The Theme Park Ride (In and of Itself) as a Cultural Form

An Investigation of Kinetics, Narrative, Immersion, and Concept

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Introduction: The Meaning of the Ride

In July 1997, following my last months of employment as a training coordinator at Six Flags AstroWorld, I became aware of a horrible accident that took place at the theme park's Excalibur roller coaster. Due to management error related to an OSHA-required lockout/tagout procedure, a maintenance worker was struck and killed as the roller coaster was dispatched from the station.[1] The terrible incident became the subject of intense conversation among my AstroWorld social circle and the focus of multiple local and regional news cycles. The occurrence of a ride accident, whether resulting in injury or death, marks a curious and potentially informative context for the study of theme parks, generally, and rides, specifically. This particular study of the theme park ride begins with the ride accident as it illustrates the confluence of technology and culture, with all of its entailing contradictions and ambivalences. Since the time of my work as a training coordinator at AstroWorld, through the years of writing academic perspectives on theme parks, and now in

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1. Scott A. Lukas, "The Theme Park and the Figure of Death," *InterCulture* 2, no. 2 (2005); OSHA, "Inspection Detail | Occupational Safety and Health Administration," *United States Department of Labor*, 1997, https://www.osha.gov/pls/imis/establishment.inspection_detail?id=123618464.

more contemporary periods of consulting for the themed- and immersive spaces industry, I have developed a perspective on theme park rides that balances their technological and cultural contexts with sensibilities developed from first-person or ethnographic perspectives as described by designers, operators, and theme park guests and fans, and even with constructions imagined from the vantage points of the rides themselves. As radical as it may sound to study the ride "in and of itself" as its own living, breathing, and conceptually salient entity, in an era in which the object of study has become known as a primarily superficial technological and amusement object, it is this research direction that is most necessary.

A "ride," etymologically dating to 1934, is defined as an "amusement park device," a definition which seems overly simplistic in terms of contemporary understandings of the term.[2] Rides include hundreds of types, ranging from iconic roller coasters, carousels, Ferris Wheels, dark rides, troikas (triple spinning rides), bumper cars, and drop rides, to more specific forms (denoted by a descriptive technological term or ride manufacturer name), including Waltzer, Tagada, UFO, orbiter, and helter skelter, among numerous others.[3] In contemporary times, this list has expanded to include rides that have a hybrid tendency in combining traditional amusement technology with video games, virtual and augmented reality, and multi-dimensional sensory designs. For all of the simplicity that is often attributed to them by academics and laypersons alike, the mere categorical and linguistic diversity of rides is an indication of the complex-

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2. "Ride," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=ride. It should be acknowledged that among theme park researchers there is general agreement that defining a ride—especially given its current status as a video game and VR-influenced entity—is a challenging undertaking. As well, it should be noted that researchers have suggested that there is a blurring that exists between the definition of a ride and that of an attraction, such as entertainment shows, performances, stunt shows, and the like. The hybridity of ride forms is recognized in the sections of this chapter that focus on film and video game influences.

3. Robert Cartmell, *The Incredible Scream Machine: A History of the Roller Coaster* (Bowling Green, OH: Amusement Park Books, 1987); Scott A. Lukas, *Theme Park* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 97–133; William Mangels, *The Outdoor Amusement Industry: From Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Vantage, 1952); Sacha Szabo, *Rausch und Rummel: Attraktionen auf Jahrmärkten und in Vergnügungsparks. Eine soziologische Kulturgeschichte* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839405666.

ity of the form being studied. Combining their technical and functional diversity with their relationship to theming, attraction design, and guest experience, we note that they are some of the most complex entities that exist in our amusement worlds.

This chapter develops a cultural understanding of the theme park ride—tracing the evolution of this technological, mechanical, and media form from its earliest instances at world's expositions and Coney Island amusement parks through its current transmediated and highly immersive examples. I chart the cultural, technological, and conceptual trajectories of the ride through an emphasis on four philosophical and conceptual eras: The Era of Kinetics (focusing on the machine), The Era of Narrative (emphasizing the influence of film on rides), The Era of Immersion (discussing the transformation of rides as video games), and The Era of the Transmechanical (in which the conceptual, existential, and transcendental contexts of rides are considered). Unlike chronological or historical epochs which consider such periods in their serial or evolutionary senses, the use of these eras is meant to focus the reader on conceptual, cultural, and methodological themes that have defined rides and that may allow future researchers opportunities for study that eschew the limited technological and consumerist foci often attributed to the research object.

The Era of Kinetics: Machine

One of the most seemingly profound descriptions of the amusement or theme park ride is that offered by technology—the material, engineered, and physics-based properties that appear to define numerous ride forms, especially the roller coaster. A brief perusal of the Internet using the search term "roller coaster" does not result in copious hits or results focused on operation and design, rather, a majority of results focus on the pleasures experienced on such rides and, most notably, the technical and scientific aspects of this iconic machine. One of the most common examples of the latter emphasis is a classroom activity that focuses on the

physics of roller coasters.[4] Such activities seek to meld students' interest in and excitement about roller coasters with the properties of engineering and physics, including speed, acceleration, and gravity, among other concepts. Related toys sold on Amazon, including the K'NEX Education STEM Explorations Roller Coaster Building Set, feature roller coaster cars without people, while other toys eschew cars for mere abstract marbles. Both toys, with their absent human riders, seem to suggest a disconnect of humans and pleasurable technology (if not a fear of it) as well as a need to reimagine the role, and indeed agency, of the roller coaster in the world as independent of human activity.[5] While it is understandable that the properties of physics evident in roller coasters should be the subject of awe, it is interesting to note that such a focus only solidifies the cultural construction of the roller coaster, and the ride more generally, as (primarily) an object of technology. As Heidegger warned, such a view of technology as an instrumental force of humans threatens to abnegate other meanings and constructions of our existence that may be imagined.[6]

In *The System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard notes that "technicity calls forth systematic cultural connotation."[7] Not unlike Marx's description of a table that breaks free from its functional and material form to become a commodity object,[8] Baudrillard offers that technological objects eventually move beyond their functional or defined forms to become objects of culture, noted by their relationships to myth,[9] allegory, atmosphere, values, social forms, and even transcendence.[10] In terms of the ride, Baudrillard's emphasis on the transformative potential of material objects beyond their functionality or technology is quite significant. To return to the roller coaster, we note the object's intermingling with a cultural tension of technology and human experience. Our inability to see the

4. Louise Spilsbury and Richard Spilsbury, *Ride that Rollercoaster!: Forces at an Amusement Park* (Chicago: Heinemann, 2015).

5. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

6. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1996).

7. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 1996), 47.

8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 163.

9. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006).

10. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 21, 47, 60, 79, 166.

roller coaster as anything other than its technological and engineering marvel suggests a psychological or existential gap between our enjoyment (*jouissance*) of the ride and its technological surplus. As Lacan, Žižek, and others have offered in terms of the *l'objet petit a*, there is a chasm that exists between ourselves and our experiences with the object at hand—the ride—and there is a certain symbolic surplus or excess that, though it escapes our understandings, makes for an apt focus for our analyses of the object.[11] As well, our inability to note the complexity of rides, as is the case with other machines and forms of technology in our world, results in our being unable to comprehend the complex energies and flows of such machines—whether these be technological, cultural, phenomenological, media-based, etc.—that provide opportunities for analyses of these forms of technology that eschew obvious meanings of function.[12]

Gazing at a machine like a roller coaster is, of course, a sight of incredible marvel. Iconic rides, including the Ferris Wheel, offer incredible alterations of human perspective for those riding, and they provide even those on the ground with a marvel to be witnessed.[13] The incredible visual and mechanical spectacles of rides like the roller coaster act as marketing opportunities for the contemporary theme park and as potential recruitment for park employees. Within the ride-training worlds of Six Flags AstroWorld, I became very familiar with the evocative semiotic mark that characterized the theme park ride. While some employees were hired on at the park to work in Grounds Quality or Security, many new hires said that they specifically wanted to work at AstroWorld in order to eventually become an operator of a roller coaster like the Texas Cyclone, Excalibur, or XLR-8. Within our training department, new employees underwent a general operations training that covered guest interaction strategies and

11. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: Norton, 2006); Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular* Culture (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

12. Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

13. Steven Johnson, "Ferris Wheel: Scott A. Lukas and the History of Theme Parks," June 4, 2020, in *American Innovations,* produced by Wondery, podcast, 30:59.

OSHA safety procedures.[14] Following the operations training, employees did on-the-job training and shadowing at their ride location. After a specific period of training, the employees would return to our training center, and we would give them a quiz specific to each of the park's rides. For those training to become a CRA (Certified Ride Attendant), the training and quiz was much briefer than that related to CRO (Certified Ride Operator) training. A CRA was tasked with performing height checks, operating the unloading or loading platforms, and greeting guests and controlling queue lines at larger rides. The CRO was responsible for operating the ride, and their training included knowledge of a very lengthy (in some cases one-hundred pages or more) manual that covered all aspects of running the ride, including safety procedures and evacuations. At times, political dynamics related to decisions made by management in terms of which workers could train and become a CRO existed, especially for popular rides like the world-famous Texas Cyclone. As well, personal sensibilities about the perceived hierarchy in the park in terms of being selected for a more prestigious CRO position often resulted in bad feelings among workers.[15]

For many workers, the realities of on-the-job rides training at AstroWorld resulted in a highly technological focus. Part of the reason for this was the practicality of training and work that focused on the ride as a machine, especially as safety (of workers and guests) was such a predominant concern.[16] For other workers, including many in rides who were promoted to supervisory positions, the love of the machine took on personal levels. One such manager whom I knew eventually trained to operate one of the park's running steam locomotives—which was considered the most challenging "ride" in the park—while another frequently engaged me about the literature he read in terms of historic roller coasters in the United States. While technology was a predominant focus for AstroWorld's social

14. Scott A. Lukas, "An American Theme Park: Working and Riding Out Fear in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Late Editions 6, Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*, ed. George Marcus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 405–428; Scott A. Lukas, "How the Theme Park Gets Its Power: Lived Theming, Social Control, and the Themed Worker Self," in *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation, and Self*, ed. Scott A. Lukas (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2007), 183–206.

15. Lukas, "How the Theme Park Gets Its Power."

16. Lukas, *Theme Park*, 117–118.

and organizational life, it was technological discourse tempered with elements that included personal relationships, (ride) history and nostalgia, and aspects of "emotional labor," such as war stories about dramatic work situations in one's ride location, that often dominated shared lived experiences at work.[17]

While much of the literature on theme parks and their rides suggests a certain mechanical nature that characterizes both the work of theme park employees and those guests who visit theme park rides and attractions,[18] reorienting this research vision of theme parks to the appreciation of the interpersonal dynamics and social intimacies is supported by the ethnographic observations of the quotidian activities of guests and workers.[19] Not unlike the rides of Coney Island amusement parks that provided opportunities for social effervescence over one hundred years ago, day-to-day operation of rides, after-hours employee-only rides parties in the park, and interaction with guests and park regulars all offered moments that prove the idea that forms of material culture (including machines) are capable of fostering and maintaining positive social dynamics.[20] I have referred to this context of sociality as a "social machine" in order to recognize that human dynamics relative to forms of park technology and machines are characterized by both spontaneous, expressive, and meaningful circumstances and dull, taxing, and alienating situations.[21] Assuming that Tayloristic, Disneyized, or McDonaldized qualities characterize all theme park human interactions that are grounded in mechanical and technological contexts is not supported by ethnographic observations of the social contexts of rides.[22]

17. Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Lukas, "How the Theme Park Gets Its Power."

18. Stephen M. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), 82; Norman M. Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* (New York: New Press, 2004), 11.

19. Lukas, *Theme Park*, 111, 115.

20. Lukas, *Theme Park*, 127–129; Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), 1.

21. Lukas, *Theme Park*, 127.

22. Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (London: Sage, 2004).

Of course, theme park rides do represent significant technological contexts that interface with cultural and philosophical concerns. As John Kasson noted in his study of Coney Island amusement parks, the numerous rides and electric lights of Coney not only suggested an interfacing of public amusement technology with everyday life (notably, the influence of transportation technology on amusement rides), they also ushered in a powerful aesthetic of spectacle, kinetics, and kinesthesia.[23] Additionally, as Lauren Rabinovitz has noted, one of the functions served by early twentieth-century amusement rides in the United States was to humanize emerging everyday technology along with the many "shocks of modernity" associated with this period.[24] While we should not ignore these significant technological trajectories of the ride, the construction of the amusement and theme park ride as a machine and object of pure technology has relegated other important cultural and philosophical issues to the background.

Returning to the tragic anecdote I mentioned earlier, in the aftermath of the Excalibur accident, some of the most common subjects of conversation among my AstroWorld colleagues were the specific dynamics of ride safety that were not followed during the incident. For any of us in operations training, our immediate contexts for the accident were the situations of the workers and procedures that were, or were not, followed. While the public often focuses on ride accidents as concerns of a technological nature, those in the industry understand that human error (whether of the guest or ride operator) is the primary reason for such accidents, not failed forms of technology. Curiously, and contrary to this fact, the ride accident may indeed be one case in which human actors attempt to imbue machines with negative values, even intent. Paralleling the Golden Age of Roller Coasters—a period in the 1920s in which a popular desire for roller coasters led to the existence of over 1,300 such

23. Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 49, 66, 73–74; Tony Bennett, "A Thousand and One Troubles: Blackpool Pleasure Beach," in *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 229–245; Michael DeAngelis, "Orchestrated (Dis)Orientation: Roller Coasters, Theme Parks, and Postmodernism," *Cultural Critique*, no. 37 (1997).

24. Lauren Rabinovitz, *Electric Dreamland: Amusement Parks, Movies, and American Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 12.

rides in the United States[25]—concerns emerged about rides, as well as the amusement venues that enclosed them, that ranged from polemics related to the immortality and vice that some believe were associated with them,[26] as well as the dangers that some felt were connected with such machines. During this period (in 1922), an editorial from *Engineering News-Record* spoke so harshly of such devices that its author called for a most dramatic measure: "Complete abolition of amusement machines is the only dependable guarantee against their dangers."[27] Amusement abolitionists and reformers, no doubt, had legitimate reasons to fear the effects of rides, especially the roller coaster. The infamous Crystal Beach Cyclone (1926–1946) was built by the legendary designer Harry G. Traver and was a ride that, due to its intense g-forces and design, led to numerous injuries and one (rider-related) death, an ironic fact given that the ride's safety was marketed to the public. In fact, the roller coaster included a nurse stationed at the unloading platform whose presence led to lowered insurance costs for Crystal Beach.[28] Amusement and theme park rides have maintained collective social interest not only for their mechanical thrills but also due to the ways in which they intertwine with our intimate lives, including, as in these contexts of death, their existential potentials.[29]

In the short story "MONSTER: The Roller Coaster," author B.J. Novak depicts a fictional meeting of the late artist Christo with twelve focus group members who are asked to ride and rate a roller coaster designed to represent everyday life. During the focus group session, some of the people "didn't like all the ups and downs," while others hated the constant "going in circles."[30] Others found the first half more fun than the second. In the end, when asked about the name of the roller coaster, some wanted

25. Judith Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 17.

26. Rabinovitz, *Electric Dreamland*, 44.

27. "Dangerous Amusement Devices," *Engineering News-Record* 88, no. 25 (June 22, 1922): 1022.

28. Richard W. Munch, *Harry G. Traver: Legends of Terror* (Mentor, OH: Amusement Park Books, 1982), 78.

29. Lukas, "The Theme Park and the Figure of Death"; Lukas, *Theme Park*; Scott A. Lukas, "The Dark Theme Park," *In Media Res*, September 21, 2020, http://mediacommons.org/imr/content/dark-theme-park.

30. B.J. Novak, "MONSTER: The Roller Coaster," in *One More Thing: Stories and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2015).

to call it "Life," but the most popular choices were "Monster" and "MON-STER" (written in all caps). Novak's short, humorous story about a ride paralleling the ups and downs of life is especially apt as terms like "theme park" and "roller coaster" have become part of everyday vernacular and metaphor.[31] Rides, and their metonymic partners in theme parks, project an existential meaning that is often lost among researchers who have focused on mechanical contexts of such amusements and their related social dynamics. In a less humorous context, the George A. Romero film *The Amusement Park* (1975) uses amusement park rides and attractions as metaphors for aging, ageism, and elder abuse. Romero's horror narrative, not unlike similar themes developed in the films *Rollercoaster* (1977) and *Thrill* (1996), is more shocking given his skillful use of amusement park rides and attractions as machines of real and metaphorical terror. In addressing the existential and conceptual sides of rides, many of these fictional contexts remind us of a second significant era of the ride—its relationship to film.

The Era of Narrative: Film

A few years ago, while taking part in a German theme park studies group research trip (see image 4.1) to Phantasialand in Brühl, Germany, I had the opportunity to ride the park's Hollywood Tour. As described on the park's website, "This themed water ride gives the whole family the chance to relive from [*sic*] famous Hollywood scenes from a brand new perspective."[32] The ride, seemingly a similar version of Disney's The Great Movie Ride, employs multi-passenger boats to take guests on a slow and meandering journey through Hollywood movie history. Though I recognized a few of the films—*Jaws*, *Tarantula*, *Sinbad the Sailor*, *Frankenstein*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Tarzan*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *King Kong*—I found myself asking many of my German co-investigators which movie was being presented. To the credit of the ride's designers, the boat ride fea-

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31. Lukas, *Theme Park*, 216.
32. Phantasialand, "Hollywood Tour – Phantasialand," https://www.phantasialand.de/en/theme-park/one-of-a-kind-attractions/hollywood-tour/.

tures some evocative cave scenography, immersive audio, and some aesthetic uses of lighting, but the overall effect of the ride—as an amalgam of film history and theme park rides—is to remind of the perilous relationship that may be noted in terms of cinema and theme park rides.[33]

The ride's use of incredibly sparse movie scenes—for example, the *Jaws*-themed portion includes memes of "fishing village" and "shark fin in water," among others—offers an opportunity to analyze the many forms of culture that impact our understandings of symbols and the nature of the symbolic order that is a part of the media and consumer worlds shared by film and theme parks.[34] In the ride's *Tarantula* scene, prior to entering the action involving a giant monster tarantula and a helicopter, the audio cues riders to the cinematic nature of the ride with the words "action," all the while presenting a movie crew to the left of the action that is engaged in creating the film. In this meta moment, the ride offers an opportunity to consider the issues of mediation, transmediation, and intellectual property that are intertwined in the study of the relationships of film and theme park rides. As well, a number of the film scenes include short actor dialogues from the films (spoken in German), though like the visual memes in *Jaws*, do not really establish much in terms of storytelling, either in reference to the film citations or the story of Hollywood Tour itself as a ride. The pacing of the ride, unlike other rides and many of the action films it portrays, is incredibly slow at twelve minutes, and one movie scene in particular—in which the monster from *King Kong* slowly torments a man on a boat with only a few audio grunts and some minor oscillating fingers as signs of Kong's "menace"—provides a sense of pure disconnection between the guest and the film portrayed and the ride that traverses the Hollywood scenes.

33. Florian Freitag, "Movies, Rides, Immersion," in *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*, ed. Scott A. Lukas (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016), 125-130; Florian Freitag, "'Like Walking into a Movie': Intermedial Relations Between Theme Parks and Movies," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50, no. 4 (August 2017): 704–722; Scott A. Lukas, "The Cinematic Theme Park," unpublished manuscript, 2009.
34. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

Image 4.1. *Researchers from the German theme park studies group conduct in situ research at the Talocan ride at Phantasialand in Brühl, Germany. The ride has been noted as being the world's greatest flat ride, and it includes pyrotechnics, water, lighting, and sound effects, elements which suggest a significant impact of filmic effects on rides. Credit: Scott A. Lukas.*

Following our group's debarking of the ride, as we would do all day on other rides, we discussed our impressions of the ride, issues of immersion, and comparisons with other rides, such as the Great Movie Ride. My immediate feeling upon completing the ride experience was that the "brand new perspective" described by Phantasialand in its description of the ride was less a perspective derived from filmmaking or ride engineering, but psychology and philosophy. In the moment of the scene of Kong's oscillating fingers, I was struck at how uncanny it was. In Freud's sense of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), one notes "a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it," while Jentsch offers the characteristic of being not at ease, not at home, a foreign quality, or "a lack of orientation."[35] The uncanny as embodied in this ride scene was the reduction of filmmaking's immersive narrative potentials and the theme park ride's ability to create corporeal, evocative, and sensory effects to a mere symbolic form. There was no movie magic in the films portrayed,

35. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917–1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: Hogarth, 1955), 15; Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2, no. 1 (1997), 8.

nor any thrills from the slow-moving ride, instead, as Lacan noted of disruptions in the symbolic order, at certain moments individuals are reminded not of the thing itself as it is happening or unfolding, but of other contexts which are tied, as referents, to the symbols at play.[36] While many studies of the relationship between film and theme parks (and their rides) suggest a simplified form of mediation between these forms—noted in phrases like "riding the movie"[37]—as the unintentional forms of the uncanny on Hollywood Tour illustrate, the ways in which the conceptual, symbolic, technological, and immersive orders of films and rides inter-penetrate one another are complex, multifaceted, and even contradictory.

In the early 1900s, a similarly jarring ride journey was offered to guests at the Pan-American Exposition of 1901 in Buffalo, New York. A Trip to the Moon, designed by the amusement architect and visionary Frederic Thompson, is considered by many to be the world's most significant early dark ride. As Woody Register describes, the ride—which included a space-ship suspended from wires—was revolutionary for its use of lighting, faux scenery and projections, and notable multi-sensory technologies includ-ing sound and blown air.[38] Following its appearance at the Pan-American Exposition of 1901, the ride was moved to George Tilyou's Steeplechase Park and, later, to Luna Park. In all of its versions, A Trip to the Moon was successful with guests not just due to the technological and media inno-vations that it included, but due to its relationship to storytelling and narrativization. Researchers have suggested that the ride's connection to

36. Lacan, *Ecrits*.

37. Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 57; Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, 11, 257.

38. Woody Register, *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 69–75.

both literary (Jules Verne's *A Voyage to the Moon* and H.G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon*) and filmic (*A Trip to the Moon* by Georges Méliès)[39] texts represents a significant moment in terms of the evolution of the amusement and theme park ride.[40]

Register's focus on the literary influences behind the A Trip to the Moon ride are particularly interesting for this study as they point to an often overlooked dynamic in the relationships of film and rides—that of the narrative. The inclusion of a narrative that depicts setting, characterization, and plot was a development that equally transformed film of the era (as it moved from films like those of the Lumière brothers that depicted a naturalized, and sometimes, non-narrative everyday life) and amusement park rides (that often relied on pure mechanical force devoid of narrative of storytelling) of the era. Clearly, A Trip to the Moon broke with the conceptualization of the ride as a pure form of technology—a "rigid machine" that declines the possibility of the ride even having narrative or storytelling functions beyond those of its pure mechanical state.[41] The attraction illustrates the early signs of the ride's later evolution as both a filmic entity and a transmediated property, especially in the intertextuality of the form that it shares with literature and film, and in its overall framing as a "text" to be shared among media forms.[42] This sharing among media forms will result in later dynamics of ride and filmic remaking,[43] including

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39. It should be recognized that a number of researchers have suggested that Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* influenced Thompson's ride of the same name. I have been unable to find written documentation of Thompson stating that the film had a direct effect on the ride. Nevertheless, connections of these two media forms focused on a similar subject seem worthy of consideration.

40. Judith Maloney, "Fly Me to the Moon: A Survey of American Historical and Contemporary Simulation Entertainments," *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 6, no. 5 (1997), 565–580; Angela Ndalianis, "Dark Rides, Hybrid Machines and the Horror Experience," in *Horror Zone: The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror Cinema*, ed. Ian Conrich (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 25, 23; Register, *The Kid of Coney Island*, 72.

41. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 16, 23, 24.

42. Lukas, *Theme Park*, 212–245.

43. The use of the term "adaptation" to describe many of the media relationships in this chapter—including those specific to theme parks, film, and video games—may serve to conceal or obscure the uncanny, and sometimes contradictory, relationships between media forms that appear to be "adapted." The etymology of this word suggests joining, fitting, and adjusting, which may be seen by some as a rather harmonious process as a theme park ride becomes a film or a film becomes a theme park ride. "Adaptation," *Online Etymology Dictionary,* https://www.etymonline.com/word/adaptation#etymonline_v_25997. Considering the relationships, borrowings, and intertextual mingling

intermediality and transmediation (such as in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Jungle Cruise* media universes), films imitating rides (as in the use of Sensurround low-frequency audio effects in the theatrical film *Roller-coaster*), the growth of ride-video game hybridity, and increasing influences of transmedia on these many connected media forms.[44]

One of the most significant concerns in terms of the evolution of the ride as a filmic entity has been what may be called a "shared spatial aesthetic" or "sensorial reorientation" between rides and film.[45] As Rabinovitz has noted in her study of the evolution of early 1900s American amusement, a shared simultaneity of moviegoing and amusement park going provided opportunities for the expectations of guests (who today desire filmic approaches in theme park rides) to be developed in those earlier times.[46] There is a variety of comparisons that have been made in terms of the ride-film symbiosis that has been noted since the days of A Trip to the Moon. As already discussed, forms of narrativization (in which a "rigid" ride machine is given narrative development) and storytelling are noted in both film and ride forms. In some cases, as in transmedia developments in media, stories are multi-spatial and polyvocal as fans are asked to consider narratives that span multiple media forms (such as in the Harry

of these media forms and their stories and narratives more in terms of "remaking" (etymologically implying a movement of forces back and forth, movement away, and undoing) may allow us to see, as Freitag suggests, that the process of inter- and transmediality is never a one-to-one dialogue between different media forms. Freitag, "'Like Walking into a Movie'"; Scott A. Lukas, "A Case for Remakes, the State of 'Re,'" unpublished manuscript, 2013.

44. Scott A. Lukas, "Horror Video Game Remakes and the Question of Medium: Remaking Doom, Silent Hill, and Resident Evil," in *Fear, Cultural Anxiety and Transformation: Horror, Science Fiction and Fantasy Films Remade*, eds. Scott A. Lukas and John Marmysz (Lanham, NH: Lexington, 2009), 221–242; Scott A. Lukas, "Theming and Immersion in the Space of the Future," in *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*, ed. Scott A. Lukas (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016), 289–300; Bobby Schweizer and Celia Pearce, "Remediation on the High Seas: A Pirates of the Caribbean Odyssey," in *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*, ed. Scott A. Lukas (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016), 95–106.

45. Vince Dziekan and Joel Zika, "The Dark Ride: The Attraction of Early Immersive Environments and Their Importance in Contemporary New Media Installations," *Mesh Issue #18: Experimenta Vanishing Point* (2005): 21; Rabinovitz, *Electric Dreamland*, 11.

46. Rabinovitz, *Electric Dreamland*, 19.

Potter transmedia universe).[47] Specific technological and technical similarities of the two forms—including pacing, editing, camera angles and perspective, staging, lighting and design, and sound effects—have also been noted as major transmediated connections.[48] These borrowings are made even more significant in the third iteration of the ride as a video game in which transmediated and technological interplay continues to evolve.[49] An additional significant context is the degree to which individual rides cinematically relate to other rides, attractions, and themelands in the theme park as a whole and the role that workers play in forms of acting and themed dramaturgy that augment the filmic effects of rides.[50] While these significant forms of transmediation and dialogue between film and theme park rides should maintain a significant hold on our research agendas, we should be weary of simplifications that emerge in the tendency to assume one-to-one borrowing, seamless and invisible forms of adaption or remaking in the two forms, and unproblematized notions of shared media synergy.[51] In fact, to return to the work of Lacan and his notion of "the beyond-of-the-signified" and, in this case, the circumstance of the creation and diffusion of the object called "ride," we should be encouraged to understand how the transformations of the ride described in this work are emblematic of the general conditions of transmediation and virtuality. The synergies of the ride and transmedia are not only reflections of Lacan's Symbolic—especially as they illustrate a realm of conceptual meaning that eludes us infinitely—they are indications of

47. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Rebecca Williams, *Theme Park Fandom: Spatial Transmedia, Materiality and Participatory Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

48. J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999); Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*; Freitag, "Movies, Rides, Immersion"; Freitag, "'Like Walking into a Movie'"; Lukas, *Theme Park*, 126; Maloney, "Fly Me to the Moon"; Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck;* Ndalianis, "Dark Rides"; Jessica Balanzategui and Angela Ndalianis, "'Being Inside the Movie': 1990s Theme Park Ride Films and Immersive Film Experiences," *The Velvet Light Trap* 84 (Fall 2019): 18–33.

49. Bobby Schweizer, "Visiting the Videogame Theme Park," *Wide Screen* 6, no. 1 (2016).

50. Lukas, "How the Theme Park Gets Its Power," 183, 191–194.

51. As Freitag notes, a theme park—like theater, cinema, and opera—functions as a hybrid medium, a composite medium, or even a meta-medium. One immediate concern of its trans- and intermediality and its relationship with other media like cinema is the "indirect participation of a distinct medium in an artifact that is realized in another medium." Freitag, "'Like Walking into a Movie,'" 706, 708. See also, Freitag, "Movies, Rides, Immersion"; Lukas, *Theme Park*, 126; Lukas, "The Cinematic Theme Park."

the challenging role offered to the theorist of the transmediated ride as she is conceptually pulled by the *objet petit a* and a desire to understand the ride's "otherness," to consider the multiple, contradictory, and elusive meanings that emerge in the apotheosis of the ride as a transmediated and virtual form.[52]

Borrowing from music and the distinction of absolute and program music, we may speak of the ride's tension as a device that oscillates between a mechanical, un-themed, thrilling focus and a narrative-based, story-driven, themed experience. In my ethnographic experiences at AstroWorld, a common experience for our training department staff was to refer to the inferiority of Disney rides through the claim that they weren't rides at all. All of the theming, storytelling, and transmedia augmentation common in Disney rides was argued to be distracting for guests who want to experience the pure kinetics, adrenaline, and thrills of a non-narrativized, non-story-based AstroWorld ride.[53] In a psychoanalytical sense, we were dealing with the perceived lack of Disney capital and IP (intellectual property) at our park by focusing on the "arbitrary" nature of Disney ride semiotics.[54] Thus, we return to a tension noted in the distinctions between the Ride as Machine and the Ride as Film. The arbitrary (Saussuarian) narratives that develop in the midst of the film-ride relationship also remind of the idea of the power of "dream objects" as they relate to human involvement in such ride narratives.[55] As the example of Disney ride inferiority at AstroWorld illustrates, the stories

52. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960* (New York: Norton, 1997); Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 83; Žižek, *Looking Awry*.

53. It should be noted that this situation is also descriptive of the general differences between amusement and theme parks. While an amusement park is often a collection of rides that are typically un-themed or not given a narrative or storyline—and in which the rides and attractions themselves are not bound up in larger narratives, such as those of themelands—a theme park is viewed as a space that takes full advantage of narratives, stories, and themes that help situate and orient the guest in its spaces. See Lukas, *Theme Park*.

54. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*; Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2007), 88.

55. Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 177. Saussure's notion of the arbitrary nature of language, namely the idea of there being no motivated or intrinsic connection between signifier and signified, contrasts with semiotic approaches like those of Charles Sanders Pierce and others who suggest more motivated or natural connections between signifier and signified. For more, see Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1998); and Hubert Kowalewski, "Against Arbitrariness: An Alternative Approach Towards Motivation of the Sign," *Public Journal of Semiotics* 6, no. 2 (2015): 14–31.

told (and not told) through rides mark a significant connection of the ride with its "audience," not unlike the audience or interpretive communities implied in literature with reader-response theory.[56] As a dream object, a ride not only reminds us of the powerful narratives that are told about (and through) rides but how a ride (to predict the era of the Ride as Trans-mechanical) provides levels of transcendence for both its related human communities and, perhaps, itself, in terms of Object Oriented Ontology.[57]
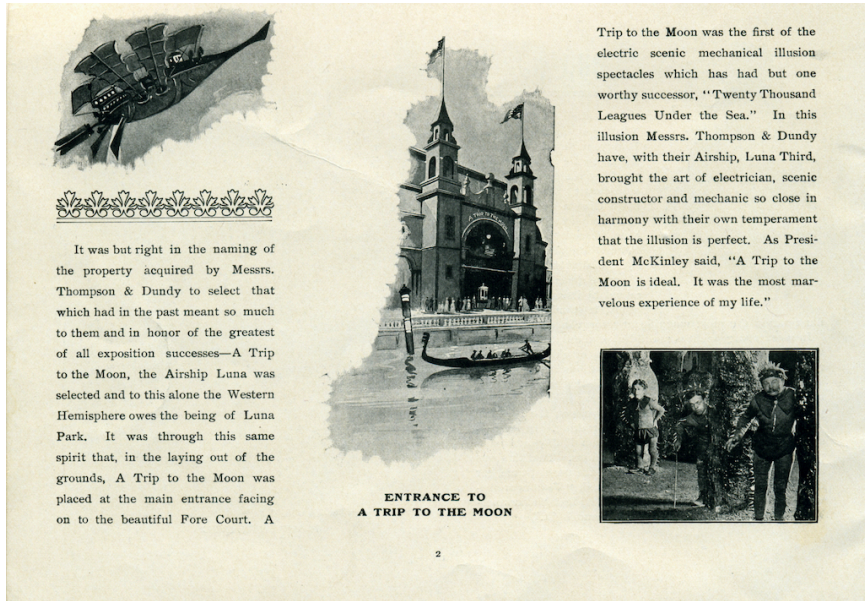

Image 4.2. A still from the official program, Luna Park: The Electric City by the Sea. Credit: Public Domain.

The pictured image (see image 4.2) is one example of the status of a ride as it achieves the state of a dream object. This particular image of a page featuring A Trip to the Moon is from the longer official Luna Park program. I obtained this piece of Coney Island memorabilia following a very intense and expensive bidding war with other potential buyers on the popular eBay platform. During a recent, near evacuation due to a wildfire

56. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).
57. Barthes, *Mythologies;* Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 79; Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (New York: Pelican, 2018); Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 175; Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*.

near my home, this was one of the prized objects that I chose to pack in the car in case of evacuation. It was, and still is, a cherished amusement park item that, in my mind, maintains a great deal of mana, authority, or power, as it reflects back on the era of classic amusement rides like A Trip to the Moon. For many fans, designers, and ride workers, my obsessive experience with a piece of ride memorabilia would likely not seem that bizarre. As many researchers of antiques and material culture have noted, certain objects carry with them a remainder of what they were once connected to—an authentic projection to the past that still gives the holder of the object a sense of power in the present.[58] For many ride (and more general theme park) fans, forms of material culture (such as in examples of Disneyana collecting of pins or other park memorabilia and in examples of the hoarding of theme park maps and press kits), the creation of scale roller coaster models (or even backyard, full-sized working versions of them), memories of theme park visits or first-person ride experiences (including those documented on YouTube and theme park blogs),[59] and the experiences themselves involved in seemingly obsessive visiting of theme parks and riding of their rides (as in the case of groups like ACE, the American Coaster Enthusiasts or RCCGB, the Roller Coaster Club of Great Britain), all point to a certain form of material and experiential fandom that has developed in the synergies of film and rides.[60]

While the fans of theme park rides are perhaps not as dedicated as Trekkers, Comic Con attendees, or fans of particular movies, transmedia franchises, or celebrities, they share with these others a clear purpose that is founded on the machines, experiences, technologies, and stories that are developed in the unique worlds of theme parks and their attractions.[61] For cultural critics, the level of dedication of such fans is a cause

58. Stewart, *On Longing*, 175.

59. An interesting version of the experiential rides video is the project initiated by Joel Zika which attempts to document vanishing dark rides through high-tech, 3D video recordings. "This Unique Project Is Using Virtual Reality to Document the Fast-Disappearing Haunted Rides of America," *Outlook India*, July 27, 2020.

60. Lukas, *Theme Park*, 212–245; Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*.

61. Many theme park researchers would, in fact, argue that theme park fandom does represent a very committed and engaged community that parallels these other communities. See Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*.

for concern.[62] While enamored with the theme park dream object, we face dangers similar to those noted in cinematic spectatorship. As some have suggested, the pleasure of film and its immersive sense of transparency may result in an inability to identify the ideological layers that exist beneath the film.[63] The next section on the theme park as video game will address the dangers of immersion that are present in moments of media "hallucination," but, in short, we may say that the dangers of interfacing with rides—like those of viewing films—have led some to suggest that the technology of rides, their connection to consumerist values, and their overall hegemony as realized in passive and nonautonomous riders results in problematic socio-political and ideological conditions.[64] Of course, such views seem to ignore the ways in which participants in consumerist and entertainment activities like those of theme parks do display agency and autonomy in terms of their interfacing with the various forms of material culture, technology, media, and theme park narratives.[65] Some examples of such agency are the many fan petitions and active social media and journalistic engagements related to concerns about the racist and sexist narratives of beloved Disney rides like Splash Mountain, Pirates of the Caribbean, and Jungle Cruise.[66]

Perhaps in line with what the poet Hölderlin offered in "Patmos," "But where the danger is, also grows the saving power": we should both admire and be cautious of the sorts of theme park dream objects that float in and out of our consciousness. One possibility for future studies of the interfacing of film and theme park rides is the growing movement that has included focus on the performative sides of rides and their related themed

62. Scott A. Lukas, "Judgments Passed: The Place of the Themed Space in the Contemporary World of Remaking," in *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*, ed. Scott A. Lukas (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016), 257–268.

63. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Winter 1974-1975), 39–47; Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*; Sherry Turkle, ed. *Simulation and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).

64. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, 11; Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas*, 1, 8, 11.

65. Lukas, "Judgments Passed"; Scott A. Lukas, "A Consumer Public Sphere: Considering Activist and Environmental Narratives in the Contexts of Themed and Consumer Spaces," in *Environmental Philosophy, Politics, and Policy*, ed. John Duerk (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2021), 159–176; Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*.

66. Katie Scott, "Disney to Change Splash Mountain Theme amid Outcry over 1946 Movie," *Global News*, June 25, 2020, https://globalnews.ca/news/7107801/splash-mountain-changing/.

venues, including discussions of dramaturgy, theatricality, and performance theory.[67] As related to political and hegemonic concerns, analyses of ride narratology and performativity might interface with important questions that have been raised in terms of theme park rides and their impacts on individual freedom and autonomy.[68] Combining these foci, we might imagine that future studies of the ride will emphasize the ethnographic experiences of rides while also paying close attention to critical cultural and political analyses of narratives, dramaturgy, and stories. Such research emphases are especially valuable as rides have now moved into a new era in which they are interfacing with the immersive technologies of video games and virtual and augmented reality—a potentially even more immersive and ideologically problematic medium than film.

The Era of Immersion: Video Games

One of the greatest immersive rides that I have experienced is no longer in existence. In 2019, I paid my admission to take part in the Void Secrets of the Empire experience at the Venetian Las Vegas.[69] Like many contemporary transmedia rides, the Void promised an experience that was immersive. Its opening experience paralleled the establishing videos that accompany the queues and waiting areas that one expects prior to boarding a ride, but what took place in the moments following a short *Star Wars* video was entirely unexpected. A ride attendant gets me situated with equipment that includes VR goggles, stereoscopic sound technology near the ears, and a bodysuit that includes haptic response devices that I would later discover are used to indicate an enemy weapon's hit to my avatar. Following some instructions from the attendant, I was led into the first of many rooms that are all themed with the *Star Wars* transme-

67. Filippo Carla and Florian Freitag, "Ancient Greek Culture and Myth in the Terra Mítica Theme Park," *Classical Receptions Journal* (2014): 1–18; Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson, eds. *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Ariane Schwarz, "Staging the Gaze - The Water Coaster Poseidon as an Example of Staging Strategies in Theme Parks," in *Time and Temporality in Theme Parks*, eds. Filippo Carlà-Uhink, Florian Freitag, Sabrina Mittermeier, and Ariane Schwarz (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2017); Maurya Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
68. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*.
69. Austin Craig, "Will The VOID, the Utah Based Global Leader in Location-Based VR, Survive the Pandemic?" *Tech Buzz News*, October 13, 2020, https://techbuzz.news/will-the-void-die-by-covid-/.

dia brand. At this point, my VR goggles are completely covering my eyes and I experience a sense of disorientation as I am immersed in the ride's scenography. When instructed, I pick up a laser assault rifle that I would need to complete the gaming experiences in Secrets of the Empire. The most uncanny aspect of the initial moments of the ride was the presumed open-world/sandbox freedom of walking within the spaces of the drama and the fact that I was able to touch objects (like the robot R2-D2) and actually feel those objects with my hands. During a few moments, I raise my VR visor to discover dull, gray painted walls and a similarly undetailed shape of R2-D2 without any of the visual adornments that I note when I pull my VR visor back down. As I move through the many sets of the experience, I have the feeling that I am moving through an actual series of spaces, and as enemy Stormtroopers shoot at me, I feel a slight jolt through the haptic technology of my suit. While I have the sensation of walking through an expansive series of spaces, I later discover that I have been walking in a circle and subject to a technique called redirected walking.[70]

Following my visit to the Void, I had hoped to return and experience this new virtual- and game-based ride (often called a LBVR, or location-based virtual reality ride) with one of the other software possibilities—notably, a horror experience focused on the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Unfortunately, some two years later and well into the COVID-19 pandemic, I discovered that the Las Vegas location of the Void, along with all other locations, had been permanently shuttered. The Void represented something that I had begun to research in 2015 at the IAAPA (The International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions) Expo in Orlando, Florida.[71] At that time, I had started to note that the attractions being displayed at the many industry booths and demonstrations were beginning to focus on a hybridity of ride and video game. It appeared

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70. For more on the interplay of the physical and virtual components of the Void, see Rachel Metz, "Inside the First VR Theme Park," *MIT Technology Review*, December 15, 2015, https://www.technologyreview.com/2015/12/15/71958/inside-the-first-vr-theme-park/.

71. Scott A. Lukas, "Theming and Immersion in the Space of the Future."

that the entire lexicon expressed by the amusement industry was reflecting new tendencies—those moving beyond the potentials of film and now marking a desire for greater interactivity, new perspectives, and possibilities for non-linear and customizable guest experiences.

In the early 1900s, and much earlier in amusement history than has been imagined, one notes the development of an amusement rides and attractions arms race or a focus on achieving the greatest level of "infinite variety" at the many competing parks of Coney Island.[72] Steeplechase impresario George Tilyou realized the fickle nature of amusement park guests and understood the need to up the competition with a Ferris Wheel many feet taller than the competitor's or an immersive dark ride more immersive, spectacular, and thrilling than that of the neighboring amusement park.[73] In the contemporary transmedia world of theme parks, the desire for greater amusement and entertainment variety for guests is also fueled by an understanding of incredible competition among media forms. NordicTrack iFIT home exercise equipment, new interactive home media like Netflix's *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (an interactive, choose-your-own-adventure-styled film), advances in PlayStation and Xbox gaming systems, and the growth of augmented and virtual reality technologies and spaces (such as Facebook's Horizon Workrooms metaverse) are examples of transformations of media and experience that are occurring in sectors outside of, yet connected to, the spaces of theme parks.[74] As many have noted, a general push for gamification in our consumer and media worlds has led to notable transformations in the nature of theme parks and their ride experiences.[75]

72. Edo McCullough, *Good Old Coney Island: A Sentimental Journey into the Past* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 309.

73. Ibid., 155.

74. Scott A. Lukas, "COVID-19 and Immersion: Physical, Virtual, and Home Spaces," *Journal of Themed Experience and Attractions Studies*, no. 2 (2022).

75. Lance Hart, "Ready Player One? The Rise of Theme Park Gamification," *Blooloop*, February 11, 2021; Schweizer, "Visiting the Videogame Theme Park"; Ellen Lupton, *Design Is Storytelling* (New York: Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, 2017).

Fear the Walking Dead Survival in Las Vegas, Nevada, is an example of a new ride that illustrates many tendencies of gamification and ride-video game hybridity. Not unlike the fate of the Void, Fear the Walking Dead Survival did not last the test of time and closed less than two years after opening. While Fear the Walking Dead Survival opened in a small space, it offered opportunities of transmedia connection that have become popular with Disney and Universal theme parks, including the *Avatar*, *Star Wars*, and Harry Potter franchises. Using the media world of *The Walking Dead* as a backdrop, the attraction included a number of new experiential and media features that suggest the direction of today's emerging ride-video game theme park. The experience began with an interior setting with live actors who established some of the zombie escape narrative that took place in the remainder of the ride. Additional spaces within Fear the Walking Dead Survival included a maze, a brief escape room puzzle, and a finale that combined a dark ride with a FPS (first-person shooter) video game experience. While *The Walking Dead* fans' and other guests' reactions to the experience was mixed, Fear the Walking Dead Survival exhibited the understanding that contemporary rides and their amusements must follow a much more hybrid and multi-experiential path than previous rides.

As the theme park ride continues its journey, the transformations noted are directly referenced in industry displays and presentations, like those noted at IAAPA, and in corporate marketing materials. In fact, many ride manufacturers, such as Sally Rides, directly identify this shift to more gamified and virtual ride experiences on their websites:

Classic Storytelling—sit back, relax and get lost in an imaginative story complimented with beautiful set pieces and animatronics.

Interactive Gaming—practical targets and vivid scenery boost repeat ridership and friendly competition.

Mixed-Media—combining storytelling, interactive media, and immersive environments to create a larger-than-life experience.[76]

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76. "Interactive Dark Rides for Museums, Exhibits, Theme Parks & More," *Sally Dark Rides,* 2021 https://www.sallydarkrides.com/dark-rides.

With the exception of the "mechanical ride," Sally's typology of dark rides parallels the eras of the theme park ride discussed in this work. As well, the focus on interactive gaming and mixed media illustrates the understanding that today's theme park experience is notably different than that of the earlier eras of rides. Some of the many tendencies noted in the evolution of the ride-video game hybrid include augmented reality and apps (such as in lessening queue line boredom by extending gamification to smart phone experiences); multi-sensory and new immersive technologies (noted in the Avatar Flight of Passage ride at Disney's Animal Kingdom, which includes haptic, multi-sensory, and virtual reality experiences); video game perspectives and experiences (including expansion of the popularity of first-person shooter genres on rides);[77] greater focus on guest goals, quests, and problem solving (such as in immersive escape rooms); and non-linear forms of storytelling and desires for open-world or sandbox styled experiences (including more customized and guest-driven storytelling, perhaps mimicking the Ocean Medallion by Princess Cruises and its big-data and sensor driven technologies and those that reflect "open work" tendencies).[78] Complications of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2019 and onward will, no doubt, continue to have a dramatic impact on all aspects of amusement and entertainment attraction design,[79] but many of the transformations noted in this era of the theme park ride connect with possibilities of adaptation found during the COVID-19 pandemic, most notably the movement of more forms of entertainment to hybrid, or even fully virtual, experiences and metaverses (such as Swamp Motel's online immersive escape room/theatrical experiences).[80]

77. Scott A. Lukas, "Behind the Barrel: Reading the Cultural History of the Gun in Video Games," in *Joystick Soldiers: The Military/War Video Games Reader*, eds. Nina Huntemann and Matt Payne (New York: Routledge, 2008), 75–90.

78. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

79. Scott A. Lukas, "On Architecture, Entertainment, and Discomfort," *The Right Angle Journal* 3, no. 4 (Summer 2020), 6–8; Lukas, "COVID-19 and Immersion."

80. Katie Collins, "Swamp Motel's Escape Room/Scavenger Hunt Mashup Is the Most Fun I've Had in a Year," *CNET*, March 14, 2021.

As noted, future instances of the ride-video hybrid will tap into the powerful potentials found at the intersections of fandom, convergence culture, spreadable media, and transmedia.[81] Studies of the transmedia influences on contemporary theme park rides have noted that the connections of rides to narrative spaces (and all of their auto-textual poaching, transmedia referencing, and citations) provide for both storytelling and technological experiences that did not exist in the amusement worlds of the past.[82] In a world more and more characterized by forms of remediation—in which we note more complex intermingling of subject, object, and medium and a self that exists through networks of transmediated associations—the types of rides that will be developed will certainly be founded on many of these possibilities.[83] With such developments, researchers of these rides, media forms, and their guest experiences will need to take into account these complex contexts and the "saturated" guests who take part in them.[84] As noted in the final section of this chapter, attention to such complexities within methodological worlds of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) may be warranted.

For some, however, the excitement about the contemporary ride's transmediated nature may not be reason for celebration. As noted with the Void, Fear the Walking Dead Survival, and the video-game-based DisneyQuest before them, the lives of the ride-video game's hybrid form have often been short. In a transmedia world, successes in one media form or genre do not guarantee successes in another, even if familiarity with the narrative worlds shared by the media are noted in those experiencing the different forms.[85] One notable issue is the degree to which "mediaplay" (as in gameplay) translates from one form to the other.

81. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*; Williams, *Theme Park Fandom*.

82. Schweizer and Pearce, "Remediation on the High Seas"; Hal Sundt, "The Quest for the Best Amusement Park Is Ever-Changing and Never-Ending," *The Ringer*, February 20, 2020.

83. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 58, 232.

84. Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

85. Lukas, "Behind the Barrel"; Lukas, "Horror Video Game Remakes"; Ndalianis, "Dark Rides"; Schweizer, "Visiting the Videogame Theme Park."

In 2008, during a behind-the-scenes tour of Disney's Toy Story Midway Mania ride at Walt Disney World, I spoke with a number of industry and academic researchers of theme parks who noted concerns with the ride's interactive form of video game gun as being too "gamelike" and distracting in terms of their expectations with traditional dark rides. In their minds, it appeared that the ride's appeal to gaming drew attention to itself both as a conceptual category and a technological form that did not authentically capture the enjoyable essences of either rides or video games. I was not surprised to hear these critiques of the ride, especially since notions of video games as "killing machines" were in vogue during this period,[86] but what did surprise me was the unwillingness of some of these observers to see Disney's Toy Story Midway Mania ride as merely the latest form of the theme park ride's evolution. An important reminder in this instance of ride-game synergy is that—not unlike notions of authenticity in philosophy in which one imagines the creation of an authentic self, fashioned in ways unencumbered by outside or inauthentic influences—future synergies of rides, media forms, and technologies could be developed in senses that avoid the breakdowns in the suspension of disbelief noted by riders experiencing Toy Story Midway Mania.[87]

Not unlike these concerns with the ride-video game hybrid form, many contemporary social critics have decried the theme park and its rides for their involvement in "the replacement of reality with selective fantasy."[88] Beginning in the 1900s with the proto-theme parks of Coney Island, social critics expressed concern about these parks, their attractions, and the direction they were taking society. One polemic written by the Russian author Maxim Gorky noted danger in the intoxicating and hallucinogenic potentials of Coney Island's amusements. As he wrote:

86. Dave Grossman and Gloria DeGaetano, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie, and Video Game Violence* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).
87. Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
88. Ada Louise Huxtable, *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion* (New York: New Press, 1997), 14.

Everything whirls and dazzles, and blends into a tempestuous ferment of fiery foam. The visitor is stunned; his consciousness is withered by the intense gleam; his thoughts are routed from his mind; he becomes a particle in the crowd. People wander about in the flashing, blinding fire intoxicated and devoid of will. A dull-white mist penetrates their brains, greedy expectation envelops their souls.[89]

Many years after Gorky's words were written, popular films like *Westworld* (1973) and *Futureworld* (1976) expressed a growing collective view that the immersive potentials of theme parks may result in disastrous effects on society. Taken as a metaphor of concern about the dangers of immersive technology, a later film, *Escape from Tomorrow* (2013), famous for its guerrilla filming techniques that included shooting segments of the film at Disneyland and Walt Disney World without permission from the Walt Disney Company, includes a memorable scene in which it is revealed to the protagonist that Epcot's Spaceship Earth is the site in which elaborate psychological experiments are being conducted on him—notably, through Disney's numerous rides and attractions. The dangers that theme parks represent to the consciousness of the guest, as expressed in all of these films, confirm many of the views of contemporary researchers who have suggested that duplicity, hegemony, and consumerist domination are foundations of experiences within theme parks.[90]

The dangers suggested by such critiques of the dreamlike and potentially hegemonic qualities of theme park entertainment—especially as rides and their video gaming technologies offer greater technological persuasion, more potent suspension of disbelief, and less transparency[91]—are certainly valuable considerations for future theme park and video game research.[92] At the same time, it is important to recall that the immersive media that takes shape in the Era of Immersion may also be noted for its potentially therapeutic and empathic qualities. Due to their immersive nature, many forms of virtual and augmented reality offer possibilities

89. Maxim Gorky, "Coney Island," *The Independent*, August 8, 1907.

90. Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, 358; Huxtable, *The Unreal America*; Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 81–82.

91. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 23, 28.

92. Scott A. Lukas, "Questioning 'Immersion' in Contemporary Themed and Immersive Spaces," in *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*, ed. Scott A. Lukas (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016), 115–123.

of creating psychological, physiological, interpersonal, and existential modes of being that may be in line with notable educational or social justice goals.[93] In fact, one possible renegotiation of the embedded argument about the blurring of lines between entertainment and education in theme parks (notably, in the discussions of "edutainment" in Disney theme park rides and attractions)[94] may be found in additional considerations of the specific media, technological and entertainment forms, and experiences noted in this contemporary evolution of the ride. Especially in the era of the Anthropocene, it may be high time to reorient consumer and entertainment practices to activist realms—what I have called a "consumer public sphere."[95] Serious gaming, which aims to use the immersive and engagement potentials of traditional video games for social justice purposes, is one video game form that could be incorporated in new theme park rides such that they begin to reflect more critical and political forms of play.[96] The famous artist Banksy's *Dismaland* (created in Somerset, England, for a period in 2015) suggests an interesting connection of serious social critique and the theme park form.[97] While Banksy's site featured more critical art forms and installations than rides, its use of the theme park and its attractions as a meta-commentary on both society and the theme park form offers insights into the most current era of the theme park ride—that of concept and transcendence.

93. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 246; Lukas, "A Consumer Public Sphere"; Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

94. Lukas, "A Consumer Public Sphere"; Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

95. Scott A. Lukas, "Controversial Topics: Pushing the Limits in Themed and Immersive Spaces," *Attractions Management* 20, no. 4 (2015), 50–54; Scott A. Lukas, "Dark Theming Reconsidered," in *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*, ed. Scott A. Lukas (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016), 225–235; Lukas, "A Consumer Public Sphere."

96. Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013); McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*; Patrick Jagoda, *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

97. Florian Freitag, "Critical Theme Parks: Dismaland, Disney and the Politics of Theming," *Continuum* 31, no. 6 (2017), 923–932.

The Era of Concept: The Transmechanical

The story of artist Gaëlle Engel is one that suggests new trajectories in terms of the evolution of the theme park ride. Engel is one of many worldwide who experience objectum sexuality, or a romantic and sexual attraction to inanimate objects. In the case of the artist, she has entered into a romantic relationship with the Sky Scream roller coaster at Holiday Park in Haßloch, Germany. According to Engel, "Sky Scream inspires me a lot in everything I write and draw," and she claims that through collecting memorabilia of the roller coaster, and, more specifically, through models and reproductions of the ride, the two have conceived children.[98] While some would debate the nature of this relationship, it illustrates how the theme park ride has achieved a state of transcendence, in the etymological meaning of "surmounting, rising above," and "beyond."[99] As well, it suggests a possible apotheosis of ride fandom and the deep and emotional connections that many people, such as members of ACE, establish with rides.

A second story parallels the case of people who fall in love with theme park rides, in this case illustrating the perceived human limits of ride experiences. Following my participation at a theme park industry consultation retreat in the 2010s, I was enjoying drinks with a number of the attendees when I became most intrigued with an individual who began to speak about possible new directions for rides at their company's theme parks and entertainment venues. While the other attendees were addressing ride theming and transmedia integration opportunities for new projects, this individual, who is a designer and engineer, suggested the unimaginable: the company should seriously consider designing rides that defy Newton's law of universal gravitation. None of the attendees besides me seemed surprised with his statement, and I could only engage in internal dialogue and ask, "Did he just say that?!" His bold vision of the theme park rides of the future reminded me of other imaginations

98. Hannah Frishberg, "Woman Says She Found True Love, Had Children with Rollercoaster," *New York Post*, March 12, 2021.

99. "Transcendence," *Online Etymology Dictionary,* https://www.etymonline.com/word/transcendence#etymonline_v_39333.

of spectacular and fantastical machines. *The Centrifuge Brain Project*—a short 2011 film by the German artist Till Nowak—imagines impossible amusement rides that defy gravity and safety conventions for the purpose of exploring life's everyday problems. While Nowak acknowledges that the film and its seven rides are fantastical creations, he has suggested that people would build such devices if it were physically possible to do so.[100] Not unlike the Euthanasia Coaster created by Julijonas Urbonas, which features seven roller coaster elements designed to humanely kill people through lethal g-forces,[101] *The Centrifuge Brain Project* is a conceptual undertaking that both illuminates unspoken existential constructions of rides and analyzes perceived limits of ride design and human experience (see image 4.3).[102]
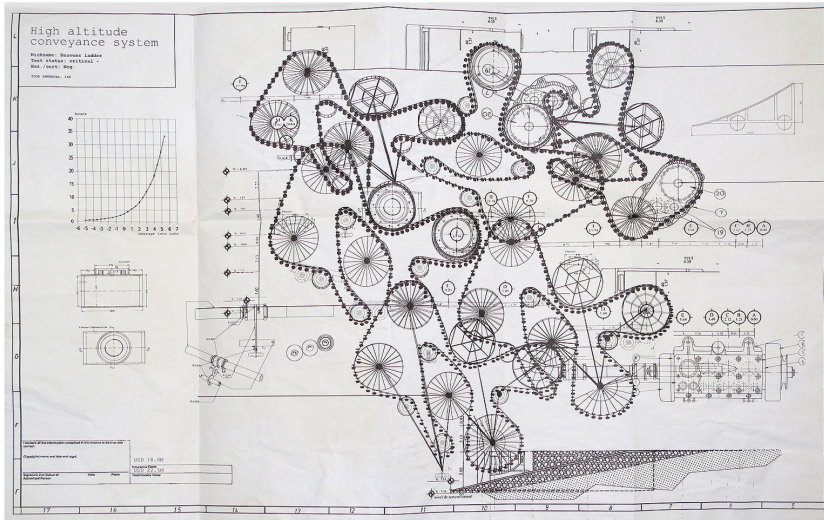

Image 4.3. *A schematic for the High Altitude Conveyance System, one of seven rides created by Till Nowak for the film The Centrifuge Brain Project. Credit: Till Nowak, used with permission.*

100. Tytti Ollila, "Till Nowak Makes Impossible Possible," *GBTimes*, April 1, 2014.

101. Blake Butler, "A Roller Coaster Designed to Kill People," *Vice*, December 4, 2014.

102. Additional lethal or impossible roller coasters have been created with popular roller coaster design software, such as *RollerCoaster Tycoon* (1999–). In one case, a designer created a roller coaster that was 210 days long and that killed riders due to starvation. In addition to these projects, others like the *Journal of Ride Theory* zine have ruminated on the topic of death and theme park rides. Matthew Hughes, "Let's Face It: The Best Part of *RollerCoaster Tycoon* Was Killing Tourists," *The Next Web*, September 29, 2017; Dan Howland, *Journal of Ride Theory Omnibus* (Portland: Ride Theory Press, 2004).

Conceptual ride projects also remind of the symbolic gaps or limits in terms of the signification of human amusement, pleasure, and entertainment. As has been discussed in the literature on rides, the presupposition that all theme park and ride activities will follow a "riskless risk" model in which guests experience thrill and danger without actually being hurt or killed is sometimes not a given.[103] As the tragic example at AstroWorld reflects, there is never a guarantee that the pleasure of riding a ride will not result in injury, even if that injury is death. Connecting such human tragedy to the conceptual projects of Nowak and Urbonas, we discover that such impossible projects have actually been built. The design of the Verrückt water slide at Schlitterbahn Kansas City and the many deliberately dangerous and fatal rides at Action Park in Vernon Township, New Jersey (profiled in the 2020 documentary *Class Action Park*), remind, in unfortunate senses, of the limitations of humans in terms of their technological and mechanical constructions. Our primary approach to thinking of rides as instrumental objects of pleasure (and monetary and branded rewards) and not as philosophical, conceptual, or metaphorical figures has certainly led to a curious opportunity in which we now attempt to reverse this course.[104]

The most current era of the ride is that of the transmechanical—referring to a state in which the ride moves beyond its own conceptualization, even its human determinations. To say that a theme park ride is to be understood "in and of itself" is to engage in philosophical and methodological activity that will initially seem absurd. Conceptually, this move is, in a sense, one to affirm that the robots of *Westworld* and *Futureworld* did take over the world and negate the human agency that created them—not literally, but metaphorically as we come to a realization that the theme park ride has entered a state in which it suggests transcendence beyond the interpretations, analytical models, and conceptual viewpoints that have been previously defined for it. Within the worlds of critical art

103. Russel B. Nye, "Eight Ways of Looking at an Amusement Park," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 15, no. 1 (June 1981), 63–75.

104. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*. The inappropriate design and testing of the ride at Schlitterbahn led to the death of one individual and the filing of criminal charges against three Schlitterbahn employees. In terms of Action Park, it is reported that five fatalities and hundreds of other injuries occurred as a result of the dangerous ride designs and unsafe conditions of the park.

and social science, two burgeoning movements provide opportunities for future studies of rides (and theme parks) as transmechanical entities. Prior conceptualizations of rides and theme parks have either literally viewed these devices (and their human users) as mechanical or have offered interpretations and analyses of them that avoid understandings of what anthropologists call the "emic" or insider's view—that is looking at rides as complex objects that interface with the world, human actors, and other machines, objects, ideas, and memes.[105] The social science movement known as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers an opportunity to reframe the study of rides and theme park objects in ways that offer symmetry in terms of analysis.[106] Traditional studies of theme parks have placed human agency and, notably, the critical lens of the social critic/analyst at the center of such studies, as opposed to viewing each object within theme parks through networks of reciprocal and co-equal associations or "unified realities."[107]

An important reorientation of the movement to view rides "in and of themselves" is to reframe the mode of analysis and description from, conceptually, an active voice to what anthropologist Steven A. Tyler and others have noted as the middle voice.[108] In the middle voiced perspective, the presumed actor or agent in the study (the cultural anthropologist) is not envisioned as that which has power over the object (as in the active voice's subject-object relationship). Instead, the analyst is one of many actors within the field of study and is thus part of the field and its processes, as opposed to being the dominant actor within it (in German, the verb *sich rasieren* comes to mind as meaning not "I am shaving my face," but "I am in the process of shaving with my face involved"). In addition, the art movement known as Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) follows a similar path of ANT and the middle voice in

105. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*.

106. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

107. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*; Lukas, "Judgments Passed"; Scott A. Lukas, "Research in Themed and Immersive Spaces: At the Threshold of Identity," in *A Reader in Themed and Immersive Spaces*, ed. Scott A. Lukas (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016), 159–169.

108. Steven Tyler, "Them Others - Voices without Mirrors," *Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde* 44 (1998): 31–50; Lukas, "Research in Themed and Immersive Spaces."

terms of refocusing analytical and methodological perspectives necessary for a transmechanical understanding of the theme park ride. OOO "is dedicated to exploring the reality, agency, and 'private lives' of nonhuman (and nonliving) entities—all of which it considers 'objects'—coupled with a rejection of anthropocentric ways of thinking about and acting in the world."[109] OOO has also been conceptualized as a sort of "alien phenomenology" that addresses how non-human objects and entities experience the world.[110] As the transmechanical era of rides is developed, the insights of ANT, the middle voice, and OOO may play primary roles in terms of shifting methodological and conceptual focus.

Some critiques of ANT and OOO offer that the approaches seek to imbue non-human, and even non-living, actors with consciousness, agency, and intent. While it is a mistake to attribute such a focus to these movements, the critique provides an interesting opportunity to actually imagine the unimaginable and to project what the evolution of the theme park ride might entail one-hundred, two-hundred, or even more years from now. It is not a mistake that many popular theme park simulation games like *RollerCoaster Tycoon* and *Theme Park* (1994) place a primary player and gaming emphasis on the situation of addressing entropy in theme parks—including out-of-control, bored, and fickle guests, and ride breakdowns and accidents.[111] One of the tensions reminded in the transmechanical era is that the ride and all of its associated connections to the theme park as a whole is imagined as a device that cannot fail, unlike the imaginary constructions of video game simulators. The many versions of *Westworld* suggest a point in popular amusements in which the robotic pleasure and entertainment devices created for humans actually achieve consciousness, agency, and intent and reach the theoretical point of sin-

109. Dylan Kerr, "What Is Object-Oriented Ontology? A Quick-and-Dirty Guide to the Philosophical Movement Sweeping the Art World," *Artspace*, April 8, 2016, http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/a-guide-to-object-oriented-ontology-art.

110. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

111. Péter Kristóf Makai, "Three Ways of Transmediating a Theme Park: Spatializing Storyworlds in Epic Mickey, the Monkey Island Series and Theme Park Management Simulators," in *Transmediations: Communication Across Media Borders*, eds. Niklas Salmose and Lars Elleström (New York: Routledge, 2019), 164–185.

gularity. The notion of a robot (or a ride) achieving a point of transcendence in which it develops autonomy from its human creation may seem like one of these fictional and futuristic visions, but the development of new ride technology noted with Universal, Disney, and other major theme park corporations illustrates such a future possibility.

Recent patents and subsequent rides and attractions developments at some theme parks include sophisticated sensors, big data integrations, artificial intelligence, and emotion-monitoring technologies that allow rides, attractions, and themelands to track, respond to, and customize the individual experiences of guests.[112] Augmented and virtual reality technologies allow for forms of near "total immersion" in which it is possible to imagine the theme parks of the future as completely seamless and vivid dreams, not unlike the worlds imagined by cyberpunk author William Gibson or those noted in Terence McKenna's "psychedelic society." One emerging context of total immersion is the platform suggested by Facebook (now Meta) called the Metaverse, which has been described as "a world of endless, interconnected virtual communities."[113] Current and upcoming immersive venues, including Area 15 in Las Vegas, Disney's *Star Wars*: Galactic Star Cruiser immersive hotel, and Kind Heaven in Las Vegas (possibly, though unlikely, under development), will include technological, performative, and dramaturgical approaches, along with hybrid rides and attractions designs that will offer guests opportunities to nearly escape reality at each waking moment.[114] In addition to these public entertainment spaces, transformations within home entertainment and living—including more immersive exercise equipment like NordicTrack iFIT and immersive video gaming and virtual reality devices—suggest that devices of the home will not only resemble (if not replace) public theme park rides, attractions, and associated entertainment machines, they may also achieve a future state of singularity and, through their immersive simulations, a possible Omega Point in terms of shared human

112. Richard Bilbao, "Disney Patent Would Alter Rides Immediately Based on Passenger Emotions," *Orlando Business Journal*, January 30, 2017.

113. Peter Weber, "How Facebook's Metaverse Could Change Your Life," *The Week*, November 28, 2021; Lukas, "Questioning 'Immersion'"; Scott A. Lukas, *The Immersive Worlds Handbook: Designing Theme Parks and Consumer Spaces* (New York: Focal Press, 2013), 203–204.

114. Lukas, *The Immersive Worlds Handbook*, 204.

and machine consciousness.[115] While these visions of the theme park ride may seem fantastical, greater imagination of the evolving trajectories of these machines may only assist researchers of the future in finally writing an evolutionary and cultural account of human-ride interrelationships that is as immersive, thrilling, provocative, and transcendent as the earliest Coney Island amusements.

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115. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Collins, 1975).

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