

3 Theme Park as Machine

People are exactly alike when they ride amusements – they react the same way, get the same thrills and pleasures.

Roller coaster designer Harry G. Traver¹

There is something remarkable about images of the roller coaster. Viewing a still photograph of a roller coaster provides an interesting moment in time of the theme park: the motion of riders is frozen, the tracks are still and the trains of the roller coaster are stationary. On the surface, close inspection of the roller coaster reveals the ridiculous. People are strapped into a mechanical device that carries them up hills, drops them, and then wraps them around numerous twists and turns. What other species would be capable of building a machine that produces amusement effects directly on the body and the mind? In everyday life, outside the world of the theme park, people use the term 'roller coaster' to refer to situations of upheaval, moments of an up-and-down nature, and turbulence and disorder. The roller coaster, unlike most other forms of public amusements, becomes a figure of life – not simply a device used to propel people along the tracks of an amusement park, but an expression of life itself. Sometimes, life is like a roller coaster, the ride embodied beyond its material consequences perhaps suggests. And as a metaphor the still photograph of the roller coaster offers something even more profound: it illustrates how life runs in moments and, just as one part of life is enjoyed, it is gone and the next one is around the hill. Like many aspects of the theme park the roller coaster is at once mundane and sublime, functional and symbolic.



It is impossible to consider the transformation of the theme park from the pleasure gardens, the world's fairs and the early amusement parks of Coney Island without considering the significance of the machine. The machine is both the amusement park's and the theme park's *raison d'être* – it gives both a life force, yet is used differently in each. In the amusement park it is a thing of sensory and kinetic delight, it throws people together and reminds them of their mortality, while in the theme park it is often a part of the story being told through theming, something that affects the body but also the mind. Interestingly, the greatest tension in the evolution of the amusement park into the theme park occurs with the ride. In the twenty-first century – which is resolutely a time of the theme park – some throwbacks or amusement atavists exist. These are the parks that dare offer themselves up not as theme parks, but as amusement parks, and they do this primarily through the promotion not of the theme but of the

A journey aboard the roller coaster at Coney Island, here frozen in time.



machine. Indeed, the amusement machine is the last stand of the amusement park in the world of theme parks.

Even before the early Russian ice slide that would become the roller coaster, the carousel emerged in the twelfth century in Arab countries as a game of horsemen involving a clay ball filled with scented water, eventually being called 'carrosello', literally 'little war', in Spain and Italy and later 'carrousel' in France.² When it became adopted in French society, lavish carousels were viewed by the public, involving incredible spectacles of safe horsemanship that replaced the bloody jousts of the past. One of the features of the carousel was known as 'catching the brass ring', and it included horsemen who would demonstrate their competency by spearing brass rings on their lances. To practise for their tournaments, which featured real horses, devices were installed in royal courts. On such devices, two men operated a circular machine by hand while two riders, mounted on wooden horses, practised

On the Scenic Railway, the terrifying kinetics of the new amusement machines.



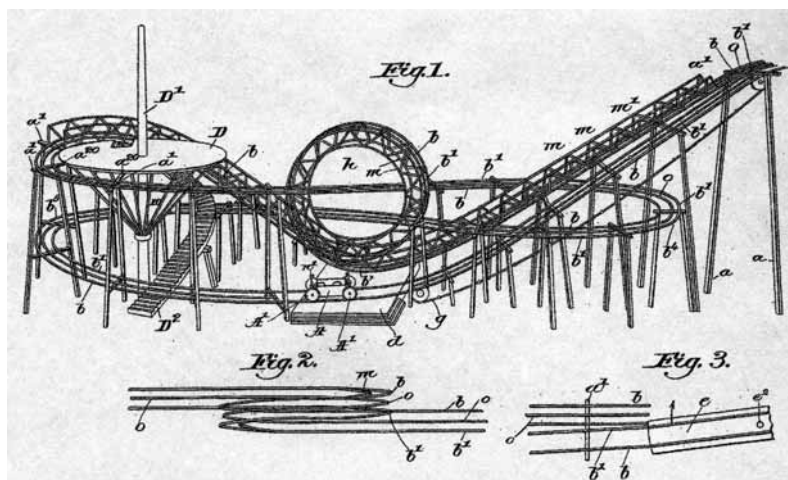
spearing the brass rings. Eventually this practice device became one of public amusement. The human-operated carousel was replaced with a horse- or mule-powered system that carried children around in circles to the delight of their parents and those watching. These early machines had no platforms, and thus the name 'flying horses' described a machine in which riders were suspended in the air. By the 1800s steam power was introduced, the carousel was given a platform, carousel animals moved up and down in tandem with the centripetal motion (giving them a gallop like real horses) and organ music was added as a further sensory stimulation.

The carousel thus gives the theme park its very first machine. It is a pleasure device of extraordinary principles. Not only does it move, creating a sensory swirl for children and parents alike, it is an

The carousel combines the powerful symbolism of animals with the kinetic thrill of moving in circles.

aesthetic device. Countless hours went into the production of the sculpted and painted horses of designers like those of Dentzel, Loeff, Landow and Herschell, and even for the public they became an immediate obsession: it is reported that one man was so taken with the carousel that he mortgaged all of his possessions, including his farm and cows, just to invest in one.³ The carousel is an architectural machine: its circularity is highlighted by the animals, their vertical movements up and down, the bright colours of animals and superstructure alike, and the calliope music, which is its own machine within a machine, providing another anachronistic look at the amusement parks of old. The carousel is a heritage device and, like the roller coaster, is the immediate concern of preservationists who long for an amusement park full of old-time machines. At extant amusement parks like Knoebels in Pennsylvania, elaborate museums have been established to showcase the wonder of carousels of the past, and the park's current carousels feature actual 'catching the brass ring' devices that allow riders to experience the symbolism of the original horse tournaments.

Most importantly for the amusement park, the carousel is immediately recognizable; it is as iconic to amusement patrons as the stone tool may have been to early humans. As one writer suggests, 'Everybody knows the carrousel or merry-go-round . . . its riders are in a dream; for a whole minute they imagine themselves in a higher sphere.'⁴ Its notoriety as a device that could send people into obsessive quests to own one or at least gaze at its movements, sounds and delights, established it as an important centrepiece for the amusement park. At the New York World's Fair of 1964–5, a 'Carousel Park' was created to feature the device as the prominent centre around which people could enjoy food and merriment. In later amusement parks the machine via its visual, kinetic and auditory effects signalled to people that safe, fun and family-centred amusement was



present in the park which featured it. Later the carousel would decline in popularity, and in the twenty-first century theme park its appearance is rare. In the complex theming that took hold in the theme park the carousel was ultimately unable to be incorporated. What becomes clear is that like the amazing carousel ride, the theme park is, itself, a larger machine; one composed of all the various rides, mechanical devices, subsystems, processes and performances that make up its functional system.⁵ Just as the carousel ride could break down and bring stark attention to the mechanical artificiality that it created, so too could the theme park.

Like the roller coaster schematic, the theme park map exposes an interesting mechanical truth of the theme park. As the previous chapter discussed, the emergence of the theme park involved its finding of a place-based identity, and part and parcel of this identity was the map that it offered for the patron. At pleasure gardens and world's fairs zones separating various parts of the space were

The roller coaster, with its unparalleled ability to throw riders in multiple positions in space, gives the theme park its most important machine. E. Prescott, Roller Coaster, US patent, 1898.



Being thrown aboard a ride is just one of the ways that theme parks promote dissociation from the real world.

created, and at later amusement parks of Coney Island, people were given a sense of space as certain rides and attractions promised trips to other places or time periods. With the emergence of theme parks in the late 1950s maps were carefully constructed by theme park designers and, most significantly, these were cognitive maps that attempted to locate the park's attractions and its overall layout in the minds of the customers. Predictability of the patron, such as what she would do after she exited a ride, was codified in the park's geography. Later, as the theme park became a multi-use themed space in the 1990s, cognitive maps were drawn to include the minute sensory coordinates of patrons on the map.

In many contemporary theme parks the feeling of geographic disassociation is used to create thrill in the patron and generate profits in the company. In most cases this feeling is illusionary since the patron soon discovers that she has been walking in a loop. Getting lost in a theme park – or later, getting lost in a themed casino – becomes the subject of folk discussions among patrons. Just as one relates harrowing experiences of foreign travel with others, the theme park patron expresses how getting lost – in both the sense of geographical misdirection and visual and sensory bombardment from the park's attractions – was part of the fun of being in the theme park. In modern theme parks like Six Flags employees are trained that one of the most important interactions with patrons is giving them the correct directions to an attraction. Giving them the wrong information results in them getting lost, becoming unhappy and losing time in their day of park enjoyment. As the patron walks through a theme park, and 'moves from ride to ride, he or she is always caught in a web of references to other rides, and ultimately, to the theme park as a whole'.⁶ Architecture was used to create ambience in early parks and in later themed ones it creates thematic mood. Patrons, as they move from one

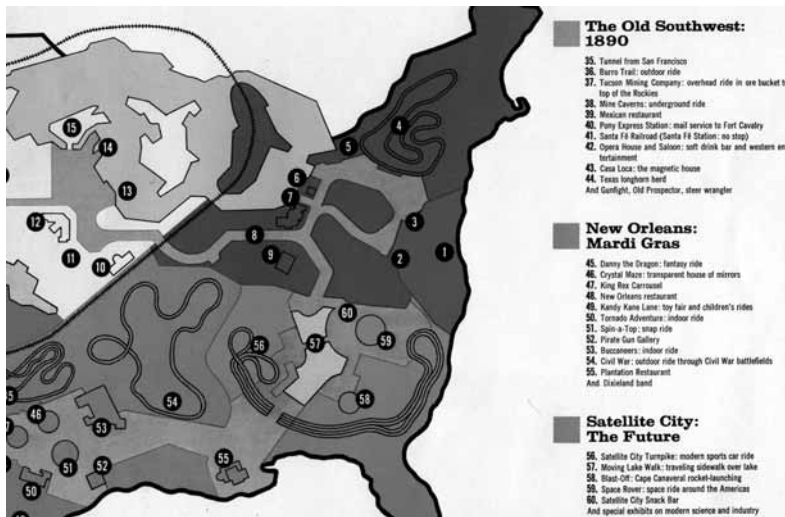


place to another, are also caught up in a system of references that connects them to the design order of the theme park. As much as a person comes to the theme park with his own identity, due to passing through the map of the park and all of its nodes, he must supplant his identity with the themes, rides and functions of the park. A tension thus develops, and it is one that is endemic to cybernetics (relations of humans and machines) whether in a theme park or not. This is one in which the person must respond to the delights provided by machines – rides, robots and other devices – and to the overall ‘machine’, that is, the theme park, all the while being able to enjoy himself in a non-mechanical sense.

The cybernetics of the early amusement park – in which people were often assaulted by machines like those of Tilyou’s Steeplechase – gave way to a version that lessened the harsh kinetic impacts of rides on bodies and increased the use of rides as story, as a means of placing patrons inside a narrative machine. Because new theme

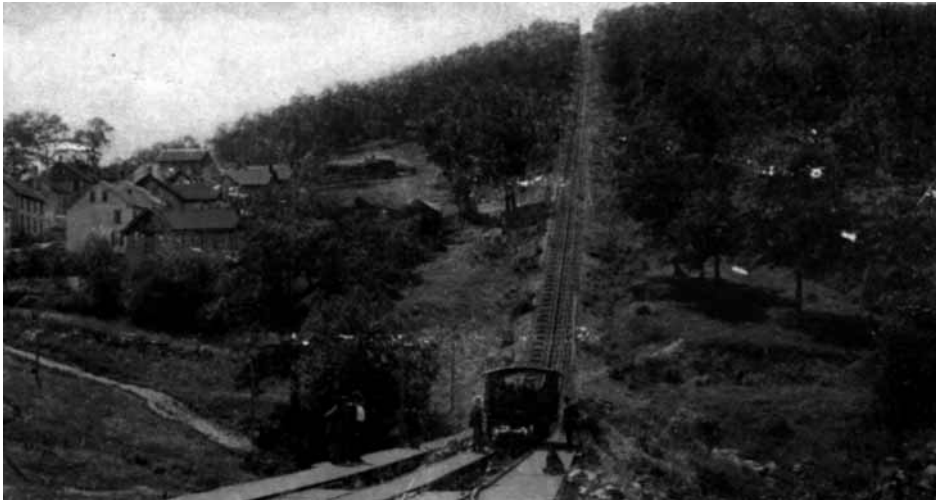
Being lost, being found – all conditioned by the geographic machine of the theme park.

parks comprise 'lands' and are not simply assemblages of rides and amusements, people take on a new relationship to architecture and landscape. Just like an explorer who encounters new varieties of flora and fauna and experiences disassociation, the theme park patron is trying to navigate through artificial mazes, simulated facades and unaccustomed experiences. As a result techniques of cybernetic adjustment develop. Theme park guidebooks are themselves a fledgling industry, and many of them detail the best touring plan for the patron. Advice on how to get to the park, whether by air or car, tips for navigating through the park (including shortcuts), strategies for beating or avoiding the crowds, ideas about which line to take in a ride queue house (such as, 'Always take the left line when given a choice'), and when to visit certain rides and attractions during the touring day are all the lengthy subjects of such guidebooks. Such plans have led some theme park patrons to joke, 'This seems more like work than fun', and such comments further highlight the tension of the human and the mechanical. Beginning in 1999 Disney theme parks incorporated a system known as 'FAST-PASS'. In this system a patron receives a ticket that tells him when he may come back and ride a particular ride and thus programmes all of his activities for the day, based on when he can visit the specific rides. Some individuals, hoping to optimize their travels through theme parks, have employed forms of artificial intelligence. In one case a man used such computer-based technology to visit each of the 41 rides, attractions and shows at Disney's Magic Kingdom in just over ten hours.⁷ Such examples of cybernetic adjustment will no doubt continue as the theme park evolves. Undoubtedly they will further raise awareness about the difficult tension between the desire of patrons to enjoy theme parks in free, non-mechanical ways and the desire of the theme park to manage, control and determine patron behaviour in mechanistic ways.



The roller coaster, like the carousel, is a foundational component of the theme park. It is architectural, in that it features a superstructure and numerous design features and is situated within a geographical landscape, but it is also mechanical in that it moves people along a track. Devices called ice slides used in Russia in the 1600s are often considered to be the ancestors of the amusement park roller coaster, but though they bore resemblances to the amusement park roller coaster, they were not machines in the fullest sense of the term. These early slides were limited in their kinetic effects on riders. Later examples of the fledgling machine included slides that propelled people down wooden hills, allowing people to enjoy the same ride in the summer.⁸ In 1804 the first prototype coaster was constructed near Paris, with important advancements like tracks and carriages complete with wheels. Later designs would make the roller coaster more practical, as it was inconvenient to ask riders to climb to the top of platforms just to descend

A map of the defunct theme park Freedomland: nodes, zones, points of connection.



down a hill. The Centrifugal Pleasure Railway, a device premiered at France's Frascati Gardens in 1848, featured a loop that propelled riders upside down.⁹ This must have been an amazing visual and kinetic thrill at the time, especially given the initial concern about the French workman who tested the ride for its first run. It was reported that onlookers took up a collection for his family in case he died while trying the looping coaster.¹⁰ It is important to note that such a sense of adventure was only possible in a time of mechanical invention. In today's world safe leisure experiences have led to some seeking out more dangerous and dark forms of tourism, such as travelling to dangerous places or partaking in extreme sports like base jumping, white water rapids rides and so on.

The roller coaster came to the United States in 1843 in the form of the Mauch Chunk Railway, a coal mine car that was converted into a thrilling runaway train ride. In 1885 LaMarcus Thompson was the first to patent a roller coaster. In the years that followed roller coasters developed swiftly. As new amusement parks sprang up, they often included one or more prominent roller coasters – which in turn helped establish the unique character of the park – and continued

The primogeniture of the modern roller coaster – the Mauch Chunk switchback railway.



technological developments, like upstop wheels and tubular steel, allowed more fantastic roller coasters to be built. Some of the earliest, including the first loop-the-loop at Coney Island, the Flip Flap, were considerably more menacing machines than those of the present. Some reports indicate that due to the perfect loops created on such rides, riders would experience as many as 12 Gs (the force resulting from acceleration) during the loop.¹¹ Like the fierce early loop-the-loops Harry G. Traver's Crystal Beach Cyclone, opened in 1927, often produced notable effects in riders, including dizziness, fainting and head, chest and leg injuries.¹² The roller coaster featured a nurse on duty to deal with any complications from the ride. In one unfortunate case, a man was thrown from it and dragged to his death; one person commented at the time that 'I saw a body hurtle through the air but at first thought it was just an overcoat. Then I heard piercing screams.'¹³ Later design technology allowed for the creation of tamer roller coasters, much to the disappointment of some riders who long for the days of monstrous machines like the Traver Cyclone.¹⁴ Traver, who longed to publish an anthropological/philosophical text, *Earth, Life, and*

The incredible Crystal Beach Cyclone of Harry G. Traver, which some call the only avant-garde roller coaster ever built.

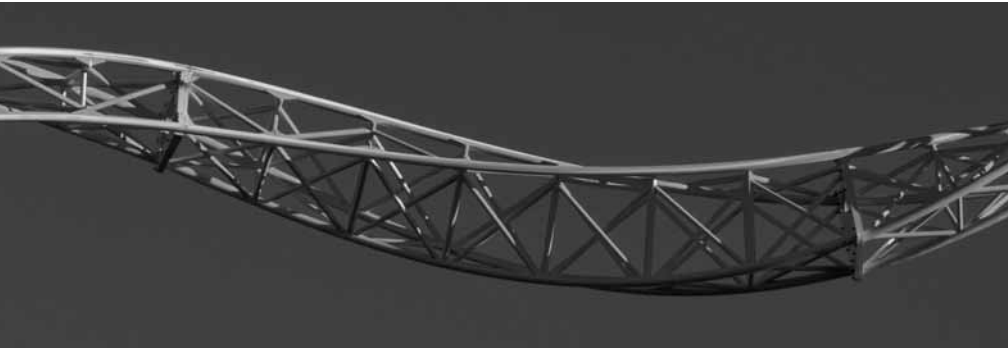
Man, but never did, probably used his mechanical expertise as a way to explore basic human needs, desires and tendencies.¹⁵ The roller coaster proved to be the perfect testing grounds for analysing the essentials of the human condition – fear, desire, safety, ecstasy and so on.

Like other theme park technologies, including the robot, the roller coaster creates fascination in the form of black box aesthetics; as Jean Baudrillard said of machines, ‘functioning is not merely the function of things but also their mystery’.¹⁶ Videos, television shows, scientific websites and books detail ways that teachers can utilize the roller coaster in a pedagogical sense. Physics teachers, for example, can use roller coasters to teach many of the principles of gravity, acceleration and G-force. The roller coaster established a fascination with engineering and the machine that would ironically influence the adoption of non-theme park machine technologies in society. Learning about a machine like a roller coaster, and understanding all of its technical terms – upstop wheels, lift hill, station brakes, chain dog – becomes a primary concern of roller coaster aficionados. For many such fans the excitement of learning about famous roller coasters on the Internet and in amusement park history books and the fashioning of their own homemade, working models of roller coasters, is heightened by the actual riding of the rides in the park. Such excitement takes on the order of religious pilgrimage as fans opt to spend large sums of money travelling the world to ride as many famous roller coasters as possible. As one member of the American Coaster Enthusiasts offered, ‘I’ll never stop riding roller coasters. I started when I was eight years old and I’ll ride until the day I die. I’ll travel wherever it takes to ride a new one. When I run out in the United States, I’ll go to another country to ride.’¹⁷

While the carousel established itself as an aesthetic and heritage device, it did so in a generic way. People do not necessarily attach personality to the carousel but with the roller coaster a new dimension of the theme park machine develops. In this case each machine has a different personality. People assess differences between wooden and steel tube versions, they decide what time of the day to ride the coaster (to maximize speed and visceral effects on the body) and they consider whether riding in the front or the back car is best. Their assessments get even more specific, beyond these design elements, as they begin to make mental lists of the best roller coasters and as they associate personal qualities with rides. In an intimate relationship – ‘that one kicked my ass, but I love it’ – soon the roller coaster is anthropomorphized, in part assisted by new forms of theming that name and further personalize roller coasters. Roller coasters, as semiotic objects, reflect a world that is beyond amusement itself. The passivity of life – whether working



Aboard the Griffon at Busch Gardens Europe: fright, weightlessness, the push of the Earth back on the body and joy all combine in one moment on the roller coaster.



in an office building or sitting in front of a television – is contrasted with imagery of violent nature, uncharted and adventurous spaces and journeys, and technological and animalistic vitality. Names of roller coasters reflect this – the mythical creatures and figures of the Griffon, Loch Ness Monster, Hydra, Banshee, Medusa, Sea Serpent, Dragon, Poltergeist, Kraken, Titan, Kong, Demon, Zeus; fierce animals like the Viper, Great Bear, Python, Scorpion, Grizzly, Rattler, King Cobra; forces of nature like Tidal Wave, Windstorm, Wild Lightnin’, Wicked Twister, Vortex, Volcano, Turbulence; forms of technology, conditions and objects that connote power, speed and ability, like Excalibur, Top Gun, XLR-8, Shockwave, Fahrenheit, Jet Coaster, Speed, Roar. Roller coasters do far more than remind us who we are; they tell us who we wish to be and thus they speak of our existential and psychological needs as much as our basic values.

The roller coaster is the first amusement ride to be integrated into people’s lives in an intimate way. Nostalgia for them invites couples to discuss their first ride on a coaster and how it later led to marriage, while others decide to take their vows on a roller coaster. As CNN reported, ‘Some couples face the inevitable ups and downs of matrimony head-on – they get married on roller coasters.’¹⁸ In other cases roller coaster enthusiasts attempt to set endurance records by riding for hours on the machines without a break. In an interesting

The roller coaster, captured like a double helix in space, gives a sense of its foundational and genetic role in the theme park.

meeting of human relationships and machines, the roller coaster seems to pronounce a metaphorical understanding – just like the ups and downs of marriage and social relationships, the roller coaster is an experience that must be endured but, after a while, the rider will come to enjoy all of the bumps.

Roller coasters also indicate an inability to persist. They tell a different story, not of overcoming obstacles but of being overcome by the machine. In a very conceptual moment, John Allen, former president of the famed Philadelphia Toboggan Company, once said that ‘the ultimate roller coaster is built when you send out twenty-four people and they all come back dead. This could be done, you know’.¹⁹ Allen’s comment, meant in jest, is nonetheless an interesting reflection on the machine and the human. Feature films like *Rollercoaster* (1977) and *Thrill* (1996) use the roller coaster as a device for establishing horror, terror and suspense in the film viewer, and directors choose this amusement machine as the catalyst of such moods because of its prominent role in the amusement and theme park. They suggest that as easily as such devices can give people pleasure, they can take it away. Though roller coaster accidents and deaths do occur they are very rare, but this does not stop the public from reflecting on, if not obsessing over, the idea of a catastrophic roller coaster failure or accident. Once, working on the XLR-8 roller coaster at Six Flags AstroWorld, I was charged with calming customers during a situation in which the coaster became stalled at the top of the ride’s lift hill. At such moments riders realize that the cost of their desire to be thrilled is high and, ultimately, that they have little autonomy when strapped into a mechanical device of their own will.

Because the roller coaster and the amusement park are so intimately connected, and because the presence of the thrill ride may suggest less reliance on theming and mood landscapes within a



park, it is not surprising that Disney theme parks immediately opposed themselves to the device. After Disneyland and subsequent theme parks were opened, patrons complained that Disney parks were lacking, notably because they had no real roller coasters. Though their parks featured some prominent ones, such as Space Mountain, Matterhorn Bobsleds and Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, people felt that these were thematic delivery devices rather than true white knuckle rides. Only at Disney's California Adventure Park did the company finally cave in and build a primary roller coaster, California Screamin'. What the roller coaster indicates is the uneasy tension that is still present between the amusement park and the theme park. For some patrons, like many of the American Coaster Enthusiasts (ACE) and the Roller Coaster

At Coney Island a ride down the Razzle Dazzle expresses the pleasure of the body in space.

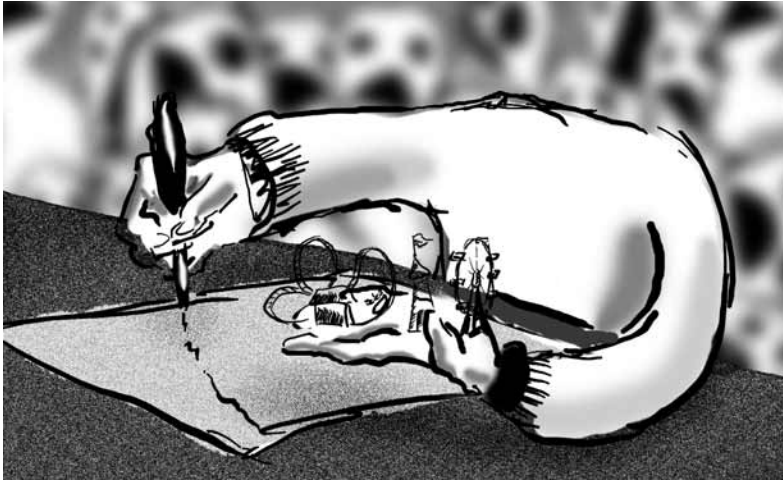
Club of Great Britain (RCCGB), what signifies a theme park should not be the theming of its attractions, but its ability to deliver heart-pounding and innovative rides, especially roller coasters. As long as the roller coaster exists, it will continue to mediate the greatest of tensions between the atavistic amusement park and the contemporary themed park.²⁰ As one roller coaster designer said, the roller coaster has the most personality and potential of all theme park machines: 'You don't know what's gonna happen, you're just letting the coaster take control of you.'²¹

The experience of being on a ride suspends the conventions of everyday life. For the individual, the ride offers an out-of-body experience of an ecstatic nature, while for the social body, as George Tilyou pioneered, the ride's ability to throw people together negated the normal social order and asked people to see, and be with, others in a new way. Rides thus became an 'othering' experience in which people came into contact with people in forms of intimacy previously reserved for family and friends. In a personal sense being on a ride enacts a similar suspension of normality. Riding a roller coaster or a troika involves a liminal state – being betwixt and between, being in the womb, being in the midst of things, expressing the most extreme human emotions, fear, death, danger, sex, ecstasy. In this way a theme park ride discards both the social and psychological orders of the day; it is as revolutionary, if not more so, than the greatest works of art.

Like theme park planners, ride designers focus on creating rides and technological attractions that combine kinetic and experiential thrills, safety, efficiency and throughput. Like other mechanical artists they are limited only by technology and capital in their attempts to produce the next great ride, the one that will define their theme park. In the case of the roller coaster, with each major technological advance – upstop wheels, tubular steel,

pipeline, suspended rides, urethane wheels, linear induction motor, inverted rides – new ride families are born, and with each technological development comes new mythologies – the first coaster over 300 feet (90 metres), the first one to exceed 100 miles (160 km). One theme park journalist commented on this trend, saying, ‘We’re in the roller coaster arms race . . . Every park likes to have bragging rights to the fastest, wildest ride for at least one year.’²² Parks like Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio continually design and build new coasters (seventeen in 2008, then the world’s most in a park), and in the case of this park, which most consider an amusement park, explicit theming is avoided. Instead roller coasters provide a thematic and mechanic orientation for a park that dubs itself ‘America’s Roller Coast’. While part of the mechanical arms race may be attributed to the desires of consumers to attain something new in a consumerist world, another part may be attributed to the powerful myths that are created as new rides are designed, built and opened. With each ride design anticipation for the next ride mounts. On Internet fan and blog sites ride enthusiasts discuss rumours surrounding planned attractions or, in some cases, debate the merits of ride alterations, such as retheming a ride, demolishing it or selling it to another park. In some cases enthusiasts mount national or even international campaigns to save rides from demolition and some gain status as National Historic Landmarks in the United States.

Theme park rides, in no small part due to the prominent role of ride designers and builders, achieve a mythopoetic status. For enthusiasts riding a famous roller coaster is like travelling to a site of religious significance. Even for the non-enthusiast – the everyday rider or theme park visitor – the roller coaster or park ride can have a magical status, in part due to its black box aesthetics and the sense of mystery and danger attached to rides. Theme park



documentaries can damage this aesthetic by exposing the inside of a ride, showing us how it works, and thus lessening the suspense that comes when we board a ride. This lessening of the aesthetic can also have consequences in terms of safety perceptions. When a theme park trainer at AstroWorld and someone who frequently operated the rides on busy days, I was accustomed to the issue of safety. Stories of gruesome deaths and terrible accidents were the subject of water cooler talk among veteran and new employees. Ride safety was such a concern that employees who made major safety blunders were almost immediately fired. Employees were taught to watch all areas of the ride – if the ride was moving and someone jumped off or if someone entered the ride area while the ride was in motion, the attendant had to immediately stop the ride and call security. There are few arenas in any society in which teenagers are charged with the operation of multi-million dollar machines of incredible power and potential danger. For visitors to the theme park the danger of the ride (its black box aesthetics) is

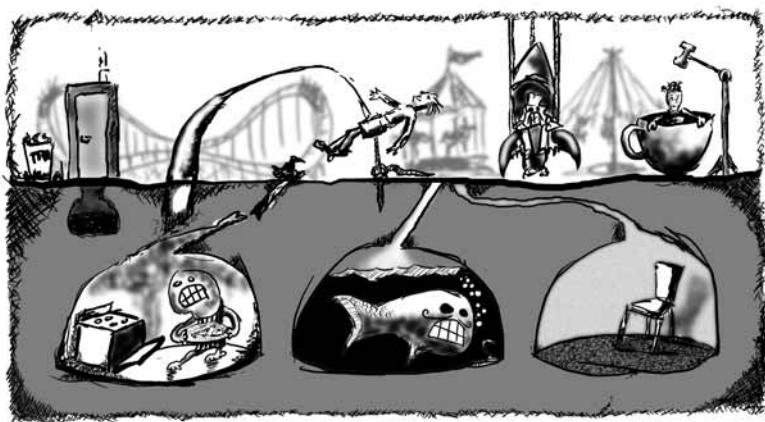
The work of theme park designers is always a mental quest to materialize the dreams of the mind in the material creations of rides, park technologies and attractions.

part of the thrill involved in riding it, but that danger must end with simulation. While theme park workers are trained in the minute details of ride operation – such as a ‘push down, pull up’ of the lapbars on the ride – for the visitor the perception that rides are unsafe or that workers are unskilled is often paramount. In the United States, in part due to poor safety conditions at non-theme park venues (for example, bungee jumping) and to the telescoping effect that occurs when a ride malfunctions, legislation has been developed to deal with ride safety.²³ While no one wants to be injured or killed on a ride, the mandating of strict safety procedures may further lessen the black box aesthetics of the theme park ride and decrease the theme park’s Dionysian tendencies.

For workers in the theme park, there are two primary emphases – one is making certain that the patron is happy, the other is to attend to the safety of the patron. Most theme park accidents are the result of patron negligence, not worker or mechanical failure, yet, in popular culture, television shows often reflect an obsession with the theme park accident. Though in many nations automobiles result in astronomically more deaths and injuries, theme park accidents receive much more attention. In the United States when a roller coaster becomes stuck for a substantial period of time it is often broadcast live on national news. Lewis Mumford wrote of the machine that as much as it reflects humankind’s immortality, ‘it is often an indication of ineptitude and social paralysis.’²⁴ It is likely that the theme park accident reflects an existential anxiety about machines as well as a general psychological association of pleasure and death.²⁵ The early amusement parks of Coney Island also illustrated this fascination with death and pleasure, but in the reenactments of Fighting the Flames and the Galveston Flood, which were more representational and conceptual. In today’s theme park, where safety and security have emerged as primary

concerns in 'risk society', death, injury and the breakdown are real-world categories projected onto the amusement activities of theme park patrons.²⁶

It is no surprise that in theme park video games of the sort considered in chapter Six success almost always amounts to being able to run one's fictional theme park as a machine. An assumption shared by both theme park managers and theme park patrons is that the theme park operates like a machine. The theme park, in



their minds, becomes a representation of Herbert Spencer's social organism, a system that self-regulates and whose ultimate goal is to keep itself running. However, beneath the surface of any theme park, as Thad Donovan's surrealist artwork suggests, there is a sinister absence. In the minds of people who frequent theme parks there are often fears of malfunctioning rides and surly or dangerous park workers.²⁷ In popular culture theme parks are often related to the breakdown – a situation in which things go terribly wrong. It often takes a breakdown of a theme park ride for the individual to realize the artifice that is in play. Like the still shot

Regardless of the efforts of designers, managers, workers and even patrons, the theme park projects its own desires beneath its surfaces.

of the roller coaster the breakdown provides for a moment of reflection on the machine and the park. In popular film and television the park breakdown is seen as something horrifying and sometimes comedic. In a parody of the theme park in the popular show *The Simpsons* the Itchy & Scratchy World Park is run by robots that run amok and turn the park into a land of fears. As much as theme parks reflect a sense of control and precision, they also project the opposite: chaos and apprehension.

At historic Coney Island visitors became accustomed to the architectural spectacle of the Iron Tower. After descending it, patrons could drink milk from the mechanical udders of a fake cow. Such examples of mechanical animals and gag devices suggested that the evolution of the theme park would involve more than the use of the machine to provide corporeal and kinaesthetic amusements; like the facade of architecture that made up the amusement buildings of Coney Island, machines themselves could be used to fulfill aesthetic, symbolic and social purposes. At the world's fairs, including the Century of Progress (1933) and the World Tomorrow (1939), companies like Messmore & Damon produced mechanical amusements that would later find their way to the theme park. Audiences at the world's fairs were stunned by life-sized mechanical elephants, ferocious moving dinosaurs and lifelike dioramas that suggested a fusion of ambient landscapes and recreated machines. With new technological advances in both mechanical science and scenic and interior design fantasy spaces could be produced with greater ease. Now it was possible to do more than re-create a landscape from the past or from a distant location; it was possible to create robotic animals, people and fantasy creatures.

Just as the roller coaster provided a kinetic form of architecture for the amusement park, the amusement machine gave it a sense



of performance. As people exited the moving architecture of roller coasters, their eyes were met with more movement in the form of mechanized amusements. Like the exotic real people from the world's fairs' midways, these exotic machines gave people something to gawk at. On the surface they acted as visual forms of the sublime – 'look at that mechanical elephant . . . it's lifelike' – and beneath they forged a new black box aesthetic, that of 'how'd they do that'? Whereas the ethnological exoticism of the parades of people at the fairs produced amazement without desire to know, the new mechanical aesthetics of the amusement park combined surface amazement with a desire to understand how the machine produced its illusions. And, where the roller coaster symbolized the inhuman side of the amusement park – the out of control machine – the mechanized device offered its ironically human side, the robot that looks human but is not.

The most pronounced applications of robotics are coterminous with the founding of the first major theme park, Disneyland. At the 1964–5 New York World's Fair, Walt Disney proved that a robotic

The robot, like this one designed for themed attractions, provides an uncanny connection to human forms and spaces.

human could mesmerize people. What was needed was a way to incorporate the robot into the theme lands of the theme park. In an early Disney-era film on the concept it is suggested that Disney's interest in the robot was moving from the two-dimensional animation of the cartoon into the three-dimensional realm of the moving machine. Audio-animatronics reflect Disney's desire to create life-like, believable characters that would fulfil both mechanical desires – for efficient workers that did not have to be paid – and organic desires – for a friendly three-dimensional cartoon character who had personality and who could tell a story or otherwise fit into a narrative or thematic approach. Much like the motion capture technology that would later dominate the video game industry, Disney worked with engineers to attempt to duplicate the movements of actors and dancers like Buddy Ebsen in mechanical models. In numerous attractions, like Pirates of the Caribbean, the Hall of Presidents and Country Bear Jamboree, Disney helped illustrate that 'robots are clever, precise, and fun . . . Above all, they are entertaining and not to be feared'.²⁸ Not all theme parks enjoy Disney's capital, and thus they have to produce less elaborate robotics and other mechanical amusement devices to entertain the patron. What the robot establishes for all theme parks is an emphasis on a mechanical form that is at once entertaining and strangely real.

The history of the dark ride dates to 1901 where at the Pan-American Exposition A Trip to the Moon gave people the thrill of travel without travelling. The terror of the indoor ride is built not on the disorientation of being spun around or being thrown back and forth, like troikas and ship rides, nor does it rely on the violence of speed alone, as with the roller coaster. Instead it uses darkness and isolation and all that they symbolically entail to create its thrills. In some cases the dark ride is not dark at all, as in Disney's It's a Small World, but the effects of disorientation and



Luna Park's popular Helter Skelter ride, where people were thrown in ways previously unknown to them.

seeming to travel to some other place are heightened by the enclosure provided by the dark ride. As the theme park moves further away from the kinetic thrills of the traditional amusement ride like the roller coaster, it builds on the dark ride's potential to use its enclosure and interior design to create a narrative and thematic space. While inside the dark ride, one is literally taken into another world. Like the modern themed casino's use of themed architecture as a space of isolation, the dark ride achieves the otherworldly by locking people inside another world and by detailing this world through special effects and interior design.

The dark ride includes many variants: rides that operate on tracks (such as old mill rides), rides that float through water (such as the famous Disney Pirates of the Caribbean), fun houses that feature gags and bodily amusements, walk-through rides (like the famous Noah's Ark), while the most contemporary and expensive



The dark ride Revenge of the Mummy at Universal Orlando uses the human fear of the dark and the unexpected to achieve extraordinary emotional thrills.

are simulation rides that take thematic experience to a new high-tech dimension. In whichever form the dark ride may be considered the most liminal of rides in the park; it is also the most psychological. The experience of going through the ride is heightened by the separation that occurs shortly after boarding: one is removed by the darkness from the space of the living, symbolized by light. The darkness takes hold of the rider, and around each turn of the car is an unexpected occurrence. Such a ride attempts to build on both expectation and surprise, capturing the rider in a simulated space of terror: 'It's kind of like a survival journey. Images of death, despair, destruction, of fright are being thrown at you, but you survive it. It's a very positive experience in the end because you have escaped that terror.'²⁹

What makes the dark ride so significant for the theme park is its ability to deliver sensory experiences. One of the most profound influences of the theme park on contemporary consumer space involves the senses, specifically the ability to connect with consumers in the most intimate of possible ways. A Trip to the Moon was revolutionary in that it allowed people to freely experience a space; in a sense, they were given more control of the experience of the amusement story, or at least the illusion of control. As amusement technology develops parks deploy sensory technologies to further give patrons the sense of being inside a story. Blasts of air hit the body, people feel sprays of water, they are treated to unique smells, the heat sensation of fire hits their bodies, they ride in devices in which their balance is thrown off, and sounds of all varieties come from all angles. At the now closed ExtraTERRORestrial Alien Encounter of Disney, illusions of aliens licking patrons were made possible by high technology. Perhaps most significant for the dark ride and its use of sensory techniques is the emphasis on cinematic modes.

Like pacing in film, the newest dark rides use the unexpected – a quick turn of the ride and a sudden jolt of a monster, scene or other sight – to heighten the sensory experience of the ride. Similar to jump cuts in film, ride pacing creates constant visual and kinetic situations, sometimes so fast that the rider is unaware of what is happening. The most current use of cinema in the dark ride is exemplified by rides like Disney’s Tower of Terror, which uses the successful *Twilight Zone* TV series to connect patrons to larger and predetermined narratives, and embellishes the experiences with the use of holographic ghosts and surprises like a ride vehicle that moves from a horizontal plane to a vertical one and back again. Modern rides also use audio-animatronic technologies, as in Pirates of the Caribbean and the Haunted Mansion at Disney theme parks. In such cases characters played by the robots extend the interest in story or cinematic narrative. While some traditional fun houses create sensory experiences only through quick shocks and generic references to ghosts, dungeons and demons, in the newest dark rides technology provides the possibility of creating entire narratives, which though only lasting a few minutes nevertheless give patrons the sense of having entered and then exited another world. At Universal Orlando’s E. T. Adventure, for example, people experience the entirety of a story from start to finish, including E. T.’s adventures on Earth and his return to his home planet. Motion based simulation, in which filmic images on a screen connect to the motion of a ride simulator (as in Back to the Future: The Ride at Universal Studios), further heightens the sense of story, sensory immersion and the connection between the riders and the scenarios being staged.

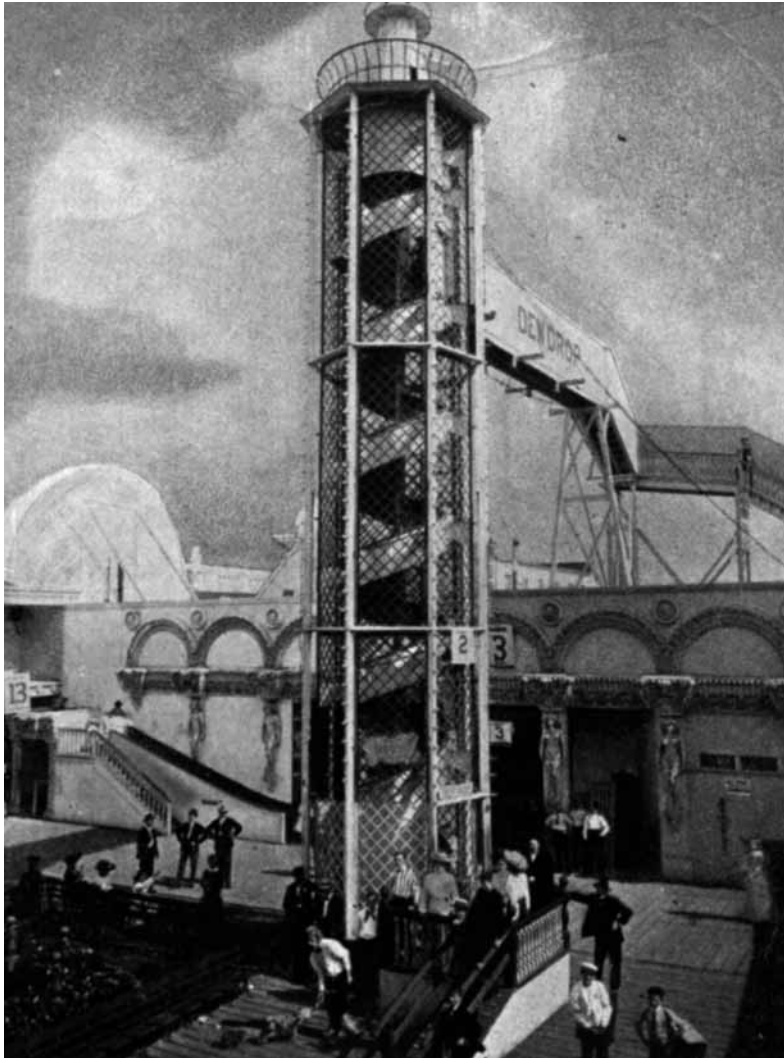
In his assessment of the state of amusement parks in 1904 Edwin Slosson wrote of the peculiar similarity of amusement park rides and the machines of everyday life: ‘that curious disposition



of people to make their amusements so like their daily life . . . The switchbacks, scenic railways and toy trains are merely trolley cars.³⁰ Though the amusement parks of Slosson's era purported to create another world, at the same time they reflected the real world in which they were embedded. The mechanistic aesthetic of Coney Island's parks both celebrated and cautiously analysed the increasing cybernetics of humans and machines. It also reflected the desire of people to experiment with new interpersonal forms, a social machine of sorts.

As people were physically thrown together on human roulette wheels, human pool tables and other sorts of kinetic thrills, they were socially thrown in close proximity with one another. Edward Tilyou, son of Steeplechase's George Tilyou, once remarked that Coney Island acted as a 'gigantic laboratory of human nature'.³¹

Rides like the Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man at Universal Orlando create an experience that combines the approaches of theme parks and films in one space.



The mechanical rides of Coney gave people the opportunity to experiment, and as these were so popular and as they became so intertwined in people's lives, relationships and emotions, they actually helped forge a new social age. One of the most important

The popular Dew Drop at Steeplechase Park threw people down a slide, causing them to reflect on their own bodies and the bodies of others.



functions these rides served was to bring men and women together. Many couples met at Coney Island amusement parks or chose them as a place to spend their first time together. Later, upon marrying, they would reflect on the joy that the parks provided them and how they allowed them to meet, frolic and better understand one another. Edwin E. Slosson ends his survey of 1904 Coney Island, 'The Amusement Business', with an emphasis on the role that Coney played as a matchmaker: 'Many a young couple have been so well satisfied with each other in this short journey through Coney Island that they have decided to continue traveling together though life.'²² The contemporary theme park also serves a social role, but it differs in its approach. Disney theme parks, in particular, shifted the

A view of Blackpool's famous amusement zone, a place of popular amusement that continues today.

social gaiety of the early amusement parks to social control. While Steeplechase promoted the apotheosis of the couple and the value of random strangers meeting and frolicking, Disneyland emphasized the family as the basic unit of the theme park. Disney forged many of his theme park fantasies in correlation with his daughter and the overall frame of the family: amusements must be safe, clean and focused on the enjoyment of the family. As a result of this shift in the social machine many critics have charged that the theme park has lost its role as catalyst for social and personal exploration.

In 1907 Fred Thompson provided an interesting comparison between the parks of Coney Island and Europe, choosing Blackpool as the only amusement venue worthy of comparison in his mind: 'the nearest thing that I find to Coney Island is Blackpool . . . but it is a long way behind. It is stiff and solemn, and its buildings lack the other-world suggestiveness of our Coney Island erections. Coney Island is frankly devoted to fun, the fantastic, the gay, the grotesque.'³³ Of course, Blackpool would outlast all of the amusement parks of Coney Island, suggesting that it, in fact, has something that the Coney Island parks lacked. Thompson's statement provides an interesting comparative opportunity. Luna Park was certainly more themed than Blackpool, but Blackpool perhaps had something more authentic that it maintains to this day. Visiting Blackpool in the twenty-first century one sees sights similar to those Thompson would have seen in his day. Impressive roller coasters, troikas and traditional shows and concessions reflect an emphasis not on theming but on another order – an authentic one in which people coexist peacefully with the amusement ride but do not enter the conceptual and cognitive realm that is promoted in theme parks. Today the Pleasure Beach persists in striking contrast with other theme parks throughout the United



Kingdom. It is the only park in the world, save Kennywood in Pennsylvania, that has one of the famed Noah's Ark rides. In stark contrast to Disney's perfected robots, this ride features mannequins like Noah and his bestiary of animals. Gags like a rocking boat are complemented by recreations of the Great Flood, a storm at sea and rooms of animals. Blackpool's use of Noah's Ark is historic. While the ride may not be as thrilling as the latest multi-million dollar simulation movie ride, it proves that public amusement has a history. Like this famous ride, the other attractions of Blackpool give a critique of the popular theme park trend.

As Thompson suggested many years ago, a park's 'other-world suggestiveness' has a direct bearing on the experiences of the patron. In the case of Blackpool there is no explicit theming; instead historic rides, historical plaques and dioramas featuring former park owners and managers provide an amusement order that is decidedly anti-thematic and anti-corporate. The 'stiff and solemn' nature of the park referenced in Thompson's interpretations might find a point of agreement with contemporary

The Noah's Ark ride – more than a ride since it combined musical elements and amusement ride techniques in one space.

amusement visitors, but another group, entirely hooked on the machine, would respond differently. For these people the machine, not the theme, the corporate logo, the movie-themed ride or stunt show, provides the only amusement truth. Many fans of Blackpool appreciate the park's historic rides, which have achieved the level of works of art: the Big Dipper, Grand National, Noah's Ark, Flying Machines. Such anti-theme park individuals who revere the machine and who eschew the corporatizing trends infecting the theme park share a kinship with 'ride junkies', individuals who cannot get enough of a ride. While working at AstroWorld I learned of a curious fellow known as Flumie. Flumie had ridden the park's log flume ride hundreds of times and I discovered that some workers I trained had a strange affinity with this man, some even calling him the park's most famous celebrity. Flumie proves that even inside theme parks, the machine can take prominence and can imbue an everyday individual like Flumie with serious social capital.

As contemporary Blackpool illustrates, one of the interesting facets of the amusement to theme park evolution is the presence of throwback or atavistic amusement parks in the era of theme parks. While Disney, Six Flags and Universal theme parks have influenced this new form of themed public amusement, some traditional parks have maintained their own identity, a different vision of amusement that snubs its nose at a form that has sometimes been called sanitized popular amusement. Like Blackpool Kennywood resolutely stands as an amusement park in an era of theme parks. The park, founded in 1898, sits outside Pittsburgh, in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania. It is a unique park in that it does not aspire to offer themed attractions and it allows people to bring in outside concessions. The park's website advertises it as a 'traditional amusement park' and 'historic landmark', suggesting a

construction of identity in contrast to the contemporary theme park.³⁴ Kennywood's Lost Kennywood section pays homage to early parks, including the Luna parks of the east coast. Included in this section's design is a Shoot-the-Chutes that mimics the prominent architectural design of early Coney Island parks. The section also includes a strange site – a wall of homage to the early amusement parks of the east coast. Kennywood's motto 'Make a New Memory' emphasizes a contrast with the theme park's present-focused approach. Whereas Disneyland, the Magic Kingdom and Epcot celebrate the present and the future and offer the past only as simulacra, parks like Kennywood pay tribute to the past and offer telling reflection on the contemporary themed space.

The amusement park, like the theme park, is composed of machines – functional, robotic and conceptual. In the amusement park the machine is of utmost value since it is the device that contacts the patron's body in a direct sense. In the modern theme park the corporeal machines of blowing air and frenzied collisions, of the sort that populated Tilyou's Steeplechase, are minimized. The effects of amusements on the body, though still significant in the theme park, are lessened in favour of effects on the mind. Machines are used only as they can be themed and deployed as conceptual tools to connect people to the greater theme park narrative. The machine gives the theme park an important foundation that it must build on in order for it to persist, but the ways that it uses the machine are strikingly different, as Blackpool and Kennywood help emphasize. As the machine is further melded into the thematic landscapes of the contemporary theme park its greatest use is as a part of the larger symbolic order that is narrative: the story.

3 Theme Park as Machine

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- 2 William F. Mangels, *The Outdoor Amusement Industry: From Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, 1952), p. 58.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 5 For more on theme parks as landscapes of motion see Brenda J. Brown, 'Landscapes of Theme Park Rides: Media, Modes, Messages', in Terence Young and Robert Riley, eds, *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations* (Washington, DC, 2002).
- 6 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London, 1995), p. 238. In the quote Bennett is referring specifically to Blackpool.
- 7 Larry Bleiberg, 'One Day, 41 Rides: It's No Problem for the Line King', *San Francisco Chronicle* (11 March 2007).
- 8 Herma Silverstein, *Scream Machines: Roller Coasters Past, Present, and Future* (New York, 1986), p. 7. Another significant source on the history of the roller coaster is Robert Cartmell, *The Incredible Scream Machine: A History of the Roller Coaster* (Fairview Park, OH, 1988).
- 9 Silverstein, *Scream Machines*, p. 10.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 11 Todd H. Throgmorton, *Roller Coasters of America* (Osceola, WI, 1994), p. 37.
- 12 Munch, *Harry G. Traver*, p. 79.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 14 One of the most famous cases of contemporary roller coaster injury occurred on the Rattler at Six Flags Fiesta Texas. Over 250 cases were filed as a result of injuries largely sustained from the first drop. In response, the ride was modified – tamed – which resulted in complaints from riders who preferred the harder ride. See www.rideaccidents.com/rattler.html (accessed 15 January 2008).
- 15 Munch, *Harry G. Traver*, p. 17.
- 16 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London, 1996), p. 115.
- 17 Quoted in the video *Wild Rides 1997* (Discovery Channel).
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- 22 Paul L. Ruben, quoted in Larry Gerber 'Magic Mountain's Record-Speed Ride Reflects New Roller Coaster "Arms Race"', *Daily News* (Los Angeles) (15 May 1996).

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- 24 Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York, 1934), p. 426.
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- 29 *Fun House* (Discovery Channel documentary film, 1997).
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- 31 John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978), p. 59.
- 32 Slosson, 'The Amusement Business', p. 139.
- 33 Frederick [sic] A. Thompson, 'The Summer Show', *The Independent* (20 June 1907), p. 1463.
- 34 Kennywood, www.kennywood.com. On December 11, 2007, it was announced that Kennywood was sold to a major theme park company, Parques Reunidos, a company that manages 61 other parks. According to a Kennywood press release, 'The Kennywood experience – as visitors have come to love and expect – will continue. Nothing will seem different'. See, 'New Chapter in Kennywood Entertainment History Announced', www.kennywood.com/docs/12.11.07KECNewChapterRelease.pdf (accessed 15 January 2008).

4 Theme Park as Show

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- 5 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Champaign, IL, 2001), pp. 25–6.

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