



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REALITY, HYPERREALITY AND DISNEYLAND: EXPLORING THE PHILOSOPHICAL LANDSCAPE

Jagveer Kaur

1. Department of Philosophy, Punjabi University, Patiala.

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Abstract

The paper explores the pervading constructed realities in contemporary world that appear in the form of fun parks and safaris that are blurring the line between the real and the simulated. The places like Disneyland and Animal Kingdom are carefully curated utopias which mask the ruse of constructs of consumer culture. Drawing on Baudrillard's concept of Hyperreality, these hyperreal spaces not only blur the boundaries, but also captivate one in immersive experiences surpassing physical limitations; while endorsing the narrative of capitalist society and consumer culture at the same time. It is crucial to examine and understand these fabrications as it provides us both; as a medium of escapism and false sense of control.

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Introduction:-

Simulations are pervading our surroundings. All the natural world is gradually being replaced by simulations. Hyperreal environments refer to those spaces which are carefully curated with marvellous aesthetics, advanced technology and perfection. Hyperspaces often exist as a more than perfect copy of an existing space or as a creation of utopic imagination. These exist in real space and time but exists with the objective of transcending masses beyond space and time. The present society can be said to have an abundance of such places. Let's discuss the very first manipulations in physical environments and their ever-evolving nature.

Disneyland

Disney World is often regarded as the ultimate manifestation of postmodernism and postmodern society, as it employs simulation to construct an illusion that allows us to transcend the limitations of time, space, self, and society. However, despite its appeal, many of the concepts that it purports are distorted, turning it into a realm of illusion in more ways than one. Disney World displays the quintessential embodiment of the intertwined orders of simulacra.

Disneyland as Degenerate Utopia

"Perhaps Utopia can never be realized without destroying itself" – David Harvey¹

Luis Marin coined the term "degenerate utopia," which he used to describe the concept of Disneyland. According to Marin, Disneyland represents a type of utopia that has become corrupted or degraded over time. It is necessary to understand the term 'utopia' here. It is referred as an ideological place, a place where ideology is put into play; it is stage for ideological representation, which displays fabricated relationship individuals tend to sustain with the reality. Two goals are to be considered, in order to analyse Disneyland as utopic space. First, to exhibit the

permanence of some spatial agency that can be certified as utopic. Not solely can they be discovered in architectural structure and associated works; however, they are additionally in works that fill a unique characteristic with regard to reality, history and social relations. These patterns include a neutralizing essential impact, and inside ideology the neutralization defines the precise space for constructing and elaborating social theory. The above said patterns and features show up in the topography of an actual area in California, and via the visitor's actual use of it. Overall, Disneyland serves as a complex manifestation of a degenerate utopia, whereas the idealized representation of a utopia has been tainted and distorted over time. It reflects the interplay between constructed illusions and the real world, inviting critical analysis of the relationship between ideology and societal constructs.

Disneyland is utopian in the sense that it is a fantastic manifestation of fictional connection that is realized in a geographical area that the supreme class of American society sustain with their authentic existence, with the actual history of the USA, and with the space outside of its borders. It is an enormous and displaced metaphor of the structure of representation and values special to American society. It is an outstanding portrayal of daily life, it is a happy, harmonious, non-conflictual space outside from the 'real' world, 'outside' in such a way as to pacify, to entertain, to invent the history, to domesticate nostalgia for some parabolic past, to eternalize obsession of commodity culture instead to critique it. The values like welfare, consumption, scientific and technological advancements, fascinating image of past and future, morality etc. are projected under the control of law and order rather than violence and exploitation. All the variations and features of capitalist alienation and of modern imperialism are depicted. Disneyland is a stage and a place of projection where the contemporary American ideology can be viewed and tested. However, it is not the only case. The visitors, themselves, are on stage and are actors performing acts, alienated by their part without being aware of performing a part. The tourists to Disneyland are put in the position of the ceremonial tale-tellers. They recite the mythic tale of antagonistic genesis of society. They go through the counterstatements while they visit the complex; from the pirate's cave to an atomic submarine, from sleeping beauty castle to a Rocketship. Their path down the park is the description, recounted numerous times, of the illusive blend of contrary elements, of the fictional solution to the conflicting tension.

Marin is of the viewpoint that, Disneyland is a utopian place but since it doesn't put a vital distance between the inside and the outside, it is degenerated. This pure fantasy land encompasses several dimensions. "The dialectic is repressed and stability and harmony are secured through intense surveillance and control"ⁱⁱ. With this framework, utopia as a representative of an internalized ideological discourse, takes its place in our social lives through shopping malls, gated communities and entertainment centres, which are the places that the contemporary neo-liberal utopia come into being, especially for the American society.

It is crucial to mention here the work of Pilvi Takala's "Real Snow White" (2009). It consists of the video recording of her performance in Paris Disneyland. The character of Snow White is worldwide known, made by Grimm Brothers, and adapted to cinema in 1937 by Disney after the rights for use was brought by them. In this, the artist tries to get inside, wearing the same costume as Disneyland's Snow white. In the beginning, she was cherished by the public but then the security guard intervened and stopped her from entering as she was threat to "Real Snow White" inside the park and may jeopardize the reputation of park and then even the public lost interest as she wasn't real. The system that is the centre of peace and moderation and free from any conflict suddenly shows it's another aspect. In this seemingly perfect society, the strategy of repressing, regulating, and marginalizing individuals becomes apparent with just a small intervention. Her early acts set in the social life, such as malls and workplaces (Bag Lady 2006, The Trainee 2008) are worth mentioning. The slight intervention cause disturbance in happy and productive working and consumption places and the persons within.

An artist, Emile Mausner, wrote an article, 'Degenerate Utopia: Disney and Disenchantment in Central Florida' in May 2020. In this article, Emile tries to trace the whole process, from purchasing lands under pseudonymous entities to construction; from opening to the experience of persons involved as staff, especially her mother, Lisa. In 1995, first theme park – southern California's Disneyland was opened, shortly after the desire to build a second park occurred to Walt Disney. The story of Walt Disney's degenerate Floridian utopia was initiated in resolute secrecy. The Florida project was carried out in unwavering secrecy by a small group of professionals. Walt Disney was intent not only to build a fantastical amusement park but also a planned community, and in its dormancy, developing his "City of Tomorrow", which required both silence and sleight. The goal was to acquire as much as land at minimal prices before landowners and speculators realized who was coming to town. As the vision was suspected by Emile Bavar, a young reporter, Disney was already in possession of 27,000 acres of swampland. Later, within one month,

Walt Disney and his brother held a press conference to announce their plans to fashion a marvellous entertainment venue in Central Florida.

The construction of Disneyland, came with wonderful opportunities for employment but gradually devastated the local business. The mother of artist, Lisa, joined the Disneyland as a high school girl and worked at different places in the timespan. She willingly moved to Canada's northwest territories, to distance herself from the physical and psychological realm of Disneyland by 1975. "You get so overwhelmed by the hordes. You start thinking of people as cattle. Screaming kids. Hot, tired people at their ugliest. You develop a disdain for humanity. It just changes you"ⁱⁱⁱ. The word 'Cattle' shares a striking image when it comes for Disney world guests, as they spent maximum park waiting in lines. It often takes half an hour, to travel between parking lot and Magic Kingdom, excluding the time spent in lines to purchase tickets. Disneyland, with its seemingly infinite series of transports, facilities and enchantments has completely changed the queue game into an occult science. It deployed various land and water tracts carrying guests from 'real' to 'fantasy' worlds.

The Magic kingdom at Disneyworld in Orlando, Florida remains the most visited theme parks in the United States despite the scorching summers, unpredictable hurricanes and even pandemic. Orlando hardly has an identity as a city independent of Disney World, in its shadow, Orlando has been artificially manufactured to sustain what is, unsustainable: limitless, all-encompassing enchanted. Disneyworld, a fantasy land, subordinated the local ambience of Orlando. Orlando witnessed a huge growth of corporate culture and the author wonders about an Orlando deprived from the unsustainable fantasies of the Kingdom, a city that develops a taste for considering with what is already here rather than importing a readymade dream of another place, a distant tomorrow.

Disneyworld: Postmodern Utopia

Disneyland is presented as the objective profile of America. Jean Baudrillard places it in third order of simulation as it is presented as unreal in order to make us believe that all the America is real, but belong to the hyperreal order and the order of simulation. Disneyworld is created in the image of an ideal world, and it implores its visitors to explore it through child's innocence and perspective. It is constructed to conceal the fact that childishness is everywhere. But most importantly it creates an imaginary rendition of a perfect world by inviting visitors to escape their limitations in physical reality so they are no longer limited by time, distance, size and physical laws. The visitors, on the thrill rides tend to defy the rules of gravity, moving at high speed and in ways that seem violations to common sense. It invites visitors into a world of uninterrupted fest, full of parades and fireworks, with costumed performers and endless fun, in order to escape the fallen state of society and self.

Given the above paradigm, it's quite clear that Disney World offers thee visitors a concocted realization of humanity's profound desire: transcendence. In Disneyland, negative emotions are eliminated and one tends to go on a journey through symbolic worlds that are objective and material, but apparently as weightless, merry and chimeric as the imagination. Not only Disneyland carries one into an imaginary world but is also tricks one into consumer culture. Disneyland's Main Street appears as fantastic fiction but, on the other hand it is an intensely canny commercial corporeality. The Main Street charades are presented as toy houses, but their interior is always a concealed supermarket, where the visitors buy compulsively, believing that they are still playing. It turns us into passive consumers transporting with the help of rides. Disney's Castle takes you in an entirely fantasy land which you dreamt about listening to the tales of childhood. Disney uses a great deal of technology to bring forth the simulated experience in all its spaces like EPCOT, Galaxy Edge and Pirates of Caribbean. In Pirates of Caribbean, audio animatronics are used to convert the fantasy world more real than reality itself. As we are well aware of the innate desire that mankind cherishes is the pleasure of imitation, and what we enjoy more now is that it has reached its apex and afterwards reality will always be more inferior to it.

Animal Kingdom: A distorted replica

Disney's Animal Kingdom is the world's largest zoological theme parks situated in the southwest portion of Disney World. It is a spectacular, 580 acres mixture of simulation and authenticity, fact and fantasy, paragon and amusement. Disney describes it as a 'nature' park, but nature is uncertain, wild and far less entertaining to be qualified for a postmodern theme park. Animal Kingdom, is yet another example representing postmodern America's own version of nature which is adulterated, depicted through the renowned Tarzan movies, unnatural wildlife documentaries and sci-fi culture.

Michael Eisner, then chairman and CEO of Disney company says the park is “like an open book, with a dramatic and humorous plot that features adventures, conflicts and the unpredictable antics of live animals in their own environments... The entire park is an incredible stage set with Disney artists creating forests, streams and waterfalls, dense tropical jungles and savannas filled with natural beauty, where the animals will live”^{iv}.

Animal Kingdom is divided into seven themed areas, starting with oasis, which is equivalent to Main Street USA, as it provides transition into the world of animals from park. Discovery Island is at the centre of the park and serves as ‘central hub’ connecting the other sections of the park, except as Rafiki’s planet Watch. There stands the yet another symbol, “The Tree of Life”. The Tree of Life is 14 stories above the visitors and is fabricated with numerous branches and endless leaves and dominates the landscape. This fabricated tree is presented as the symbol of magical nature, especially mother nature giving birth to animal forms out of the matrix itself, as more than 350 animals are carved into tree’s roots, ferocious trunk and sturdy branches. It is a fabricated idol of life itself. “It’s tough to be a Bug”, a 3D adventure is featured in the tree of life, an amusing tale, loaded with dozens of special effects, trying to provide a theatrical experience of world, through a bug’s eye. Asia and Africa are theme parks replicating the culture, cuisines and biodiversity of both the continents respectively. One can visit to Disney World’s Animal Kingdom, and can enjoy the architecture, lifestyle, heritage, food and even wildlife of various places of the two continents from the comfort of their hotel rooms in USA.

Dinoland USA is another theme park, in the theme park. It is designed to give you the illusion that you have travelled back to the era of dinosaurs, with a great melange of exotic and ancient trees and bushes. Various fossils and the skeletons of Branchiosaurus and Carnosaurs tend to take the visitors to an adventurous world from a mundane land. Dinoland also presents ‘Finding Nemo – A Musical’ based on a Disney movie. The movie is meant to stir the parenting traits and provide the visitors with tips on parenting along with our duty towards environment. Rafiki’s Planet Watch is further divided in three areas. First comes the Habitat Habit, it is a relatively short discovery trail with fun statues of rafiki, educated symbols about co-existence of human and wildlife as well as some cotton-top tamarins. Then comes the conservation station that displays the several preservation measures and efforts taken by Disney company. It also contains picture window that allows visitors to peep into veterinary labs, brooder rooms and nurseries to know about animals from the staff. This display of events turns the staff in live theatre and presents them as living heroes and role models tending to animals. Affection section includes all the gentle domestic animals whom visitors can touch and pet, it is to give the visitors sense of involvement and fill them with the sense of love and compassion towards animals.

Disney’s Animal Kingdom is a bewitching simulation machine that knits together elements of nature with fabrications. It is full of natural and animatronic animals picturing both real and imaginary creatures. A fantastic example of animatronics in the Pandora – the world of avatar, which is the recent addition to Animal Kingdom. It is the epitome of simulated experience. It is inspired from James Cameron’s Avatar, invites the visitors to admire nature’s magic, lets them plunge in a breath-taking bioluminescent rainforest with floating mountains and alien wildlife. Bob Iger is of the opinion that it is a real ecosystem and provides you with the chance to have your own adventures in the pandora world. The main motive is to engage the visitors and give them interactive opportunities to provide them with precise experience of transcending to a completely new planet.

Flaska Reclinta, a massive plant provides most unique interactive experience with a special spot when touched leads to an eruption of steamy or spray, giving the illusion of purifying air to breathe for humans on the lines of movie. The movie made by James Cameron is a pure digital artwork. He himself was awed at the surreality of Disney’s pandora. Joe Rhode, virgin Galactic Architect, did a wonderful job in giving the tangible look to a digital masterpiece. Land itself is the character, expressing and teaching how to respond and what it means to be in a place. The floating mountains are engineering archetype in and of themselves and are built in a surprisingly convincing way. The food served at Satulli Canteen gives you the impression of some sort of alien food. The flight of passage is rather astonishing. Before flight, one goes from mountain and caves which is full of fabricated Navi art and culture, gives the visitor illusion of travelling for a long time and entering into new space. The preparation for flight and queue time is thoroughly designed. There are two to three pre-shows before linking to an avatar closely relating to your body. Here comes a miraculous simulating machine. It gives a far convincing experience of riding a banshee, draconic flying animals. The whole ride is meticulously designed giving you the windy gushes while flying, earthly scents in forests, water splashes on harbour and many more. It takes you to an altogether new world. The Navi River ride is perfectly constructed with all the flora and fauna of pandora land in physical form and some in animatronic form. The centre of attention is Navi Shaman performing some rituals. All this provides visceral experience to

immerse the visitor in Pandora Land. All the Disney World is not just an entertainment unit; it is a successful attempt to imitate the nature in a far better way than the nature itself. The real and fake are blended in a seamless way that they tend to overlap each other and is hard to distinguish what is what. The fake trees are not only precisely imitated, but they have unfeigned appearing texture transported with the help of imprint. Apart from fake trees, even authentic trees are artificially created to add a living tableau in zoo theatre. In fact, the entire park is a giant machine of simulation, surveilled and sustained through computers. In order to keep and limit animals at different places, barriers and escarpments are used but are hidden with the help of props of nature to give the authentic illusion of pure or natural nature. The high-tech infrastructure has hidden feeding stations under natural appearing fabrications stimulating herds of animals roaming from one place to another fashioning an entire scenario of wildlife. The mingling of material deception with auditory and visual special effects to induce various emotions in visitors is not an icon of natural park but of contemporary theme park.

Till time mythmakers, tale-tellers and shamans used to manipulate our fantasies and turn them in the appearance of life, in order to satisfy our desires. Art and fiction have also gone to a far extent but never have had able to convert life into theatre. The Animal Kingdom offers the visitors a simplified form, contrary to the untamed nature and fulfils the narcissist desire of us, as human beings, always as the centre of story. A hero that saves the innocent nature. It also tries to fulfil its environmental conservation agenda and no doubt has inspired millions of people to live in tune with nature. But the whole contemporary culture is hell bent on symbolically saving the world from ourselves which poses a great threat to “reality” as the kind of dangers we pretend to save ourselves from but in reality, are the result of our malevolent actions. The park is about our unconscious dreams, desires and fears including audaciousness, goodness and dismissal of corruption from ourselves. It is offering us dangers to fear, suffers to sympathize with, villains to hate, hypocrites to disdain and leaders to admire in a compelling way that these events are important events in actual life. It tries to induce positive emotions, but isn’t only about manipulated nature, but our reaction and perception.

The critic Northrop Frye believed that western civilization has been pervaded by a myth of a universe with four levels – heaven; a perfect uncorrupted world of nature that expresses our impulses; the corrupted world of nature and death we live in; and an underworld. Disney represents our primary craving of living in second order and saving the nature instead of destroying it. Like the entire western civilization, its job is to drench us in false utopias and imitations of transcendence, for its own benefit. We should stand up against the moral delusions of this multi-million-dollar setup, instead of rejoicing it. There are many philosophies like eastern mysticism, Freud and modern science that teach us, how to gain transparency of thoughts and desires and to separate our perception from the world as whole. We need not to struggle our imaginations while studying the world, instead with the transparency of our thoughts, we can distinguish truth from illusions and can understand the stories fabricated by popular culture.

Disney with art and technology has recreated romance stories, myths of aliens, time travel and a lot more, thus defying the “dry scientism”, the view posited by Max Weber that due to rise of science, the modern world has lost both its charm and hope for a happy future. But Disney gives us the postmodern promise of a perfect society, in the form of fictional world using simulations, with the hope to enjoy, later, in reality. It gives us assurance that with the help of technology we can break free the current circumstances of mankind and transcendent to the era of impeccable state of nature, society and ourselves.

But the paradox here is that, it manipulates the image of perfect world that we desire by expressing the world that is innocent, free from corruption and flaws; and in the process it filters out all the hard truths of society and self the irony is that, in order to show us utopic world, it turns us into passive consumers. If we observe Disney closely, it not only shows wonderful future, but also the threats imposed by technology. We might get lost in the domain of automation, falsifications and reassuring witty phantasms.

We need a renewed sense of culture criticism that help humanity not to get drenched in these would be never lands. But what is unfortunate is that, we are up against those giants who have mastered the art of manipulation with high end technology.

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