"Out of This World: A Review of Scott A. Lukas’ Theme Park" by Péter Kristóf Makai

Péter Kristóf Makai is a graduate student pursuing his MA degree in Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies at the English Dept. of the University of Szeged, writing on the intermedial relationship between theme parks and computer games. Email: peter.makai@ieas-szeged.hu

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Reaktion Books’ Objekt series is a fascinating venture in giving a new twist to the old paradigm of cultural studies to approach culture at its most basic level: the objects and buildings that surround us. Studies of material culture have always thrived upon defamiliarising the mundane artefacts of a given community and dissecting the social processes in which they are embedded. Such iconic modern inventions as the motorcycle, the dam, or even the school are well worth the genealogical investigations they are subjected to in this series of books, enabling the authors to reveal the economic and ideological implications of our everyday interactions with these artefacts of human culture.

Theme parks have enjoyed a high-profile reputation amongst scholars of popular culture for being a unique site of conflux in the semiotic orders of signification, upsetting existing hierarchies as well as producing new norms of interaction, altering social relations and maintaining their hold over the popular imagination. It is enough to think of Umberto Eco or Jean Baudrillard’s scathing critique of hyperreality that continental European intellectuals perceive as omnipresent in the signifying processes of the theme park world to get a glimpse of what theoretical battles are fought over such a venue of popular entertainment. At the crossroads of modernity and postmodernity, the theme park has been cast as either belonging to the cultural logic of the one or the other, reflecting tendencies of both epochs, but seldom has it been looked at as a site of interaction creative in its own right, defining alternative relations between cultural agents. Scott A. Lukas attempts to rectify the situation by getting ahold of the theme park, following its genesis and many mutations, and assessing the influence of the mass entertainment venue on culture.

Lukas sees the theme park (and its designers) as an active participant in the creation of culture: “though it still aims to thrill patrons, [in transforming from the amusement park to the theme park,] it recognizes a more
powerful role – that of altering society itself" (177). The book presents the impact of the theme park on society through six of its aspects, each chapter devoted to focusing on one particular function. The chapters explore the theme park as an oasis and a refuge of the imagination from the dullness of work, a landscaped environment, a machine of entertainment, a show and a performance, a marketable brand and, finally, as a transposable, malleable cultural text. By following this trajectory, Lukas maps the global culture the theme park has produced through the adoption of the ideological aims and economic power of the imperial world’s fairs.

Scholars versed in sociologically informed cultural studies will note the lack of critical discussion in relation to the treatment of distinct sociocultural groups in theme parks and their impact on the parks in return. There is scant attention given to the highly stereotypical depiction of racial difference in parks throughout the world, nary a word on the gender-differentiated experiences of patrons. Additionally, the author remains almost entirely silent on issues of class. Nor is there a satisfactory handling of even such a fundamental economic and ideological underpinning of the theme park as the unit of the post-war nuclear family, integral to the rise and commercial success of this cultural form. Level-headedly, Lukas never makes the theme park the diabolical machine of brainwashing that its fiercest cultural opponents make it out to be. That kind of critical scholarship was never a goal of his book.

On the contrary, Theme Park is structured to give the readers a cognitive map of the interconnexions that link the theme park to the wider social sphere, diachronically following the emergence and spread of the parks and synchronically comparing theme parks of the world functioning at present. Chapter one, “Theme Park as Oasis” is dedicated to finding the precursors of the modern theme park, such as the pleasure gardens of London and Denmark, or the amusement parks of Coney Island. Here Lukas introduces the hybrid concept of the artificial-real, applying it to human artefacts which are endowed with human-specific meaning and engaged in signifying processes but are, first and foremost, thinglike, objectual. In Lukas’ words, in the construction of the artificial-real of the theme park, “the utilitarian features of the landscape are combined with the altered features of entertainment geography and architecture [by human beings who] may modify it in synthetic ways that perfectly fuse the natural and the unnatural” (23). This strikes at the heart of the ‘hyperreal as fake’ model of conceiving the theme parks in postmodernist thinking by managing to salvage the physical, material reality that is the foundation for any other cultural valorisation.

After a discussion of the pivotal 1939-40 New York World’s Fair, which gave the theme park landscape its own logic, its “important architecture of juxtapositions, [proving] that it is possible to connect disparate amusements – whether rides, shows, historical displays, demonstrations or cultural reconstructions – in one space” (73), Chapter 2 dives into theme parks in earnest. “Theme Park as Land” discusses the importance of the geographical location of these mass entertainment venues. Disney’s worlds and the elaborate landscape design decisions that influenced the choice of themes and their materialisations form the centre of the chapter. To the credit of Lukas, he also takes note of the Universal Studios park, several Chinese parks and Tennessee’s Dollywood, among others. Subsequent chapters shift from an historical overview to a four-pronged theoretical approach to theme parks, branching out to examine them from influential scholarly perspectives.

Chapter 3 takes apart the meanings epitomised by machines and installations which endow the theme park with its most iconic and alluring promise: the rides and their reification of the imagination. The “Theme Park as Machine” turns in Lukas’ hands into a site where the fusion of humankind and the material artefacts it produces is rendered possible in diverse and entertaining ways. Evaluating the social implications of the theme park as transformative of the patrons’ identity, Lukas remarks:

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. (105)
This is where the book really shines; in assessments like these, Lukas can put us on new tracks, steering us away from fruitless debates concerning the theme park’s relation to nigh-Platonic ideas and forms. By suggesting that the whole edifice of the theme park is a “narrative machine” (105, emphasis added) of cybernetic importance, Lukas asks fellow scholars of (popular) culture to reanalyse the theoretical investment in seeing the theme park as derivative of the culture in which it is situated, merely a handy illustration of ideological processes working on groups and individuals without examining the spatial rhetoric it produces. After this reassessment, the semiotic approach that underlies his deft analysis becomes a socioculturally relevant force and one that ought to readjust our understanding of the theme park.

Halfway through the third chapter, Lukas makes the case for the narrative machine of the theme park to operate through the use of the building façades, giving the amusement machine “a sense of performance” (120-121). The trajectory of the argument carries over to the next chapter that looks at the theme park as show. In this chapter, Lukas argues for taking the themes of the mass entertainment venue as pieces performed by architecture. Here, however, Lukas falls into the trap many other cultural critics have fallen before. He claims that “the performance of architecture, like all performance, is based on a definitive crime against reality: certain symbolic features, some lifted from actual places and some imagined, become the representations used in performative architecture” (139). The egregious mistake of falling back on the unproductive reality vs. representation schema is all the more surprising since he already devised the concept of the “artificial-real” (23) as a middle-ground, dialectical approach that does not seek to separate the symbolic and the material in cultural production. It remains puzzling why Lukas would back down from using the concept he created to argue for his new scientific perspective more consistently and forcefully.

The performance-based analysis, though, is especially apt in light of how the most famous operational model of theme parks, the Disney metaphor of the theme park as stage, became the industry standard. In fact, throughout the book, the Disney parks remain the yardstick of all comparisons, and the whole book is, perhaps not unduly, dominated by the American perspective in treating its subject matter. In fact, Lukas makes the case for the theme park emerging as a particularly American cultural object, “on a par with other indigenous American forms, including jazz” (96). Although this assessment of the theme park’s Americanness might delight some scholars of American civilisation, it is quite lamentable that the flow of cultural capital surrounding the theme park remains unidirectional. In this model, the European ‘input’ of the pleasure gardens and world exhibitions come to the New World, where the theme park is fully formed, then it radiates out of its gestating chamber into the global scene via the magic of pervasive theming. A more nuanced and strategically deployed analysis of the spatial movement of cultural appropriations would have bolstered Lukas’ point about the nodal relationship of and the gradual spread of theming both internationally (from Europe to North America and then to the rest of the world) and within an American context.

Lukas is adamant in showing that the theme park has a unique potential to serve as a basis of cross-media franchise production because of the loose narrative provided by the theme, which creates an ambiance transposable to other, more narrative-driven media. Lukas places the corporate identity and the brand as a prime motivator of cultural production in late capitalism, and identifies “the idea of the corporate form as the symbolic connector that links people, ideas and things in the theme park and, ultimately, as the entity that gives meaning to people and their experiences” (196, emphasis in original). He brings the now phenomenally successful Pirates of the Caribbean franchise (spanning four movies, three computer games, a theme park ride with minor modifications in four theme parks, a LEGO set, several prequel novels and a pinball table) as an example, demonstrating how corporate-designed narratives weave themselves into the tapestry of personal and popular culture. In his view,

[r]ides like Pirates of the Caribbean often create intergenerational effects in which parents pass down to their children the idea of the ride and, most importantly, their reminiscences of it from their past. Though the ride will become a brand, it appears more innocently as a material embodiment of a fantasy story and thus people ‘pass it along’ as if it were a part of their own intimate family
Although he does not miss the chance to point out how the corporate model also saved the mass entertainment venue from languishing in obscurity, previously overshadowed by the private joys of television and the solipsistic mass entertainment of the movies, he fails to sufficiently develop the point he is trying to make in making the brand (and explicitly the theme park brand) as a cultural heritage.

He attempts to bring this framework of intergenerational effects into play in Chapter 6, “Theme Park as Text,” the chapter which most literary theory-influenced scholars of culture will find familiar, the warmth of the hearth of textual interpretation beckoning them to plod through the otherwise object-oriented book. Here Lukas makes the most generalising and universalistic claims about the theme park, stating that it is a “sounding board of life” (237), a site of boundless experimentation, not unlike a social Petri dish:

The tradition of the theme park […] expresses the moral missive of human experimentation with nature […] and its ill effects. Thus the theme park as a narrative becomes a foundation on which the most serious issues of society […] may be tested and played out. (219)

Scholars adhering to the paradigm of critical cultural studies might criticise Lukas for covering up social tensions among different sociocultural groups in sweeping statements like this. They might also point out the fact that his liberal humanism clouds his vision to the more sinister aspects of the hegemony of the theme park’s mass entertainment model of rampant consumerism. But the problem with such overly general fauxanalytical sentences is this: it tells us nothing of the actual interaction between the theme park, its designers, managers, patrons, fans and detractors. Lukas lacks the courage to make his claim that the cultural form of the theme park and the medium of the ride is an evolving form of entertainment that lives as it is remade and altered from generation to generation explicit. This affinity for the cultural evolutionary manipulation of the theme park is a recurring theme of the book, but it is never quite overtly theorised.

When the author writes about the intergenerational traditions that have shaped the carnival, the amusement park and the world’s fair into the theme park, he is wary of realising the full implications of writing statements like: “Wrongly seen by many as merely an entertainment form, it [the theme park] is indeed a life form – a means of negotiating the self, the world around it and the vast expanse of culture, people and things in the world” (96). What is at stake here is that the spatiotemporal diffusion of the virtual entertainment space, from the earliest hanging gardens and follies through the illusionistic faux terrains of the eighteenth-century panoramas (later incorporated into the dark rides of the theme park) to the massively-multiplayer on-line games of today, the pervasive nature of virtual space allows a fully evolutionary approach to the worlds and myths created by human culture. Lukas comes closest to this vision when, summing the whole book’s argument up, he writes that

[the]newest theme parks act as powerful lifespaces – as physical places that project educational, political, and lifestyle messages amidst all the consumerism, […] giving them life. Like our early human ancestors who may have used symbolic caves to deal with the unrealities, the difficulties, of the real world, we use these virtual spaces to do much the same. (244-245, emphasis added)

But even then, the idea of cultural, material life is not nurtured to its full potential. Were it made more explicit, the otherwise disjointed narrative that Lukas presents here would have made a much more lasting impact on the cultural study of the theme park. Overall, the book is an eminent piece of scholarship on its own right, making scholars reconsider the supposedly profane, vulgar space of an important venue of entertainment. It is an admirable attempt to take the theme park seriously, without writing it off as insignificant or, worse, an abomination. It is, however, a bit ironic that a book in a series entitled “Objekt” should end with its object almost literally coming to life. But what could, if not the theme park, popularised by Walt Disney, who made a living making dead matter appear alive, animating culture, shaping the amusement park into Lukas’ virtual lifespaces?