the fake New Orleans of Disneyland to the real one, and from the wild river of Adventureland to a trip on the Mississippi, where the captain of the paddle-wheel steamer says it is possible to see alligators on the banks of the river, and then you don't see any, you risk feeling homesick for Disneyland, where the wild animals don't have to be coaxed. Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can. (44)

Eco's account already hints at the increasingly problematic separation between everyday and theme park reality, or between reality and hyperreality. Eco already anticipated the confusing relationship between the idealizations created by the external world and the display of such idealizations within the park. Some years later, Baudrillard took up the idea in *America* and concluded that

Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all the "real" America, which *is* Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). (25)

Baudrillard's analysis of America in the eighties leads to the conclusion that the barriers between the *postmodern look* of the country, and the plastic replica offered by Disneyland are fainter than ever. America as utopia-in-the-making has engendered another utopia, this time stagnant, whose only purpose seems to be the need to avoid an overt clash. He refers to America as *hyperreality* since for him it is neither dream nor reality any more.

In short, the game of role-reversal between real life and theme park ends when the former fagocitates the latter in a sequence which may be summarized as follows: 1)

Western societies, despite their allegedly utopian goals, engender frustrated individuals. 2) Western individuals approach theme parks in search of rest (or fun, or happiness, or nostalgia, or adrenaline hypes). 3) Theme parks re-create reality and sweeten it to make it palatable for these individuals. 4) These individuals enjoy themselves, reassemble the fragments of their individuality, and go back to everyday reality with “fond memories of the past”, a past which never existed outside their minds or the enclosures they have just left. In this sense, theme parks would be fulfilling a double function. On the one hand, they would provide the necessary outlet for the frustrations caused by the eternal process of constructing the out-of-the-park utopia. On the other hand, by presenting themselves as models of security and ease, they would act as political safety valves. Unfortunately, as could not be otherwise, the pretended isolation of parks has proved a failure and the postmodern social landscape is evolving with such turbulence that the limits of both are far from clear. It remains to be seen which side will succeed at the end of this process. Whether the whole world turns into a theme park or whether theme parks become social models to reconstruct our world in an *orderly* way, the relevance of theme parks as (neo)capitalist icons will remain unquestioned, and their utopian quality unharmed.

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