

**Locked in the Funhouse:**  
**Imprisonment and Escape in Theme Parks of the**  
**Postmodern American Literary Imagination**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate and trace the development of the theme park in postmodern American literature. Using theoretical models provided by Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, and Guy Debord, it will explore the idea of simulation and simulacra in the context of the postmodern era and apply it to several primary texts during close readings. The texts will be examined in chronological order (with minor exceptions) and will be shown to illustrate a movement from the idea of confinement, or imprisonment, towards escape, or freedom. Beginning with the proto-theme parks of Donald Barthelme's short fiction, it will then analyse John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," David Foster Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," several short stories by George Saunders, "Zimmer Land" by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, and, finally, *Swamplandia!* By Karen Russell. The ultimate goal will be to arrive at a conclusion that plots an escape route from the traps of simulation, and, through these texts, breaks free of the oppressive regimes imposed by American capitalism and the postmodern era.

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# Introduction

## Illusions and Phantasms: Simulation, Hyperreality, and the Fictional Theme Park

“What’s it about? Why put us here? Once upon a time, bad things going on Above? [...] Why the costumes, the roles, the creek, the Tram, the Bowling? I do not know.” (Saunders, “Ghoul” 58).

“Ghoul” (2020), by George Saunders, is set in an underground theme park in a dystopian future. Our protagonist, Brian, works as an actor in the park’s horror section, portraying a “squatting ghoul”. The most important tenet for workers in this theme park is compliance: there are a rigorous set of rules all employees must follow, and certain transgressions or slips of the tongue result in being kicked to death by colleagues. This Draconian system appears to be in place solely to maintain an illusion, or a sense of verisimilitude for visitors. It is essential that the façade never fails, as the park itself is a space of simulated hyperreality, littered with falsified representations of real-world phenomena such as “pretend meadow, with real-appearing flowers; free-flowing creek, beside which we may sit, out of which fake fish leap on these sort of wheels, four fish per wheel...” (51). Against this idyllic ersatz backdrop, however, acts of intense violence, paranoia, and authoritarianism unfold. Everyone is constantly monitoring one another, on the lookout for lapses in the illusion: “Shirley from Monitoring shoots me a look, meaning: Brian, give Rolph

there a kick, so I can write down that you were among those who gave Rolph a kick because you were, as we all were, shocked and offended by the boldness and audacity of Rolph's lies" (52). It then becomes clear that not only are the employees of the park literally trapped within their underground cavern, but they are also entirely cut off from the outside world and have seemingly never had a visitor. "We are sealed in, sealed in good down here, by a stout, permanent plug of concrete" (58).

Saunders's stories are often set in similar environments to that of "Ghoul," in which theme parks are sinister, cruel places where humble characters frequently find themselves trapped, whether metaphorically or literally. This paper will trace the development of the theme park in postmodern American literature, and, using theoretical models by Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, and Roland Barthes, examine the ways in which these fictional theme parks operate as traps, which ensnare worker and visitor alike, and from which one must escape.

The conception of the fictional theme park naturally grew alongside the cultural phenomenon of real theme parks, represented most notably by Disneyland, opened in 1955 by Walt Disney in Anaheim, California. Taking its precedent from fairgrounds and amusement parks, Disneyland featured several "themed" areas, including "Adventureland", "Tomorrowland", and "Main Street U.S.A.". Its best-known feature, the "Cinderella Castle," evoked the settings of fairy tales, and can be recognised in Disney's stylised logo. Paying customers were given free rein to explore these areas, partaking in the rides and activities, interacting with the hired actors playing famous Disney characters, and, most importantly, spending their money in the abundant gift shops and restaurants, all within the vast

confines of the park. This large-scale simulated attraction proved eminently popular, and Disneyland was a tremendous cultural and financial success, resulting in the establishment of several new locations, and innumerable imitations and similar theme parks appearing worldwide. It also inspired a lot of critical engagement by theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, who have written about Disneyland in particular as an example of a specifically American, capitalist, postmodern microcosm.

In his seminal work of poststructuralist theory, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard posited that in the postmodern age, the unfathomable rate of media production meant that signs, simulations, and simulacra had begun to replace reality and that the western world had entered a new order that he termed “hyperreal” (2). Baudrillard cites Disneyland as an example of hyperreality, claiming that:

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms: the Pirates, the Frontier, the Future World, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation. But what attracts the crowds the most is without a doubt the social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of real America, of its constraints and joys (9).

The idea behind this theory requires an understanding of Baudrillard’s use of terms like “simulation” and “hyperreality”. Firstly, simulations refer to signs, or representations of objects, places, and people that we understand to exist in reality. For example, televised advertisements are notorious for their depictions of food products, often tampered with to elicit desire in audiences. The tantalising slice being pulled slowly away from the impossibly shiny, perfectly divided pizza portrayed on our television screens is likely infused with glue to make the cheese appear extra stretchy. A coat of oily sheen has probably been applied to

the surface of the pizza in order to make it appear freshly cooked. All of which is to say nothing of the numerous editing and postproduction tricks used to transform this inedible food into the ultimate agent of enticement. The slice of pizza is therefore a *simulation*, which represents the real: actual pizza. "Simulacra," on the other hand, refers to simulations of simulations, such as can be found in Disneyland, for instance. The previously mentioned Disney castle provides a useful demonstration. The castle was supposedly modelled on Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany (*Britannica*), which itself was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the image of medieval European castles from "legend and poetry" as its inspiration (*ibid*). The Disney castle, therefore, becomes "hyperreal" in that it is a conscious replication of a previously existing structure which in turn signifies fictional imagery of medieval castles. Baudrillard argues that Disneyland is thus more *real* in many ways than the rest of the world, as it makes no attempt to disguise the fact that it creates and maintains an illusion for the benefit of its spectators:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (9).

Baudrillard's theories build on earlier work by cultural theorists such as Roland Barthes and Guy Debord, key figures in structuralist and Marxist thought of post-war France.

*Mythologies* (1957) by Roland Barthes, published just two years after the opening of Disneyland, analyses the signs and semiotics presented to us by society. It offers alternative ways of looking at everyday phenomena by attempting to locate and communicate the

encoded messages and values behind seemingly benign signs. Barthes, in short, takes Saussurean linguistic theory of signs and signifiers, and applies it not only to language, but to the very structure of society. He refers to the illusions cast by these structures as “mythologies,” and presents a case for reconceptualising certain myths as emblems of the power dynamics or political structures behind them. “In a single day,” Barthes writes, “how many really non-signifying fields do we cross? Very few, sometimes none. Here I am, before the sea; It is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, signals, sign-boards, clothes, suntan even, which are so many messages to me” (135). This prefigures Baudrillard’s assertion that postmodernity has bred an era of simulation and signifiers that has replaced reality. For Barthes, it is human interference that creates this environment of semiotic messaging, whereas the only *pure* states are natural ones, such as the sea in the above example. Theme parks may be considered to exist in diametric opposition to natural landscapes, as they are entirely manmade, and every last detail has been curated with the intention of maintaining a fantastical illusion for the duration of the consumer’s visit. For consumption is the key purpose of theme parks, after all. The product on sale is not merely the enjoyable sensation of a rollercoaster, or the overpriced food, but the suspension of disbelief and the opportunity to live temporarily in a utopian world. The problem with manmade utopia, however, is that they are easily manipulated by their creators to transmit coded messages to consumers. Walt Disney wielded an extraordinary power of influence with Disneyland, which could reinforce certain values or ideologies through its spectacle and via its employees, who were known as “imagineers” (Chytry 37). “Tomorrowland” for example, was concerned with a vision of the future, and promoted ideas of technological innovation and space exploration. Meanwhile, “Main Street U.S.A” simulated a traditional small-town American environment based on

Disney's own hometown of Marceline, Missouri (*Britannica*). It is therefore a mediated worldview that is being presented to Disneyland's guests, who are at the mercy of this elaborately spectacular, simulated system. Disney's intention was that visiting the park would be "like a theatrical experience – in a word, a *show*" (Chytry 37).

The concept of the *show*, or "spectacle" is also a key topic for Guy Debord, a Marxist cultural theorist, whose 1967 work *The Society of the Spectacle* offered a ground-breaking analysis and critique of capitalism in post-war societies. He contends that capitalist ideology led to the ever-increasing commodification of everyday life, and that we are therefore constantly being "sold" something or other, whether straightforward products or, more abstractly, a way of life. This condition has resulted in what Debord calls the "spectacle," which is essentially the perceived world around us: "commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity" (29). The spectacle, consequently, "is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image (24). One can perhaps intuit the many ways in which Debord's theory is applicable to the institutions of theme parks like Disneyland, which masquerades as a fiction, but is in fact a "shrewd commercial reality" (Eco 95). Umberto Eco points out that Disneyland, as a hyperreal landscape, "can permit itself to present its reconstructions as masterpieces of falsification, for what it sells is, indeed, goods, but genuine merchandise, not reproductions. What is falsified is our will to buy, which we take as real, and in this sense Disneyland is really the quintessence of consumer ideology" (96). Debord's work, like Barthes's, refers generally to western society and the divisional political landscape in the wake of WWII rather than the consciously simulated worlds of theme parks, etc. However, if, as Baudrillard claims, Disneyland can be taken as a microcosm of society, Debord's "spectacle" may reveal the social mechanisms at

play under the surface of these institutions. He is particularly interested in labour, for example, writing that “the unreal unity the spectacle proclaims masks the class division on which the real unity of the capitalist mode of production is based” (46). Nowhere is this falsification more evident than in Disneyland, where staff members, or “imagineers,” are literally masked actors, allowing the consumers to believe they are somehow having a genuine interaction with fictional characters. The division in this dynamic is also an economic one: the consumer is in reality a paying customer, and the imagineer is a worker, despite the illusion of a unified, shared experience.

The consumerist demand for these kinds of experiences, according to Debord, stems from a lack of “exciting conversations” or moments of transcendence elsewhere in life.

“Commodities of this type could obviously not exist were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody” (112). This idea, closely linked to Baudrillard’s “Desert of the real,”<sup>1</sup> echoes the landscape of “Ghoul,” which features simulations of natural phenomena, and in which human interactions are forced, clipped, and full of paranoia as a result of their professional setting, which essentially represents reality to these characters who have no access to an exterior life and are thus captive in their workplace. Simulated environments like Disneyland cast an illusion, or spectacle, which shifts emphasis from Marxist preoccupation with production value, towards *symbolic* value, which is another pressing issue for Baudrillard. Symbolic value relates to the cultural (rather than economic or practical) capital of certain brands, franchises, or even stories. Disneyland thrives on its symbolic value, deriving much of its prestige from the deeply entrenched

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<sup>1</sup> Recalling a Borges fable in which cartographers create a map so detailed it covers the very landscape it describes, Baudrillard posits that “It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself” (3).

cultural permeation of its characters like Micky Mouse, or its appropriations of canonical characters like Cinderella. The public are presented with an illusion that simultaneously entertains them and cleverly hides the inbuilt structural hierarchy of its capitalist foundation by means of these familiar shared cultural icons, and that disguises the conditions under which its staff or its visitors may find themselves *trapped*.

The theme park has also held a fascination for many authors as a rich setting in which, through satire, allegory, and social engagement, the manifold traps of American capitalism and domination are uncovered. They appear as recurring settings in science fiction, such as Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), which speculates on the future of genetic coding and imagines a reality in which dinosaurs are brought back from extinction. They also provide fruitful plot-devices for the horror genre, as in Stephen King's novel *Joyland* (2013), which follows an employee's quest to solve a murder mystery in a haunted theme park. This paper, however, is concerned with a particular kind of theme park: the social microcosm, and its ability to portray social inequality and other real-world concerns through the veil of hyperreal environments. Beginning with John Barth and Donald Barthelme, I will investigate the establishment of the literary funhouse, and identify the traps laid therein. Chapter 2 will then provide a study of David Foster Wallace's parody of Barth, which argues that fiction has the ability to become trapped within *itself*. Chapter 3 will survey several stories by George Saunders, which portray a distinct form of economically "imprisoned" characters. The final chapter will then seek an "escape" from the theme park in works by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah and Karen Russell, which both provide unique perspectives with their theme parks, tackling racial violence, gender inequality, and climate change.

If Disneyland is to be considered a hyperreal simulation of a simulation, the status of its fictional counterparts become even more complex, as they are simulations themselves. The theme park in George Saunders's "Ghoul", for instance, is so many degrees removed from reality that in many ways the artifice of the medium of fiction is stripped away and emphasis must instead be placed on the characters' humanity, or the injustice of class and labour division and rights violations within large corporate entities. By the end of the story, Brian decides to take drastic action against the system of oppression imposed upon him by the theme park/prison, and distribute literature to inform and rally his colleagues to his cause:

Upon my release, I will rise, go to Copy Services, make Copies of these, go forth, leave Copies on every fake stump in the Room, each chair in Dining, [...] so that all may know the truth and be moved to ask, perhaps in some quiet moment, Is this world that we have made (which, for the soundest of reasons, we made, along the way, quite harsh) a world in which lovers may thrive?

Though I will not live to see it, and dread the kicking that must come, may these words play some part in bringing the old world down (61).

"Ghoul" represents the ultimate hyperreal theme park, as it conceals the fact that it is actually *not* one. We know from Baudrillard that simulacra conceal the absence of originals, which traps us in a world of copies of copies with missing origins. "Ghoul" also offers a glimmer of hope for a way out, though. This theme will repeat itself often in the chapters to come, as we witness characters who are essentially enslaved in their workplaces, visitors becoming lost in mazes constructed of words, authors frustrated with the limits of fiction itself, and several solutions to these problems of confinement. The ultimate goal of this paper is to arrive at a conclusion that, like "Ghoul," plots an escape route from the "old

world” of simulation and simulacra, and breaks free of the oppressive regimes imposed by American capitalism and the postmodern era.

# Chapter 1

## Enter the Funhouse

“A story can, yes, Mark speculates, be made out of a Funhouse. But not by using the Funhouse as a kind of symbol you can take or leave standing there. Not by putting the poor characters in one, or by pretending the poor writer’s in one, wandering around. The way to make a story a Funhouse is to put the story itself into one” (Wallace 331).

### Laying the Foundations: The Short Stories of Donald Barthelme

While none of Donald Barthelme’s stories are set in literal theme parks, almost all of them are imbued with a sense of wonder and an uncanny atmosphere that makes the stories feel as though they are, in many ways, “funhouses” themselves. Stories like “The Balloon” or “The School” appear to take place in the real world, but woven into their narrative fabric are fantastical, fabulated elements, and playfully self-aware artifices that anticipate the fictionalised representations of theme parks to come by the likes of George Saunders, or that produce an experiential essence of the immersive entertainment and whimsy to be found in amusement parks. Other stories take place in similarly simulated or hyperreal environments, such as museums or sporting events. As Larry McCaffery has noted of Barthelme’s fiction, many are based on a general plot:

[A] main character creates a fictional system to provide order, meaning, or diversion in a world which seems chaotic, destructive, or banal. The fictions devised by these characters are sometimes obviously artificial in nature (such as literary texts, games, sports, or various private systems based on paranoia) and at other times are more subtly subjective [...]. The big danger faced by many of these characters is a tendency to ignore their own role as creators of these fictional systems; once they begin to lose sight of this, they tend to become controlled by their creations rather than being able to use them as useful or even necessary metaphors (76).

McCaffrey's insight is reminiscent of Barthes's arguments in *Mythologies* about remaining vigilant in the face of artifice, as it is all too easy to become "controlled" by the illusion, just as Barthelme's characters often do.<sup>2</sup>

In "The Balloon" (1966), an enormous balloon appears overnight in New York City. Seemingly manifested by the story's narrator, the balloon expands to cover forty-five blocks, hanging over a large portion of the city, wedged between some of its buildings. What is immediately noteworthy is not the absurd and unusual occurrence, but the ways in which the population react to it. Immediately, the New Yorkers deem the balloon a place of fun and amusement, rather than exhibiting confusion and anxiety. Instead, they begin to decorate it, write messages on its surface, and children use it as a space to play. The surface of the balloon even begins to resemble a landscape, on which intrepid residents can freely wander the "small valleys, as well as slight knolls, or mounds" and "once atop the balloon, a stroll was possible, or even a trip, from one place to another. There was pleasure in being

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<sup>2</sup> This paranoia relating to unseen power structures and forces behind the spectacle is a key feature of American postmodernism, most recognisable, perhaps, in the novels of Thomas Pynchon.

able to run down an incline [. . .] or in making a leap from one side to the other” (Barthelme 133). The balloon, therefore, provides a sort of topographical amusement park for those with the temerity or imagination to use it this way.

It is not that the New Yorkers in “The Balloon” merely accept the presence of the inflatable behemoth without question; in fact, a significant portion of the story is deeply concerned with interpretation and meaning. “It was agreed that since the meaning of the balloon could never be known absolutely,” Barthelme tells us, “extended discussion was pointless” (133). Several commentators in the story nevertheless attempt to discern the unknowable meaning of the balloon. The interpretations offered within the text are presented as ludicrous misreadings, however, as Barthelme ostensibly parodies the very institution of literary criticism. The story fundamentally rejects analysis by mocking interpretative modes and tropes. As Maurice Couturier has suggested, “The balloon seems to be a device to test individual and collective discourses” in which a philosophical investigation into the symbolism of the balloon is impossible, leaving only a sociological reading, which merely describes the various ideas of the characters rather than affirming them (187). Couturier continues, “[the narrator] suggests that all the built-in codes are inadequate and challenges us to find another one elsewhere. In other words, we are being told that this fiction deals very specifically with the interpretation of fiction” (188). This self-reflexive hostility towards interpretation betrays a key concept related to the theoretical approaches of Barthes and Debord. If we consider the balloon a fantastical representation of Debord’s concept of the Spectacle, for example, the behaviour of Barthelme’s characters is exactly as we might expect. The intellectuals argue over its meaning, function, and aesthetic qualities, while the majority of the population interact with it, some deriving entertainment, others remaining

passive. In each instance, however, the spectators fail to understand or identify the underlying *cause* of the balloon. Debord conceives of the underlying cause of the Spectacle as the structure of capitalism, whereas Barthelme, with characteristic audacity, reveals at the end of the story that the narrator erected the balloon himself as a “spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease [he] felt at [his partner’s] absence, and with sexual deprivation” (136). Upon the return of the narrator’s lover, the balloon is deflated and sent away to be kept in storage.

This route of commentary, tangential as it may appear, represents an important facet of postmodern fiction’s intersection with simulation, and the real-world implications of our interaction with such simulated environments. According to Debord, “the bureaucracy is obliged to be a class imperceptible to consciousness, thus making the whole of social life unfathomable and insane” (74). The idea of that which is imperceptible to consciousness is key to the possibility of simulation, especially in Barthelme’s case, if we are to attribute the bizarre occurrences in his fiction to this invisible “bureaucracy,”<sup>3</sup> or perhaps substitute the bureaucracy with the metafictional antics of its intrusive author. In any case, many of the phenomena we interact with on a daily basis involve an element of self-deception, which renders the functions of these phenomena imperceptible to us. In the case of Disneyland, as Umberto Eco has observed, it is a blatant commercial enterprise masquerading as a site of leisure: “The Main Street facades are presented to us as toy houses and invite us to enter them, but their interior is always a disguised supermarket, where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing” (95). Generally, we tend not to engage philosophically

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, “Me and Miss Mandible,” a story in which a Kafkaesque bureaucratic error results in a grown man getting sent back to the fourth grade and being legally re-classified as an eleven-year-old.

with these environments the way Eco or Barthelme's intellectuals do, but rather, when presented with an anomalous entity—whether a city-spanning balloon, or an entirely artificial city in Disneyland—we are far more likely to behave like the uncritical characters in the story, simply enjoying it without trying to peer behind its surface for an explanation of its motives. After all, “[t]he focus on the artistic construction becomes an analogue of the way we all manipulate the world of symbols into the system we call “Reality”” (McCaffery 77). We are therefore in constant danger of allowing ourselves to become blind to the signs around us and to be imprisoned in a situation which at once entices and takes advantage of us, as in the case of capitalism, as Debord would argue, which has immersed us in so much illusion as to prevent us from seeing a way out.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most profound example of hyperreality in the work of Donald Barthelme is to be found in “At the Tolstoy Museum,” which, in a series of visual collages and drawings with commentary, describes a visit to a fictional museum dedicated to the Russian author Leo Tolstoy. The story conjures an unsettling atmosphere, which can apparently influence the emotions of its guests. For instance, “sadness grasped the 741 Sunday visitors. The Museum was offering a series of lectures on the text ‘Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves?’ The visitors were made sad by these eloquent speakers [...] In the plaza, a sinister musician played a wood trumpet while two children watched” (255). There is a prevailing sense that the museum’s curators are manipulating the visitors’ mindsets, though to what end is unclear. No allusions are made to financial transactions — there is no mention of a gift shop or an entrance fee — and the prevailing feeling among the crowd is one of misery: “More than

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<sup>4</sup> “It is easier to imagine an end to the world,” writes Mark Fisher, “than an end to capitalism.” (2). Fisher attributes this quote to Fredric Jameson, though it appears to be paraphrased from Jameson’s essay “Future City” (76).

any other Museum, the Tolstoy Museum induces weeping” (251). The story highlights the transmutability of worldview and the communication of ideas through various media, whether written, visual, or hyperreal as in the case of the museum. The narrator reads an unnamed story<sup>5</sup> by Tolstoy at one point and offers a brief reaction: “I was incredibly depressed by reading this story. Its beauty. Distance” (253). The visitors are thus like hostages in Tolstoy’s — or the museum’s curators’ — mindset, which, while being transmitted in a hyperreal context, has real emotional consequences for the consumer.

Baudrillard posits that “the museum, instead of being circumscribed as a geometric site, is everywhere now, like a dimension of life” (7). This assertion refers to the ways we view culture as somehow static, or quantifiable. Museums are spaces in which our desire to consume and admire bits of history or artwork is made explicit, whereas, Baudrillard argues, the rest of the western world has managed to hide the fact that it has itself become “museumified” (*ibid*). With this concept in mind, Barthelme’s Tolstoy Museum could be conceived of as a sort of microcosm of public consumption. The experiences of the narrator in the story belong to the order of simulation: the pictorial representations of the author, the story he reads, and the themed rooms he visits. Their rendering in Barthelme’s story, however, belong to the order of simulacra, as they have been mediated twice over before being presented to the reader: first by the fictional museum’s curators, and subsequently by the story’s narrator (or author). The overwhelming sorrow felt by the narrator is nevertheless acute, and not limited to his individual experience, but apparently a symptom of the environment itself, which emulates parts of Tolstoy’s fiction and communicates the

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<sup>5</sup> Though it likely refers to “The Three Hermits” (1886).

ideas therein. Baudrillard reminds us of the power of images, and the ability of simulation to produce real effects: "simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary." Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces "true" symptoms?" (4). To extrapolate further, Barthelme's museum produces these tangible "symptoms" in its visitors in much the same way, Baudrillard might argue, that society itself influences and manipulates its own population. This is also achieved through the transmission of images and messages, but in a far more nebulous and oblique fashion. The commodification of images, for example, is remarked upon by Debord, who observes the west's obsession with visual consumerism, reduced to absurdity by the ubiquity of representations and signifiers such as brand names as commodities: "A film sparks a fashion craze, or a line of products. The sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities become more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right" (44). Perhaps, then, the Tolstoy Museum elicits sorrow in its visitors just as advertisements or other systems of communication in society elicit desire in us. In fact, a great deal of Barthelme's fiction is so packed full of cultural references, celebrities, pastiche, and collage from all forms of media, that John Domini has called him "some sort of museum keeper" and a "preservationist" as though his stories are also museums that exhibit scenery and ideas from their particular moment in time (108).

## Labyrinthine Corridors: Mapping John Barth's Funhouse

While Barthelme's stories' absurdist and fantastical qualities lend them their sense of hyperreality, it is the obverse case for John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968). This story uses metafiction to break down the boundary between the medium of the story and its subject. The story *is* a funhouse, and vice-versa. As Brian McHale puts it, placing Barth in the tradition of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, it is "a labyrinth-story or, in the terms of Barth's ironically deflated world, a funhouse-story" (107). The basic premise is as follows: the protagonist, Ambrose, embarks on a trip to a funfair in Ocean city with his family and their neighbour. Once there, he enters a funhouse and gets lost, growing increasingly distraught as he becomes entangled in a web of confused narrative strands and non-sequiturs while the author, in violation of narrative verisimilitude, offers musings on the topic of fiction, and deliberates about what ought to happen to Ambrose. While the base-level story depicts a real funhouse that exists within the world of the story, the story becomes its own version of a funhouse, constructed from text, which attempts to "lose" the reader amongst its winding passages (whether in the sense of swathes of text or of actual corridors). Victor Vitanza likens Barth to a topologist, "who is concerned with ways in which surfaces can be twisted, bent, pulled, stretched, or otherwise reformed from one shape into another" (84). This aligns with McHale's analysis of "Lost in the Funhouse" as "typical of this *topos* of reduced carnival," in which the usual rules of society are inverted, and things are rarely as they seem: "representations of circuses, fairs, sideshows, and amusement parks often function as residual indicators of the carnival context in postmodernist fiction" (174). What appears to be an experimental story set in a funhouse, then, is also a meditation on the artifice of fiction, and the power imbalance between author, protagonist, and reader.

Take for example the following sentence: “A fine metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech [...] may be taken from the *milieu* of the action, for example, or be particularly appropriate to the sensibility of the narrator, even hinting to the reader things of which the narrator is unaware” (Barth 74). The implication of direct communication between author and reader that circumvents the narrator reveals the agency of the author, or, more abstractly, the *text* over the narrator, which foreshadows Ambrose’s fate later on. This metafictional device is not so much an example of dramatic irony as a darker, nihilistic reminder that the characters are fundamentally imprisoned within their own texts, and are always at the mercy of their author, which in turn signals to us to consider our own environment, and the figures of authority we must regularly succumb to, as Ambrose does to Barth.

The reader is not given a chance to inhabit the spectacular and inverted world of the funhouse setting of this story, however, as its author constantly interrupts the narrative. Similar to Barthelme’s “The Balloon,” the story anticipates and attempts to deflect criticism by providing its own internal critical commentary. For example, the author regularly bemoans the slow pace of the action, anxious that the journey to the funfair takes up too much narrative real estate: “We haven’t even reached Ocean City yet: we will never get out of the funhouse” (77). He also provides an outline of the structure the story “should” have had:

The *beginning* should recount the events between Ambrose’s first sight of the funhouse early in the afternoon and his entering it with Magda and Peter in the evening. The *middle* would narrate all relevant events from the time he goes in to the time he loses his way [...] Then the *ending* would tell what Ambrose does while

he's lost, how he eventually finds his way out, and what everybody makes of the experience (*Ibid*).

Later in the story he interrupts yet again to explain the appropriate execution of rising action with a diagram showing Freitag's Triangle (95). This approach differs to Barthelme's in that the metafictional criticism is external to the central plot, while Barthelme's misgivings were voiced by his characters. The self-referential voice in "Funhouse" stems from the implication that Ambrose — as an autobiographical stand-in for Barth — grows up to become a writer who writes about himself growing up to become a writer, and so on in an endlessly recursive loop (Schulz 402). Roland Barthes has dismissed this technique, proclaiming that "it is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the Text, [...] but he then does so as a 'guest'. If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, alethiological" (*Image Music Text* 161). The candour we receive from the author, then, is in fact just as simulated as the events of the plot, or the conditions of the funhouse, but is also hyperreal because it acknowledges the artifice of its medium and transcends convention by inviting the reader into the creation of the story, as though it were possible to peer behind the scenes.

The funhouse operates as a quasi-metaphorical literary device that compares literature to funfairs, and readers to spectators. It is an attraction that necessitates some sort of value: "it's meant to be a *funhouse*; that is, a place of amusement. If people really got lost or injured or too badly frightened in it, the owner'd go out of business" (Barth 90). With a distinctly capitalist frame of reference, Ambrose reassures himself of his own safety, and, more importantly, of the responsibility of this place to deliver a *fun* experience in exchange for the money he pays to enter. Peter also speculates that there are operators "stationed at

peepholes” to trigger certain mechanical features of the funhouse at the appropriate times (93). In these environments, it is expected that invisible labour and economic dichotomies (the paying consumer and the paid imagineer) are the driving forces behind the experiences on offer. However, as Debord has shown, we are often unaware of the same dichotomy outside the realms of these consciously consumable spaces, as when we fail to recognise the invisible labour inherent in any tiered society operating under capitalism.

The perspective of “Funhouse” is not quite so straightforward as to indicate any kind of political or social allegory, however. In many ways its outlook is solipsistic, concerned primarily with its own creation and execution, and focuses more on the technical process of communication and intelligibility than on any message contained therein. In fact, perspective becomes a problematic dimension of the story once Ambrose becomes lost, and the reader becomes exasperated by red herrings in place of a central idea or theme. As the topology of the story increasingly distorts itself, the perspective becomes skewed and obscured in its turn. At one point we see the narrator looking into the funhouse mirrors, which, reflecting each other’s surfaces, create an infinite series of images stretching into the distance. He is unable to report looking into infinity, though, as it is blocked by his own head (85). This odd yet familiar image is then replicated in the actual writing of the story, which sees Ambrose deprived of some of his senses, frequently missing or misinterpreting things as they happen due to intense paranoia (or, being stuck *in his own head*). He wonders whether “everybody else is in on some secret he doesn’t know; they’ve forgotten to tell him” (88). He even begins to question whether he exists at all, or if he is merely a figment of the author’s imagination (*Ibid*). From this point on, the sensory details appear to constantly be limited in some way, whether visually, due to the darkness of the funhouse, or mentally

fractured, as experienced by Ambrose in his state of panic. Barth's representation of this state of incomprehension recalls Baudrillard's assertion that the information overload of the postmodern era has heralded "the end of perspectival and panoptic space," that "there is no longer a medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real" (22). Baudrillard is referring to television in this passage, but it remains relevant to "Funhouse," a story that is hyper-aware of its own medium (the short story), yet continually flouts the rules of that medium, and refuses to offer a panoptic view of its events, but uses blindness as a device to obscure or misrepresent them. "Funhouse" as a work of simulacra, then, is not so much interested in simulating the physical space of the funhouse, but rather in superimposing the narrative and the manifestation of the story's progression onto that physical space. It therefore creates its own sort of hyperreality within the internal logic of its fictional dimension, which differs from the hyperreality of Disneyland, or Barthelme's Tolstoy Museum in that it is a work of fiction that purports to inhabit physical space and time, whereas the other examples are physical spaces that purport to be simulations of fictional phenomena.

"A tree is a tree," writes Barthes, "Yes, of course. But a tree as expressed by Minou Drouet is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain kind of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social *usage* which is added to pure matter" (*Mythologies* 132). Just as Drouet's representation of a tree is not a real tree, it is important to remember that Barthelme's representations of representations of images, for example, are even further from any kind of real-world or platonic forms of whatever is originally represented in those images. Rather, his stories largely exist within the realm of hyperreality, as does the fiction of John

Barth, where signifiers rarely point in the direction of social usage, but more often gesture inwards, using the cultural significance of previous generations' images and ideas to build up and bolster their own world of reference. Barthes continues, "mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication" (*Mythologies* 133). Barth and Barthelme are therefore free to commandeer or plunder at will from the rich well of signs and signifiers already laden with meaning and symbolism to the reader, and exploit our familiarity with them either by inverting their usual context as "Funhouse" does with the setting of the funfair, or by capitalising on our understanding of certain symbols, as "At the Tolstoy Museum" relies on the reader having a passing knowledge of Tolstoy's work in order to take full effect. While neither author makes excessive use of the theme park as a setting in their work, they both embody many of the theories and ideas set forth by Debord, Barthes, and Baudrillard with their fiction. Many of the postmodern qualities of their work would also inspire their literary descendants, including David Foster Wallace and George Saunders, who would continue to explore these ideas with simulated and hyperreal landscapes of their own.

## Chapter 2

### For Whom is the Funhouse a House?: A Brief Survey of a Postmodern Parody by David Foster Wallace

“He believes now that J.D. Steelritter and Dr. Ambrose have not just “sold out” (way too easy an indictment for anybody to level at anybody else), but that they’ve actually done it *backwards*: they want to build a Funhouse for lovers out of a story that does not love” (Wallace 331).

With “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” (1992), David Foster Wallace commits an act of “patricide” against John Barth, one of the “original stars in [his] firmament” (Max 214). The novella is a parody of Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” and a damning indictment of postmodern metafiction in general (if a somewhat contradictory and impenetrable one, being a clear example of the very type of fiction it rails against itself). Like Barth’s story, it features a long car journey, but Ambrose’s family have been replaced with a motley crew comprising an advertising executive, his deadbeat son, two MFA creative writing students, and a struggling ex-actor. They are on their way to the town of Collision, Illinois, to attend a “secluded reunion of everyone who has ever been in a McDonalds commercial” (235). We also learn that Dr. Ambrose (a stand-in for Barth) has teamed up with J.D. Steelritter, the ad-man, to open a chain of “Funhouse”-themed nightclubs throughout middle America.

““Westward” feels like watching a family fight,” writes D.T. Max, “worse because it is only the son who wants the combat and it may be himself he really wants to wound” (222). Wallace allegedly began writing this story in the margins of his copy of *Lost in the Funhouse*,<sup>6</sup> seeing the endeavour as a vital stride forward in his career and a necessary disavowal of the ironic postmodernism of the 1960s and 70s, and of Barth’s brand of such in particular. “Westward” attempts to expose the coldness of metafiction, arguing that behind its self-aware artifice, it lacks substance beyond the merely aesthetic. Wallace bemoans the tendency of authors like Barth to interrupt their own stories with commentary, or to use metafictional intrusions as crutches, believing that “this internal *acknowledgement* of their failure to start the show would somehow release them from the obligation to start the show” (269). His contention is surprisingly reminiscent of Baudrillard’s summation of postmodern culture, while simultaneously rejecting its usefulness. Just as Baudrillard suggests that Disneyland is in many ways more “real” than the postmodern city due to its awareness of its own artifice, “Lost in the Funhouse” establishes a hyperreal exchange between author and reader by making reference to its own creation and thus becomes less illusory or deceptive than “realist” fiction. Wallace argues, however, that the illusion is still firmly in place in these contexts. One section of “Westward,” entitled “A Really Blatant and Intrusive Interruption,” sees the author offering opinions on the state of metafiction in a similar manner to Barth’s musings on fiction in “Funhouse”:

In metafiction it would, nay *needs* be mentioned [... that] the narrative [...] is *not* in fact a barely-there window onto a different and truly diverting world, but rather in fact an “artifact,” an object, a plain old this-worldly thing, composed of emulsified

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<sup>6</sup> See copyright page of *Girl with Curious Hair*.

wood pulp and horizontal chorus lines of dye, and *conventions*, and is thus in a “deep” sense just an opaque forgery of a transfiguring window, a gag, and thus in a deep (but *intentional*, now) sense artificial (265).

Consider this dispute in relation to Umberto Eco’s analysis of Disneyland: “Disneyland is more hyperrealistic than the wax museum, precisely because the latter still tries to make us believe that what we are seeing reproduces reality absolutely, whereas Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced” (Eco 96).

Both authors are concerned with the self-conscious creation of a spectacle, and suspicious about the economic motives behind it. Eco calls the spectacle of Disneyland “masterpieces of falsification (*Ibid*), designed to elicit the desire to *buy* in its spectators. Wallace’s criticism of “Funhouse” follows a similar line of thought, as part of the problem with this style of authorial candour is that it “tricks” us into believing it is sincere, and therefore incapable of manipulating our emotions. Hence, “Westward” has Dr. Ambrose sell the “Funhouse” franchise to a corporation to be capitalised upon, just as Disneyland capitalises upon the cultural cachet of its beloved fictional characters to sell merchandise. “Steelritter is the Barth of advertising,” according to Marshall Boswell, “for he too wants to push advertising to its end, its exhaustion, and the reunion in Collision is his means of doing so” (Boswell 144). Indeed, at one point in the story, Steelritter is referred to as “manipulator of image and sign” (309).

The characters in “Westward” never actually reach their destination, and so the “funhouse” in this case is entirely notional, or, like Barth’s, is rendered from text. The text is however littered with allusions to the hyperreal, authorial intrusions notwithstanding. J.D. Steelritter is in many ways a representation of a cynical interpretation of Barth’s work, which focuses

on the purely manipulative and capitalistic compulsions behind writing and disseminating fiction: "You think [...] that you just naturally want what we, your fathers, work night and day to make sure you want?" he asks, "We produce what makes you want to need to consume" (338). Steelritter's diatribe reminds us that we are always being sold things other than products: experiences, feelings, lifestyle, etc. There are market forces behind the fiction of both a Disneyland funhouse and a John Barth novel, and "Westward" tries, perhaps over-zealously, to equate the two. This point is made again by Steelritter, who evinces a Barthian self-awareness in terms of his *modus operandi*, which he likens to Pavlovian conditioning. "'Over at Steelritter Ads we've done conditioning research up to here,' holding one hand like a blade to his fine head's top" (340). Behind the bravado and showiness of the writing's formal experimentation, though, lies an undercurrent of profound vulnerability, which manifests itself in a deep desire to be loved. Whether this theme relates to the author's wishes, Mark Nechtr's private hopes about his own fiction, or the story's ultimate conclusion regarding Barth's work and its motivation, is unclear. However, it is expressed variously at seemingly random intervals by different characters, including Steelritter ("He will be loved. Beloved" (311)); Mark, who wants to write something "that stabs you in the heart" (332); and even the self-conscious story itself, which ends with the line "you are loved" (373).

A funhouse for lovers cannot be built out of a story that does not love, according to Wallace, as artifice is a fundamentally superficial quality, and can therefore never plunder the depths of human emotion. This idea goes some way to explain Umberto Eco's complex reaction to his uncomfortably hyperreal surroundings in Disneyland, which equate entirely to signifiers and no signifieds: "But once the "total fake" is admitted, in order to be enjoyed it must

seem totally real" (Eco 96). A story, like a funhouse, cannot be enjoyed to its fullest extent without the suspension of disbelief. And suspension of disbelief is rendered impossible when the reader is constantly reminded of the "falseness" of the story, which is the crux of Wallace's scathing parody of Barth's "Funhouse". It argues, in a sense, that Barthian postmodern fiction lays a trap not only for its characters, but for the vehicle of fiction itself, which can never break free of its recursive structure, just as the characters in "Westward" are perpetually restrained within the confines of the car.

## Chapter 3

### Class, Power, and Humanity in George Saunders's Theme Parks

#### Everything's Fine!: The Corporate Satire of "Pastoralia"

The Title story of George Saunders's 2000 collection takes place in a theme park that features instalments representing scenes from various eras in history. Our unnamed narrator and his workmate, Janet, are imagineers in Pastoralia, an attraction in which they portray pre-historic humans. It is clear that the park is suffering from a lack of business, and the mood of the story is therefore paranoid and tense, with frequent indications from management that some staff members will be terminated in the immediate future. The narrator and Janet are required to fill out "Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Forms" about one another (4).

This story is at once a satire of corporate America and a parable about the ways in which real people often suffer under the regimes of corporations. David Huebert refers to the situation of "Pastoralia" as a "biopolitical dystopia" in which the human body becomes an object of entertainment and a replaceable commodity (105, 107). However, insofar as the story is dystopic, it also reflects many recognisable characteristics of contemporary office culture and workplace apathy. For instance, the primary mode of communication between management and staff is through memos. The language of the memos also pokes fun at the jargon and double-speak often employed in these environments: "Staff Remixing" is used in

place of “downsizing,” or “firing” (16). Likewise, a sort of overly-anxious optimism and denial pervades in the tone of the memos, blatantly attempting to diffuse rumours of the theme park’s financial trouble:

In summary, we simply ask you to ask yourself, upon hearing a rumor: Does this rumor cast the organization in a negative light? If so, the rumor is false, please disregard. If positive, super, thank you very much for caring so deeply about your organization that you knelt with your ear to the track, and also, please spread the truth far and wide, that is, get down on all fours and put your own lips to the tracks. Tell your friends. Tell friends who are thinking of buying stock. Do you have friends who are journalists? (62).

The hypocrisy and desperation of the corporation shines through the absurdity of the memo’s content, and even prefigures much of the public discourse surrounding the idea of *post-truth* a decade or so later,<sup>7</sup> as when management proclaims, “Truth is that thing which makes what we want to happen happen. Truth is that thing which, when told, makes those on our team look good, and inspires them to greater efforts, and causes people not on our team to see things our way and feel sort of jealous” (63). As Kasia Boddy has remarked, “it is “negative” attitudes (rather than low productivity) that threaten [the characters’] jobs” (5). This attitude towards workers, which exerts control over their emotions and modes of thought and expression rather than simply their labour, suggests a deep mistrust of corporatized America as exemplified in the microcosm of the theme park, which, in this case requires its staff to live on location, thereby removing access to a private life and trapping

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<sup>7</sup> Oxford English Dictionary appointed the 2016 “Word of the Year” to *post-truth*, an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford). Sarah Pogell also notes that “Saunders’s obsession with the *untruths* of simulated realities and corporate rhetoric is both timely and necessary” (475).

them within the confines of the hyperreal workplace. The narrator communicates with his wife via fax, and the only other human he has prolonged in-person engagement with is his colleague, Janet. The worker must forego virtually everything in service of work, which is presented as an absolutely vital source of income for Saunders's protagonists, who are often desperate and in dire financial circumstances. "Pastoralia"'s narrator, for example, has a severely sick son, whose treatment he must pay for with his meagre earnings, while also being entirely absent from the boy's life. "It is not within my power to cure Nelson," he thinks, "it is only necessary for me to do what I can do, which is keep the money coming in" (35).

Catherine Garnett has commented, "Saunders's heroes routinely sacrifice family, morality, dignity, sanity, and perspective to their workplaces, and are asked to sacrifice more. Most notably — and this is the crux of the ethical dilemmas which Saunders stages — they're asked to sacrifice one another" (141). This is played out dramatically in "Pastoralia" through the narrator's increasing pressure to evaluate his partner negatively so that management can fire her. The staff here find themselves in a dystopian state of surveillance and self-suppression, at one another's mercy, and the ever-present power of upper management looms above them, threateningly, as in Foucault's analogy of the Panopticon: "[It] should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). Despite the fact that the park's managers rarely directly observe the workers, and guests are alarmingly scarce, the simulation of the pastoral environment must be upheld by the narrator and Janet themselves, for fear of repercussions. The narrator has been described as "a model

employee because he stays in character even in the absence of park Guests. This level of obedience [...] bespeaks a deeper level of self-deception that likewise belongs to affective labor” (Garnett 145). *Affective labour* is a term coined by Antonio Negri, referring to work intended to produce “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” in its consumers, such as that created by workers in the field of entertainment (293). The affective labour produced by the narrator and Janet, therefore, is wasted, its sole purpose being to perpetuate the spectacle of their performance. This accords with Debord’s assertion that “use value” has radically declined in favour of “illusion in the consumption of modern commodities” (32). Debord believes that

At the root of the spectacle lies the oldest of all social divisions of labour, the specialization of *power*. The specialized role played by the spectacle is that of spokesman for all other activities, a sort of diplomatic representative of hierarchical society at its own court, and the source of the only discourse which that society allows itself to hear. Thus the modern aspect of the spectacle is also at bottom the most archaic (19).

This theory would suggest that the artifice implemented by the theme park, then, does not necessarily present a model of capitalist power structures, but rather a more primitive, almost feudal system of hierarchy, in which positions are fixed, labour is intensive and thankless, and consequences for misconduct are severe.

Debord’s notion of recursive discourse is also significant here. Foucault has offered a solution to governance and hegemony in the form of critique and discourse, claiming that “critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. [...] critique will be the art

of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject” (“Critique” 47). The characters in “Pastoralia” are restricted from engaging in any form of meaningful critique, however, given that they are prohibited from even speaking English while working — they must instead grunt and gesture to one another. Breaking the illusion appears to be a cardinal sin in this context: “This is really pushing it. Her kid comes into the cave in street clothes, speaks English in the cave, she speaks English back, they both swear many times, she spends the whole afternoon weeping in her separate area” (Saunders 34).

Their inability to speak also reflects their powerlessness within this structure. Clare Hayes-Brady writes, “In many of Saunders’s frequent imaginings of the theme park society and most notably in [“Pastoralia”], those who control the theme park’s vocabulary control its running” (28). Language is considered a “tool of insubordination by management” and therefore Janet, who rebelliously refuses to give up her speech, or *critique*, is summarily ejected from her position and replaced by Linda, who follows the rules even more keenly than our narrator (Hayes-Brady 29). Hayes-Brady continues,

By thus constraining the workplace vocabularies of its employees, the theme park manages largely to suppress the mutterings and complaints that might lead to a workforce united in dissatisfaction and does so by making non-communication a necessary attribute of good performance. The persistent punishment of open communication and the more insidious imposition of scripts on the actors in the park position the linguistic structures of the park within “the rules of exclusion” (30).

Without access to language, the park’s employees have no access to discourse, and therefore no means of revolt or hope of changing their oppressive regime. “Capitalism’s

ever-intensifying imposition of alienation,” according to Debord, “makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognise and name their own impoverishment” (89). “Pastoralia” presents us with a situation in which a spectacle is being created not only for the consumer, but for the worker, too, who must buy into the simulation so thoroughly that the lines between simulation and reality become blurred.

At the end of the story, the new employee, Linda has literally altered her body to more closely resemble a neanderthal: “*See that brow? It is permanent, she had it sort of installed*” (64), which makes the narrator in turn question whether or not he should affect equal commitment to the role. Similarly, Linda’s peer-surveillance is far harsher than the narrator’s; she gives him frequent disapproving looks and remains permanently in character. “It gets old but she doesn’t stop [catching bugs], and all the time she’s grunting, and once or twice I could swear she actually catches and eats an actual small bug” (65). Garnett calls the Pastoralia attraction itself a “weak simulacra” (152), which it undoubtedly is to the visitor. However, the effect of management’s procedural acrobatics enforced on the imagineers appears to have rendered the weak simulacra essentially “real” by the end of the story, in that, per Baudrillard, simulation replaces reality. It is also significant that, in their inability to speak and their limited behaviour — catching and eating insects — the workers are reduced to an animalistic state of being. They become residents, or “inmates” of the “Human Zoo”, in which “the segregated human as object of the entertainment-seeking gaze occupies the traditional position of the zoo animal” (Huebert 106-7). Baudrillard tells us:

They, the animals, do not speak. In a universe of increasing speech, of the constraint to confess and to speak, only they remain mute, and for this reason they seem to retreat far from us, behind the horizon of truth. But it is what makes us intimate with

them. It is not the ecological problem of their survival that is important, but still and always that of their silence. In a world bent on doing nothing but making one speak, in a world assembled under the hegemony of signs and discourse, their silence weighs more and more heavily on our organization of meaning (90).

Baudrillard suggests here that in prehistoric times, the animal was attributed a certain sacredness and reverence that became lost in modernity — “animals were only demoted to the status of inhumanity as reason and humanism progressed” (*Ibid* 87). Sarah Pogell therefore points towards the “posthumanism” of “Pastorialia,” in which characters like Linda — a “backward [...] Baudrillardian simulacrum with no corresponding referent in human history” — may flourish, while distinctly human characters with discernible reason and speech like Janet, are subjugated (472). “Saunders suggests that human devolution is the tragic and inevitable result of successfully negotiating the world of work in hyperreality” (*Ibid*). This seems to be a common thread among much of Saunders’s short fiction, in which workers are frequently discouraged from expressing themselves and live in constant fear and precarity. The result, often, is “devolution,” or the sacrifice of one’s very humanity in service of the illusion.

## Entrepreneurs of the Physical: Morality and Subjugation of the Individual in “CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” and “Bounty”

“CivilWarLand in Bad Decline” and “Bounty” from *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1997) use their theme park settings as arenas in which to explore ethics, brutality, socio-economics, and race. The former is set in a civil war-themed amusement park that has fallen on hard times and, like the park in “Pastoralia,” must take drastic measures to stay afloat. The latter takes place in a dystopian future in which society has been segregated into two orders: those born with genetic “defects” or mutations, known as “Flaweds,” and “Normals”. The protagonist works in a Medieval-themed amusement park, but soon sets out on a picaresque journey across a racially divided America.

Morality lies at the heart of these two tales, and Saunders never allows the reader to lose track of the characters’ humanity, despite every effort of the systems that subdue them. “CivilWarLand” centres on a disenchanted, often bemused narrator, who is placed in a series of complex, morally compromising situations, and must reckon with their implications and his responsibilities throughout. The park is being terrorised by local youths and gangs, which has had a profound impact on ticket sales, and the principal drama involves the manager, Mr. A’s, attempts to rectify this problem with disproportionately radical retaliation. Eventually, Mr. A hires Sam, a veteran of the Vietnam War, and — on the narrator’s advice — arms him, with the objective of ridding the park of gangs. Once Sam is revealed to have had an alarmingly violent history, the narrator (henceforth N) becomes the moral compass of the story, albeit ineffectively: “I express reservations at arming an alleged war criminal and giving him free rein in a family-oriented facility” (15). However, much like

the management of "Pastoralia" the chief concern of the park is economic, and Mr. A brushes off N's concerns, which imminently leads to the violent deaths of several youths at Sam's hands. N's remorse is reflected in his visions and dreams, as when the dismembered hand of one of Sam's victims haunts him, and he is confronted with an ethical dilemma: "What am I saying? I did a horrible thing. Even as I sit here I'm an accomplice and an obstructor of justice" (20). N's empathy is contrasted against the apathy of his colleagues, however, who exhibit a sort of Machiavellian determination to keep the park in business, and even his family, who display constant irritation at his failure to provide sufficiently for them. Despite all of this, N does his job with diligence, and is touchingly motivated by his love for his thankless family. "Is this the life I envisioned for myself?" he thinks, "My God no. I wanted to be a high jumper. But I have two of the sweetest children ever born. I go in at night and look at them in their fairly expensive sleepers and think: There are a couple of kids who don't need to worry about freezing to death or being cast out to the wolves" (9). Layne Neeper has argued against Saunders's classification as a satirist, focusing instead on his sincerity and morality in place of the irony or cynicism of his predecessors such as Barth and Barthelme.

Saunders's fiction only intends to place us in proper relation to our flawed fellow humans, and he abjures all other potential targets for satiric correction in his stories. In story after story, we are confronted with Saunders's acerbic critiques of human failing while simultaneously being urged to embrace the affective, and he encourages us to empathize with his hopeless, draggled losers (Neeper 287).

While Saunders certainly is a satirist at times, it is also important to note that compassion is a vital component in that satire, and that it is generally an indictment of systematic oppression or societal injustice that is being rendered absurd, or criticised obliquely in his

work. The individual, on the other hand, is almost always presented with some measure of compassion and empathy, no matter how hideous their actions. The Civil War-themed park is an ideal venue in which to test out the limits of this radical empathy, as a hyperreal space filled with violence, both simulated and actual.

The hyperreality of the theme park is evident from the story's outset, which sees the physical "set" of the surroundings falling into disrepair:

When visitors first come in there's this cornball part where they sit in this kind of spaceship and supposedly get blasted into space and travel faster than the speed of light and end up in 1865. The unit's dated. The helmets we distribute look like bowls and all the paint's peeling off. I've argued and argued that we need to update. But in the midst of a budget crunch one can't necessarily hang the moon (10).

This is a stark reminder of the realism required to uphold an illusion of the fantastical. The imagined landscape is past its prime, and our focus is shifted to the economic needs of these places of illusory wonder to exist. The degradation of the space goes beyond the merely practical, too, as later on Mr. McKinnon, a ghost that haunts the park, proclaims that "even the heavens have fallen into disrepair" (13). The physical condition of the theme park seems to mirror the moral dilapidation that has been pervading the area, as violence, theft, and corruption grow increasingly common. We are also privy to much of the park's mechanics and the ways in which the spectacle of the site is maintained. For example, N works as a "verisimilitude inspector," whose job is to survey the park and ensure that the simulated landscape and affective labour of the staff uphold the civil war setting at all times. With allusions to such details as the "Verisimilitude Irregularities List" the bureaucracy and administration behind the exciting illusions become exposed and the spectacular nature of

the area becomes instead boring and commonplace (8). As Pogell points out, Saunders's theme parks are not fantastical, "nor are they Bakhtinian carnivals where rich and poor mingle, enjoying the temporary erasure of class distinctions. Rather, they constitute the quotidian reality of the workers" (473). In fact, if anything, class barriers are *reinforced* in these environments, as seen in "Pastoralia," where social mobility is only available downwards, and the working class are routinely oppressed.<sup>8</sup>

The level of oppression examined in "CivilWarLand" is trivial, however, compared to that of "Bounty," which revisits (or reinvents) a kind of hyperreal antebellum America in which it is acceptable for Normals to buy and sell Flaweds as slaves. The novella is not merely an allegory for slavery in the South, but rather a comical picaresque that traverses all manner of landscapes, real and simulated, and reckons with oppression of a visceral and sinister nature in the form of bodily ownership and racial segregation. It is also a complex postmodern pastiche of anachronisms, juxtapositions, and simulacra. "Bounty" bears a distinction in Saunders's short fiction in that the Medieval theme park here represents safety and shelter from the harsh reality outside its walls. Although it contains and enforces the stratified levels of social class it does in other stories, it is also something of a haven compared to the outside world, in which racism and slavery are rampant.

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<sup>8</sup> David Rando has written at length about the representation of the working class in Saunders's fiction, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is useful to consider the ways in which class stereotypes may be conceived of as performance, and the representation of class in fiction thus as a kind of simulation itself. Rando posits that Saunders challenges the middle-class reader who is "so blind to the working class that its experiences are other-worldly: what universe does the working class actually inhabit?" (440). In the case of "Civilwarland", at least, it is the universe of the hyperreal.

Yet it is only a matter of time before we are inevitably led to question this serenity, and whether or not it actually constitutes freedom of any meaningful kind. Although Flaweds are not enslaved in the park, a class system is nevertheless held rigidly in place. Workers are punished for acting according to their morals, as when the protagonist, Cole, intervenes in the sexual assault of his sister by a wealthy customer, and is subsequently punished for doing so with a demotion and the threat of termination. Bountyland's management are incapable of viewing their employees' actions as separate from the interests of the workplace. "'Tell me,' Albert says, scooting his chair close. 'Was this a political reaction to last night's vote?' 'No,' I say. 'He was degrading my sister.'" (*CivilWarLand* 93). The senior staff's callousness in this regard is a fitting component in their determination to uphold the spectacle of a medieval world, in which although entirely behind the scenes, they play important roles as oppressors, more akin to feudal lords, perhaps, than clerical office staff.

The treatment of the park's imagineers results in their total degradation of ego and ambition: "Listen: Don't budge from here. Learn to enjoy what little you have. Revel in the fact that your dignity hasn't yet been stripped away. Every minute that you're not in absolute misery you should be weeping with gratitude and thanking God at the top of your lungs" (114). This is also reflected in the low self-esteem of the Flaweds and other oppressed members of the society, such as the "Guilter" Cole encounters, who deems himself too "lowly" to give directions. "I'm not worthy to tell you" he says, "I'd probably get it all wrong" (123). These kinds of interactions convey the effects of this brutal social system on the mindset of the individual, and on the low-level worker in particular. This is supported by Debord, who gives a brief history of labour through the ages (98 – 107) and theorises that

The bourgeoisie was the first ruling class for which labour was a value. By abolishing all social privilege, and by recognising no value unrelated to the exploitation of labour, the bourgeoisie effectively conflated its own value qua ruling class with labour, and made the progress of labour the only measure of its own progress (104).

In this analogy, the management operate as bourgeoisie while the workers represent the proletariat or peasant class. Both are engaged in the production of labour, but only the bourgeoisie stand to gain anything from it. “This society turns on aspirational belief in bounty for all, but disallows class mobility while granting those already successful an almost royal status” writes Gillian Elizabeth Moore (63). Bountyland offers the aesthetic qualities of wealth and comfort, in other words, but the illusion is only upheld under the extraordinary effort of its working class — or “entrepreneur[s] of the physical” (*CivilWarLand* 129) — and the illusion of poverty is thereby also available for consumption by the wealthy elite who visit the park.

This Marxist line of investigation is apt, as the world of this story does include some voices of dissent. There are activist groups who challenge the system, urging the workers “to refuse our allocated narcotics so we can see the power structures more clearly. They’re calling us brothers and sisters and asking why we honour the very mind-set responsible for the world’s sorry state” (101). The “allocated narcotics” here refer to cocaine, which is given daily to staff in order to manufacture and enforce docility (102). They are thus indoctrinated into a sort of pseudo-ideological cult of the workplace based not merely on rhetoric and emotional manipulation, but also on chemical dependency. “Think!” The Marxist dissenter continues, “Extrapolate your daily actions one-million-fold. Ask yourself if the things you do make sense. Then walk out of Babylon and join us” (101). The stirrings of revolt fall largely

on deaf ears, however, and it is only when his personal circumstances call for it that he takes initiative and flees Bountyland, rather than doing so out of frustration with the system itself. Later in the story, when Cole escapes a slaveholder with a cell of activists, the dissenters are presented in a comical, vaguely ridiculous light: “You people are always yapping about oppression this and oppression that, but you certainly don’t seem to mind oppressing me” (172). Many of the underprivileged characters resemble Barthes’s appraisal of Charlie Chaplin as an emblem for “poor and the proletariat” in *Modern Times*: “at a loss before strikes, fascinated by the problem of bread-winning [...], but as yet unable to reach a knowledge of political causes and an insistence on a collective strategy” (*Mythologies* 36). Yet there is hope at the story’s close, when Cole, having achieved his personal goal of ensuring his sister’s safety, turns his attention to the wider world and joins one of the activist groups.

While the story develops this modern political conception as it unfolds, the world of Bountyland remains strictly rooted in an ahistorical past. As Moore puts it, “the “Bountyland” theme park manifests this hyperreal construction by representing absurdly exaggerated, reconstructed stories of historical reality that blend together pop cultural ideas of multiple different epochs” (63). Within the context of this loose Medieval simulation, simulacra becomes real once again. The performance of violence, for instance, translates to real physical violence, as when Cole’s role is to enact a highway robbery on a group of wealthy visitors, but misses his cue as he is busy assailing another wealthy visitor who was assaulting his sister. The commonplace and desperate activities of working class people is packaged and turned into a commodity for the upper class in situations like this.

The park's patrons manifest their lives of bounty and abundance by paying for a top quality, simulated experience of scarcity, lack and danger. Bountyland exists to provide clients with a historical mashup of death, disease and aberration alongside exaggerated luxury, while masking the true struggles and humiliations undergone by those providing these experiences (Moore 61).

The distinction between the real and the simulated is perhaps more urgent in these cases than in Baudrillard's sense of psychological onslaught by the hyperreal, in that Bountyland's simulations often result in physical harm. However, once again, the humiliation and torment undergone by the staff of Bountyland is preferable to slavery, a likely outcome for any Flawed who leaves the park, and therefore the cycle of oppression continues. Bountyland functions in this dystopian America much as Debord's conception of the festival operates outside of the strictures of cyclical time in the Renaissance. "In the arts of the festival, life came to recognise itself as the enjoyment of the passing of time. But this enjoyment of transience would turn out to be transient itself" (103). In other words, it is a festive space that masquerades as a leisure activity, but in contrast to a traditional theme park like Disneyland, does not "sanitise" itself and sell an idealised, utopian landscape to explore for the duration of your visit, but rather offers a gritty, overly morbid simulation of an under-privileged life to the most privileged members of society.

## The Best Medicine: Black Humour, Critique, and Resistance in Three Stories by George

### Saunders

Although they usually depict “losers and underdogs” in dire circumstances and under sinister systems of oppression, Saunders’s stories are also darkly funny, using comedy to satirise class and hegemony in America (Hayes-Brady 23). The stories that best exemplify this are “Downtrodden Mary’s Failed Campaign of Terror,” “The Wavemaker Falters,” and “My Chivalric Fiasco,” each of which carefully mixes humour and melodramatic tragedy to highlight their protagonists’ suffering and to draw attention to the preposterous circumstances in which they find themselves trapped.

“My Chivalric Fiasco,” like “Bounty,” takes place in a medieval-themed amusement park in which the employees are “controlled” by the corporate apparatus with drugs. Ted, the narrator, is given a chemical called “KnightLyfe” which alters his language, making him speak like a chivalric knight. “I did happily entertain our Guests, through use of Wit and various Jibes, glad that I had, after my many Travails, arrived at a station in Life from whence I could impart such Merriment to All & Sundry” (Saunders *December* 209). Ted’s cartoonish approximation of a medieval knight’s speech appears as a kind of chemical simulacrum, in that it is not derived from an empty simulation, but from his own limited consciousness, which contains only vague and ahistorical models of chivalric dialogue. We have already observed that language and speech patterns play an important role in Saunders’s fiction and

usually hint at the degrees of domination and servitude at play.<sup>9</sup> The effect of the drug on Ted is comical, especially when juxtaposed against the corporate jargon of management, or the colloquialisms of other staff members. However, the drug alters Ted's behaviour as well as his speech, inspiring a sort of superficial nobility in him, which causes his downfall. Early in the story he witnesses a manager sexually assault another employee, Martha, and they both receive promotions in exchange for their silence. Yet under the influence of KnightLyfe, he announces that "Don Murray had taken Foul Advantage of Martha" (211), provoking disastrous results including the loss of his job, and his implied suicide at the end of the story. We remember Foucault's idea of speech, or critique, being a tool one can use to "question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth" ("Critique" 47). The park, by literally manifesting speech from Ted with pharmaceuticals, and subsequently punishing him for the effects they produce, has imprisoned him in an impossible catch-22. Desubjugation is not an option when the "critique" in this case is being performed as a kind of verbal simulation. The KnightLyfe produces a medieval-flavoured spectacle intended to entertain visitors, but instead causes Ted to transgress in the eyes of management and to suffer further oppression at the hands of a hideously amoral corporation.

Corporations, by definition, *are* amoral, though. As Mark Fisher points out,

It is a mistake to rush to impose the individual ethical responsibility that the corporate structure deflects. [...] The blame will be put on supposedly pathological individuals, those "abusing the system", rather than on the system itself. [...] But this impasse — it is only individuals that can be held ethically responsible for actions, and

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<sup>9</sup> See Pogell (469); Kelly (41 -54); and Hayes-Brady (23-37) for more in-depth analysis of language in George Saunders's fiction, and its relationship with power and subjugation.

yet the cause of these abuses and errors is corporate, systemic — is not only a dissimulation: it precisely indicates what is lacking in capitalism. What agencies are capable of regulating and controlling impersonal structures? How is it possible to chastise a corporate structure? (75).

This idea lies at the crux of Saunders's farcically evil theme park corporations. It is always the individual who falls under scrutiny and suffers disproportionate punishment; the emphasis is always placed on the abuse of the system, rather than on the system itself. There is no infrastructure through which to "chastise" the management of "Chivalric" or "Pastoralia," and as long as their subjects' vocabularies are controlled and monitored, they remain trapped, at the mercy of those above them in the corporate chain, or prohibited by "procedures of exclusion" in which speech is "a privileged or exclusive right" of those in a position to exercise power (Foucault "Discourse" 52). The individuals involved almost always exhibit some form of moral conscience, though, usually in resistance to their institutions' mandates. Ted, for instance, agonises over the appropriate course of action after witnessing the assault; Likewise the narrator of "The Wavemaker Falters," blames himself for the death of a child at his job in yet another amusement park.

The "Wavemaker" park differs from many of Saunders's others in that the imagineers do not live on-site, therefore also giving us access to the narrator's home life. Unfortunately the potential for a degree of work-life balance does not offer an escape from the governance of the theme park, however. Conversely, the interaction between the narrator's home life and career leads to his wife having an affair with his manager. When he confronts her "she doesn't fall to pieces. Not only does she not deny it, she says it's going to continue no matter what. She says I've been absent too long" (43). Our narrator's theme park thus kind

of *leaks* into his personal life,<sup>10</sup> and has adverse effects on his mental health and his marriage, possibly suggesting that the precession of simulacra, as Baudrillard would have it, can be even more destructive when not confined within the defined boundaries of a self-consciously mediated environment like Disneyland. Dana Del George argues that the simulation of “Wavemaker” is not entirely hostile, however: “This last remark — “But still.”— is Saunders’s tribute to the soul among the simulacra, and simulacra are ubiquitous in his settings” (Del George 125). This suggests that although the symptoms of simulacra can be benign, the corporate environment remains fertile for exploitation by amoral characters like Leon, who in turn represent the amorality of large corporations in general, echoing Fisher’s point that “impersonal structures” cannot be controlled.

How, then, to escape? Baudrillard tells us that “even repression is integrated as a sign in this universe of simulation. Repression become deterrence is nothing but an extra sign in the universe of persuasion. The circuits of surveillance cameras are themselves part of the decor of simulacra” (52). So characters like Ted and the narrator of “Wavemaker,” repressed to a farcical degree, are effectively doomed to remain in captivity, as it were, indefinitely. One possible method of deterrence, Saunders seems to suggest, is sabotage. In “Downtrodden Mary’s Failed Campaign of Terror,” Mary, a ninety-two-year-old disgruntled and weary theme park employee, takes to poisoning the cows in one of the park’s attractions in defiance of her oppressors.

But compassion is not why I’ve killed six to date. I’ve killed them because I like to make Mr. Spencer sad. Because of me he’s pinned down in Cleaning, and Curation is

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<sup>10</sup> He is also haunted by the ghost of the dead child, Clive, who functions as another inescapable psychic symptom of his job.

out of the question. Because of me the see-through cow is a boondoggle and a white elephant and Spencer is a laughingstock. It feels good to finally be asserting oneself (“Downtrodden” 85).

Mary exercises a form of agency we do not see in other stories, in which the actions of the characters are generally always in service of their workplaces, motivated by financial anxiety and the threat of destitution. In this case, however, Mary is (relatively) unencumbered by existential dread, and rather follows a nihilistic urge, which allows this act of resistance. It is not that she is apathetic, but rather that she feels the need to exert some form of control in an environment that consistently removes her sense of personal control. She is stripped of her dignity and forced to relive traumatic events, playing out a kind of comedy of extremity: “He says not so fast, then orders me to clean up some vomit from near the Pickled Babies. I ask him please no. Three stillborns was my lot and the Pickled Babies first thing in the morning is too much” (80). Where characters in other stories may have begrudgingly succumbed to this kind of treatment, however, Mary rebels, enacting what Foucault calls “insubordination” to escape, in a sense, her trap. Interestingly, she appears not to consider her actions radical or ideological, and even refers to herself as passive at one point: “I was never one to rock the boat” (81). Yet her defiance and sabotage of the corporation from the inside marks an important implication in Saunders’s theme park stories: that “critique” is in fact possible, if exceedingly rare and ultimately impotent.

It is a somewhat pyrrhic victory Mary achieves with the murder of the cows and the humiliation of her superiors. If, in the postmodern age, capitalism “can only be resisted, never overcome” (Fisher 27), acts of resistance like Mary’s tend to have more adverse effects on the individual than on the system they attack, and with little reward. Mary’s fate

is in many ways worse than other doomed characters in Saunders's oeuvre. Having lost her job, she attempts suicide, only to be rescued against her wishes. "I step off the pier, followed by nine or ten of the Navy boys, who want to save me, and do, and will not stop saving me although I beg and beg and beg" (87). We are left with the image of the Navy boys dancing, having rescued Mary, and the unsettling knowledge that even death does not provide a means of escape.

Mary's age is also relevant. As a nonagenarian member of the proletariat, "the debilitating effects of irreversible time" over her body "are treated by the modern production system as strictly secondary considerations" (Debord 115). As her physical ability dwindles, so does her value in the workforce, and there is seemingly no compensation for her age, or compassion from management. Her act of rebellion may then also be conceived of as an act of surrender, and her subsequent attempt on her own life as equally futile. "Fixated on the delusory centre around which his world seems to move," the repressed worker no longer experiences life "as a journey toward fulfilment and toward death. Once he has given up on really living he can no longer acknowledge his own death" (*Ibid*). It would appear that in being denied the right to die at the end of the story, then, Mary suffers the ultimate indignity, rendering not only her attempted death, but also her life unacknowledged.

## Chapter 4

### Escaping the Funhouse: Socially Engaged Theme Parks of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

While David Foster Wallace drew our attention to the limits of metafiction, parodically sacrificing “Lost in the Funhouse” on the altar of postmodernism, George Saunders used the funhouse to highlight structural oppression and the plight of the working class. This dark turn from their literary predecessors, Barth and Barthelme, is notable here, and it is clear that the funhouse hides behind its façade a great deal of treachery and suffering. What has not changed, however, is that the theme parks in these fictions still operate as *traps*, which ensnare their characters, whether financially, ideologically, or literally. At no point in Saunders’s stories are we offered a reprieve from the relentlessly cruel world of corporate governance and surveillance, suggesting a bleak worldview which juxtaposes itself against the fantastical surroundings of its amusement park settings.

This chapter will examine two more works of fiction, “Zimmer Land” (2018) by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, and *Swamplandia!* (2011) By Karen Russell, and investigate the theme parks therein, with a particular interest in locating an “escape” from the darkness of the earlier generations of literary funhouses. Where Saunders’s criticism was largely directed at capitalist systems, and its critical assessments tended towards the general, and Wallace’s parody is inherently backwards-looking, attacking Barth’s genre, rather than exploring particular themes in the content, these newer fictions deal with specific issues. Adjei-

Brenyah tackles race and violence in his disturbing short story, while Russell's novel explores gender and environmentalism. There is a social functionality inherent in these works that is arguably missing from the texts previously examined. Perhaps this new generation of writers have broken free, in a sense, of the recursive loops that bothered Wallace so much in postmodern metafiction. Perhaps the "escape route" lies *outside* of the fiction itself in the form of social awareness and activism.

### **Compressed Tools for Moral Exploration: Racial Violence as a Commodity in "Zimmer Land"**

"Zimmer Land," by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, is set in a theme park of the same name whose mission statement is as follows:

- 1) To create a safe space for adults to explore problem-solving, justice, and judgement.
- 2) To provide the tools for patrons to learn about themselves in curated heightened situations.
- 3) To entertain. (Adjei-Brenyah 95).

The theme park comprises several modules in which visitors carry out semi-scripted role-plays with the park's imagineers, so they can live out a kind of heroic fantasy in which they prevent crime, terrorism, or other perceived threats, and in which they get to mete out justice, believing themselves to be vigilantes. The story's narrator, Isaiah, works in a module called Cassidy Lane, a suburban street setting in which he (an African American man)

portrays a “thug” who is confronted by the patron, role-playing as a concerned resident. These scenarios almost always end with the patron massively overreacting and violently attacking the imagineer. “He points the handgun at me. I locate: your life is in the hands of someone who doesn’t even know you and thinks you don’t deserve it. “Wait,” I say. He shoots.” (89). The kind of simulation on offer in Cassidy Lane is one that reinforces rather than challenges the biases of its consumers. Unlike the Baudrillardian simulacra of Disneyland, which requires passive engagement with its attractions, Zimmer Land encourages individualism, and produces unique experiences and outcomes each time, like unscripted improvisation. As Umberto Eco remarks,

An allegory of the consumer society, a place of absolute iconism, Disneyland is also a place of total passivity. Its visitors must agree to behave like its robots. Access to each attraction is regulated by a maze of metal railings which discourages any individual initiative. The number of visitors obviously sets the pace of the line; the officials of the dream, properly dressed in the uniforms suited to each specific attraction, not only admit the visitor to the threshold of the chosen sector, but, in successive phases, regulate his every move (Eco 105).

Zimmer Land, on the other hand, markets itself as an arena of spontaneous and interactive spectacle. It is in this way perhaps more equivocal to a video game than to the carefully curated attractions of a contemporary theme park.

George Saunders, who formerly taught Adjei-Brenyah, has said of the writer “[t]his is a person who’s using fiction to ask and answer big, urgent questions [...] That’s why the stories feel new, because they’re compressed tools for moral exploration” (Alter). All the stories in Adjei-Brenyah’s collection *Friday Black* indeed display some degree of moral

exploration, whether in the form of staunchly anti-consumerist satires like the titular story and “In Retail,” or the visceral representations of racial violence in “The Finkelstein 5” and “Zimmer Land”. Although providing one of the bleakest visions of a futuristic theme park we have yet encountered, Adjei-Brenyah does actually hint at a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. “I get it,” says Melanie, Isaiah’s ex-partner, “Zimmer Land could really actually help people see the craziness all around them” (99). Although the corporation behind the park is depicted as deeply misguided in this conviction, we are not left with the sense that it is a wholly futile exercise to envision positive change. Isaiah is obsessed by the idea of altering the “Cassidy Lane” module to encourage acting with morality, rather than leaving it as a vehicle for living out abhorrent racist fantasies. He suggests to the park’s owner and his manager that there may be a simple solution:

The majority of the patrons are revisitors who just want to kill me over and over again. It isn’t a hard choice for them. I think we could make killing a less obvious option, and we could also make the killing, if they do choose that, matter more in the postsequence. It’d be more intense. I’ve drafted a plan [...] that would take them through a trial process, where maybe they could find out that their decision to kill leads to a life in prison. Or they might have to meet the family of the guy they killed or something (98).

Isaiah evidently sees the park as a potentially didactic device to instruct, and to demonstrate the consequences of rash violence, or perhaps, at the very least, as a means of placating individuals otherwise at risk of really harming someone outside in the real world: “it was

better for me to get fake blasted ten or twenty million times a day than for an actual kid to get murdered out of the world forever” (92).<sup>11</sup>

Tommy Orange has written about the urgency of Adjei-Brenyah’s collection, praising the timeliness of these stories, and their relation to events in the real world:

Now more than ever I believe fiction can change minds, build empathy by asking readers to walk in others’ shoes, and thereby contribute to real change. [*Friday Black* is] meant to be read right now, at the end of this year, as we inch ever closer to what feels like an inevitable phenomenal catastrophe or some other kind of radical change, for better or for worse (Orange).

“Zimmer Land” is a very timely story. The commentary of the text points outward, its subject familiar to us from too many recent news stories. The name of the park (and title of the story), for example, likely refers to George Zimmerman, the man who fatally shot an African American teenager named Trayvon Martin in 2012 and was acquitted of all charges. Perhaps even more disturbing, and unfortunately also immediately topical, is the park’s plan for its newest module, “PS 911” which is designed for children, and simulates a school. “With only their eyes, their ears, and their wits, youths will have to figure out who in the building is the terrorist planning to plant a bomb in the gym” (96). It is revealed at this point that children will also be allowed to visit the other modules from now on, too, which

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<sup>11</sup> This logic is potentially flawed, however, as numerous studies have shown that violent video games (an imperfect though still apt comparative metric for the “modules” of *Zimmer Land*) often increase aggression and violent behaviour in players. One such study by Tobias Greitemeyer found that “performing intense violent acts during video game play leads to a bias in the perception of the aggressiveness of one’s subsequent behavior. This biased perception in turn should increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior” (Greitemeyer 52). Although there have also been studies that have challenged these findings, and the debate is far from resolved, the point stands as a counter to Isaiah’s naively optimistic assertion that by providing the Cassidy Lane module as an outlet for people who wish to commit acts of racial violence, the occurrence of real-world racial violence would thereby decline.

suggests the danger of ideological conditioning on young minds, threatening to perpetuate the cycle of racial injustice, rather than breaking it.

Besides the corporation's wrongheaded belief that the theme park is actually doing some sort of societal good, there is also a faction of social activism within the story in the form of protesters, who rally against the park, as well as an allusion to subversive journalism, such as the article headlined "Injustice Park: The Pay-to-Play Death of Morality in America" (91-2). There is also some dissent from within the park, as Saleh, another employee, is so aghast at the new developments that she decides to leave. "At least before it was, like, maybe we could have done some kinda good," she laments. "We have to get outta here" (102). Her departure represents an escape from the tyranny of the funhouse, though Isaiah is unable to join her as he becomes trapped by the promise of capitalism:

'I just got put on creative development.'

'So what?'

'So I can't just quit.'

'You can do whatever you want,' Saleh says.

'Don't quit,' I say (102).

The story ends on a note sufficiently dark to match its subject, but hope and escape are at least notionally possible in this scenario. Saleh's character, the protests, and slanderous article communicate to us that dissent and critique can be used to some sort of effect here, unlike in the Saunders stories, in which speech and freedom of thought are rigorously monitored. "I think of theme parks as spaces where the rules are overt and distinct from the outside world," says Adjei-Brenyah, "I wanted to think about what Zimmer Land is

concerned with in a very specific context that I had a lot of control over”.<sup>12</sup> This approach recalls Foucault’s speculation that commentary, as a method of discourse, “allows the (endless) creation of new discourses” (“Discourse” 57). By exerting “control” in the context of the strict and stringent theme park, Adjei-Brenyah fosters an open opportunity for discourse to occur not only within the story, but in the social commentary the story itself sparks.

### **Carnival Darwinism: Gender and Ecology in *Swamplandia!***

With *Swamplandia!*, Karen Russell presents a vision of the theme park as a liminal space both out of this world, and yet somehow very much entangled with its setting, in a constant battle with nature’s encroachment and the latent menace of the elements. The park is on an island in Florida’s everglades, only accessible via ferry. Its main attraction is its infamous alligator wrestling show made famous by Hilola Bigtree, the deceased mother of the novel’s adolescent protagonists: Ava, Kiwi, and Osceola. The Bigtree family still run the theme park at the novel’s outset, though it is long past its heyday, and is in serious financial trouble ever since the opening of a rival theme park on the mainland: the apocalypse-themed “World of Darkness”. *Swamplandia!* tackles issues of gender and ecology, using the theme park as an extended metaphor for both humankind’s dominion over the natural world, and the patriarchy’s hold on feminine agency throughout the novel.

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<sup>12</sup> This quote comes from a brief correspondence I had with Adjei-Brenyah over Instagram direct messages on 20/06/2022.

“While theme parks offer boys adventure,” writes Sarah Graham, “they direct girls towards romance. Theme parks thus play a significant role in shaping adolescent expectations of future life, encouraging compliance with social roles and gender norms that are affirmative for boys but disempowering for girls” (590). Although the novel is populated with strong, fleshed-out female characters, it also highlights the inequalities still evident in American culture today, both professionally and socially. “*Swamplandia!* serves as a warning against the postfeminist myth that, by the end of the twentieth century, gender equality had been achieved, rendering feminism redundant” (Graham 601). Both Hilola and Ava Bigtree achieve a degree of empowerment via their practice of wrestling, for example, a traditionally masculine pursuit. However, it is a complex kind of empowerment, which relies to some degree on illusion, and ultimately does not prove useful to the welfare of the park or its inhabitants.

Professional wrestling, according to Barthes, “is not a sport, it is a spectacle” (*Mythologies* 3). We are given an indication that this is also the case in *Swamplandia!*, when, it turns out, Hilola’s trophy for 1971 national champion from the “American Association of Alligator Wrestlers” is fake, and was presented to her by the family’s patriarch, Sawtooth (54). We also see Ava “wrestle” an alligator as part of a performance at one point, in which she merely dives into the gator-infested water of the park’s arena, and swims around, tactically avoiding several alligators. The physical fighting appears to be irrelevant to the spectacle, however, as the entire process is described with the language of performance: “‘Ta-da!’ I said lamely. Without the Chief to hit the switch, the end of the show was hard to pinpoint” (166). It is the performance that counts, and the spectacle loses its vigour without these external factors such as lights and music. This accords with Barthes’s analysis of the illusory

nature of wrestling: “the spectator does not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant; he only enjoys the perfection of an iconography” (8-9).<sup>13</sup> Alligator wrestling is nevertheless a heavily gendered facet of the novel. Only the female characters perform this feat, while the men are involved in more of an administrative or behind-the-scenes capacity. Through wrestling, Ava connects and communicates with her dead mother:

*Don't look, don't look, cautioned my mother's voice inside me — often during shows I could hear her in my mind's ear, directing me. She'd scream at you good if you goofed a move; she got protective at odd moments. Our mom was her most conventionally maternal when she was watching one of us fight the gators (166).*

Alligator wrestling appears to be a sort of sacred ritual passed down matrilineally, that binds Ava and Osceola to their mother more profoundly and successfully than Osceola's many attempts to reach her via séance or Ouija board.

This episode is mirrored later on when, after being sexually assaulted, Ava escapes her attacker and dives into an alligator hole. Here, outside the confines of the park, the danger is more urgent, and when she is bitten by an alligator, she conjures memories of her mother. Calling upon “a Bigtree escape manoeuvre,” she flies “forward with a strength that felt far beyond the limits of my small body” (383). It is as though Ava channels her mother and escapes the alligator by calling on the feminine strength endowed upon her in her youth:

I believe I met my mother there, in the final instant. Not her ghost but some vaster portion of her, her self boundlessly recharged beneath the water. Her courage. [...] I

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<sup>13</sup> Iconography is after all the predominant commodity on sale at Swamplandia, with its appropriation and bastardisation of Native American aesthetics and culture, and its hyperreal “Bigtree Family Museum” which is a kind of falsified monument to the family's myth-making about their own origins.

believe that she was the pulse and bloom that forced me to the surface. She was the water that eased the clothes from my fingers [...] and she was the victory howl that at last opened my mouth and filled my lungs (389).

Graham observes that this scene “points to the importance of strong female role models in the context of an ongoing feminist struggle against patriarchy rather than as substitute for it” (603). It is also pointed out by Christopher Rieger that this scene and the subsequent action of the book rely on men for their resolution, suggesting that

While the girls seemingly have the natural space in which to assert agency and independence, they are both seduced by traditional romantic narratives and subsequently thwarted by men. Also disturbing from a feminist perspective is the fact that Ava [...] is rescued by men, a park ranger and hunters. Ossie is similarly saved by her brother Kiwi, whose “knight-in-shining-armor” rescue of a drowning “damsel in distress” at The World of Darkness has earned him a promotion to pilot (408).

The form of empowerment offered by wrestling, therefore, seems to be one of profound personal development, but not a structural one, as the gender dynamics of the Bigtree household remain patriarchal, as does the outside world they encounter.

*Swamplandia!* places the Bigtree men in similarly prescribed gender roles. Both Chief and Kiwi leave the island, feeling that they must work to earn enough money to save the park, evidently conceiving of their problem as a primarily financial one. Kiwi goes to work in the rival theme park, The Dark World, where he is confronted with the gruelling reality of minimum wage labour, and finds himself in a Saundersesque parable about the evil of the corporate-owned theme park. A scene that captures both the most poignant and satirically

humorous example of the capitalist trap is when Kiwi receives his first paycheck from the theme park:

“There’s been some mistake here.” Kiwi smoothed the check on Scott’s desk; according to the computer-generated invoice that accompanied it, Kiwi had worked three sixty-hour weeks inside the Leviathan and yet he somehow owed the Carpathian Corporation, the World’s parent company, \$182.57 (123).

He is then informed that the cost of his onsite accommodation, food, uniform, water, AC, electricity, and more has been deducted from his wages, trapping him in a cycle of debt despite his diligence and work ethic. He is exposed to the precarity imposed by American capitalism — “if something fell on you, a flaming pretzel or one of the tinted panes from the Leviathan’s intestinal slides, you were shit out of luck” (86) — and becomes physically ravaged by the work itself, symbolically making the transition from teenager to adult via the workplace (171). This echoes Marxist critic Terry Eagleton’s assertion that under capitalism, our bodies become “commodified,” turning them into mere “instruments of production” (231).

The *maleness* of Kiwi and Chief is also depicted as somewhat more performative than the natural femininity of Ava and Ossie. At one point we see Chief, for example, performing the patriarch’s task of organising their finances, for which he dons a special outfit: his “accounting costume—glasses and red pens for sorting our bills” (53). This appears symptomatic of the family’s simulated surroundings, which renders their every action, no matter how mundane, an *act*, even when tourists stop visiting the park. “Without a show to perform, the whole island had become our backstage” (125). Conversely, Kiwi has his gender assignment inverted at The Dark World, where he is mocked for his timidity and

ignorance of mainstream American pop culture. He is given the nickname “Margaret,” after his co-workers find a picture of Margaret Mead in a book in his locker. “Some of the girls had shortened this to M&M, a trend that Kiwi was trying to encourage [...] M&M could stand for all kinds of mysterious things, much less emasculating things” (79). However, once he performs masculinity to a satisfactory degree (accelerated drastically when he saves a young girl from drowning) he gains independent agency and the theme park becomes for him, as Graham puts it, “a site of heroism or self-realization for boys and men” (591). Kiwi thus undergoes a sort of mirror-image developmental trajectory to that of Ava, who is assertive and powerful at the novel’s outset, but becomes subdued and vulnerable later on.

Towards the end of the novel, Ava ruminates on her spiritual bond with her mother, arriving at the conclusion that “something more mysterious might be happening, [...] Mothers burning inside the risen suns of their children” (394). This imagery neatly links the Bigtrees’ spirituality to the theme of nature and ecology. Rieger has pointed out the significance of the sun in the novel, which is equated to the “Upper World” in some Native American iconography.<sup>14</sup> Russell’s “blending of Native American traditions,” according to Rieger, informs much of the natural imagery and symbolism of the novel. At its heart is the idea of civilisation versus nature, which is exemplified throughout the text in the form of various dichotomies: the city and the wilderness, man and woman, humans and animals, The Dark World and Swamplandia, etc. The act of wrestling alligators is, for instance, an attempt to tame the natural world and to control the wild. Turning once again to Barthes, we learn that

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<sup>14</sup> Specifically the SECC, or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, a loose “geographically and historically disparate” system of tribes in the American southeast (Rieger 403).

In wrestling, nothing exists except in the absolute, there is no symbol, no allusion, everything is presented exhaustively. Leaving nothing in the shade, each action discards all parasitic meanings and ceremonially offers to the public a pure and full signification, rounded like Nature. [...] What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things, [...] a panoramic view of a univocal Nature” (14).

The spectators at Swamplandia! are subject to this semiotically “pure” form of entertainment which represents humanity’s dominion over the animal kingdom. However, the same spectacle is not quite as simple for us readers. For Debord, the dichotomy of civilisation and nature is inherently political, with cities representing centres of production and labour, while nature represents leisure and equality (120-122). The city inevitably spills into nature, as “human circulation” becomes, in its own right, a commodity. “Tourism is the chance to go and see what has been made trite. The economic management of travel to different places suffices in itself to ensure those places’ interchangeability. The same modernization that has deprived travel of its temporal aspect has likewise deprived it of the reality of space” (*Ibid*). The majority of Swamplandia’s visitors are tourists, who, presumably coming from the “unreal” space of the city, are presented with an idealised and hyperreal imagery of the natural world which has been conceived of, as Debord predicts, as a kind of commodity to be consumed. For the imagery of nature on display in Swamplandia is a far cry from actual nature. According to Baudrillard, simulacra pertaining to natural imagery “aim[s] for the restitution or the ideal institution of nature” and is Utopian in nature (81). The more force (simulated or not) exerted by the family on the natural world, the more nature itself appears to become illusory and artificial around them. To cite but a few examples: “since moths are just a flying paper” (71); “a seaplane made a loop above them, fangs painted on its nose in a simulacrum of an alligator’s grin” (175); and “birds move

above it by their own power. Nobody was controlling them” (309). There is some *leakage*, or cross-contamination between the natural world and the manmade, which leaves us with a more nuanced and complex symbolism regarding alligator wrestling. It is an act of affection on their part, not aggression, which is made abundantly clear by Ava’s treatment of the gators as companions, pets.

Just as “Zimmer Land” responds to racial injustice in the United States, Karen Russell has ingrained *Swamplandia!* with important and urgent messages of its own. “This story is very close to me,” she says,

The landscape is a fictionalized version of my home, "mainland" South Florida and the shrinking Everglades [...], a terrain that's currently poisoned by phosphorus pollution, dammed, drained, paved-over by developers, covered in sugarcane, dyked, maybe twenty per cent of its original size, and disappearing at sickening speeds. For me, the story of the Bigtree family's meteoric descent after their mother's death has always been connected to this larger story of the imperiled Everglades cut off from its headwaters (Hurn).

Climate change looms large in the background of this novel. Set in the flooded marshes of south Florida, and stricken with a plague of invasive melaleuca trees, *Swamplandia!* is not so much a call to arms as “a whimsical tale of ecological devastation” (Hurn). The equation of the Bigtree family’s decline with that of their habitat is an important detail, as, for Russell, “family is a kind of ecosystem, with its own microclimate and catastrophic weather events and resource bottlenecks” (Davidson), which partially implies one of the novel’s central goals, in delivering an important, socially relevant message by means of a “whimsical” family drama.

What is perhaps most unique about *Swamplandia!* in relation to the other texts under study, however, is that it, finally, represents an escape from the funhouse originally constructed by Barth many years ago. Unlike Ambrose in “Lost in the Funhouse,” every character in *Swamplandia!* ends up leaving the theme park, each with their own reason for doing so. Kiwi literally ascends to the order of the “Upper World” when he becomes a pilot. Meanwhile, Ava and Ossie resolve to attend school on the mainland, and, at least in Ossie’s case, subvert the “traditional romantic narrative”. On a meta-textual level, *Swamplandia!* provides one possible solution to the problem raised by Wallace with Barth’s “Funhouse”, by simultaneously allowing its characters to love and be loved, while also avoiding the snares of metafiction and getting tangled in its own web of allusions and references. Instead, like “Zimmer Land,” the novel engages with themes and issues *outside* of its own creation, grappling with difficult and urgent issues like sexism and climate change, but not allowing the simulacra of the theme park to dominate the story’s sense of reality.

# Conclusion

## Dinosaurs in the Desert

By way of a conclusion, let us turn for a moment towards Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* franchise, which can be viewed as a kind of metonymy for the arc of imprisonment and escape in the postmodern theme park. The 1990 novel and its subsequent movie adaptation imagine a theme park that has, through the genetic manipulation of a DNA sample extracted from a prehistoric mosquito, cloned and reared live dinosaurs. Visitors to the park are invited to wander around and observe the dinosaurs in a kind of zoo, where they are also taught about the astonishing breakthroughs of the park's scientists, and the logistics involved in creating a spectacle of this nature. Located on a remote island, the theme park is safely distant from the rest of humanity, and the hyperreality of its environs are confined to its isolated setting.

By the time of *Jurassic World: Dominion* (2022), however, through a series of catastrophic events in previous films, most of the dinosaurs from the original theme park and its successor — "Jurassic World" — have escaped the boundaries of the parks and have gradually been integrated into the world of the "real". Many now exist in nature, having adapted to their eco-systems and inserted themselves into food-chains seemingly without major adverse impact on local flora and fauna. Some develop relationships of mutual respect and admiration with humans, as in the pseudo-pet/owner relationship between Owen Grady (Chris Pratt), and a velociraptor named Blue, while others are bought and sold on the black market by the film's antagonists. In each case, however, the "breaking out" of

the dinosaurs into the real world emulates the “desert of the real”. The world we think of as the “real” one, for Baudrillard, is analogous to Borges’s desert with its shreds of map scattered around, representing traces of reality, but “it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” (3). Just as in the Borges story, the remains of the map (a simulation created by humans) gets discarded and becomes “inhabited by Animals and Beggars” (Borges 325), the dinosaurs (also a hyperreal creation of humanity) spill out into the “real” world, and become absorbed by it.

I want to suggest that the procession from *Jurassic Park* to *Jurassic World: Dominion*, in terms of their treatment of the theme park as a hyperreal space, mimics the procession laid out in this thesis from Barth and Barthelme to Russell and Adjei-Brenyah. We begin with Barthelme’s playful stories, which act like proto-funhouses themselves, followed by Barth, who constructs his literary funhouse and subsequently loses Ambrose in it, introducing the theme of imprisonment. We then move forward to Wallace, who feels acutely trapped in the genre of postmodern metafiction, and attempts to write his way out of Barth’s labyrinth. Saunders, meanwhile, is concerned with traps of a more socioeconomic variety, and in his theme parks we witness the degradation of human dignity and morality, and are warned of the snares of American capitalism, which consistently threaten to ruin the livelihoods of the working class. Adjei-Brenyah provides a contemporary perspective on racial violence through his depiction of futuristic theme parks, which are used as a vehicle to encourage and stimulate discourse around its ideas, suggesting a possible route out of the prison of the hyperreal text by turning its focus outwards to real-world events and issues. Finally, Karen Russell’s theme park functions like a stage on which its inhabitants come of

age, and raises questions about conformity, gender, and ecology. Over four decades after Barth first imprisoned Ambrose in the funhouse, Russell's Bigtree family escape *Swamplandia*, *leaking* into the world of the real, as have Jurassic World's dinosaurs and Borges's map.

What conclusion can we draw about these fictional theme parks, then? In a way, the entire progression from the laying of the trap with "Funhouse" to escape and freedom with *Swamplandia!* Could be said to reflect or *complete* Baudrillard's core theory, that the orders of simulation and simulacra have all but entirely replaced reality, and that the "escape" from the funhouse may only indicate the onset of another kind of trap, albeit a much larger one. "Only a pataphysics of simulacra" Baudrillard states, "can remove us from the system's strategy of simulation and the impasse of death in which it imprisons us" (100). Yet there is optimism in escape, too. When we consider Foucault's discussion of power, oppression, and discourse, and the disparity between the agency of the oppressed in Saunders compared to Adjei-Brenyah, for example, who does not merely give a voice to the powerless, but also actively seeks improvement, whether on a personal or societal level. Stories like "Zimmer Land" force us to reckon with the world we live in — the real world, in which it is all too easy to mistake fact for fiction, and simulation for original. These stories remind us that even hyperreal simulations (or fictional representations of such) can induce real-world symptoms (Baudrillard 4). These symptoms, one hopes, are the production of discourse, social engagement, and heightened awareness of the subject matter in question.

Classic theme parks like Disneyland tend to position themselves in an ahistoric context, deliberately and consciously separate from and outside of time and place, transcending

political narratives and ideological partition. In other words, they will go to great pains in order to achieve the very opposite effect of “Zimmer Land”. “In the overall condensed master narrative of Disney World,” writes William F. Van Wert,

we are given the illusion of being posthistoric creatures by avoiding all consciousness [...] by repressing all vital and potentially shameful moments in American history (words like "war" and "slavery" are not mentioned), and by suppressing names and dates, anything that might be remembered, altogether. The result is a master narrative that seems contentless [...], but in fact serves as [...] an invitation to accept the replacement of real figures and history with puppetry, holography, and simulacra, and, finally, an invitation to ride passively into the future with nothing to do but be swarmed with progress fed to us by big corporations, whose motives are never questioned (189).

So, if we attempt to answer Barth’s old question, “for whom is the funhouse fun?” with this dichotomy in mind, we might reasonably conclude that the theme park, in its original form, is a hyperreal space of escapism: a fantasy land in which the exterior world is forbidden from intruding and one can freely surrender to the passive, hedonistic entertainment available within. George Saunders’s theme parks offer this same kind of pleasure to their visitors, though we are always subject to the perspective of the employee, which shatters the illusion and reminds us of the adversity at stake in these deeply cruel capitalistic systems. Finally, theme parks like “Zimmer Land” do not purport to offer escapism, but *realism* (with some caveats). It is by no means historically or socially remote, but rather capitalises on socially pertinent issues and provides active, as opposed to passive, entertainment that also purports to be ethically responsible. This trend, it seems to me, is indicative of a broader shift towards social engagement and away from escapism in the

ways with which we choose to entertain ourselves. It forms a striking progression in the texts I have examined here, which move from the self-reflexive solipsism of Barthian metafiction, to the intensely empathetic style of Saunders, to the socially responsible production of Russell and Adjei-Brenyah. Perhaps counterintuitively, then, escapism does not provide an escape after all, but a well-disguised trap.

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