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Critical theme parks: Dismaland, Disney and the politics of theming

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses Banksy’s 2015 installation ‘Dismaland’ and identifies it as belonging to a new subgenre of theme parks: the critical theme park. Whereas immersive spaces have increasingly addressed controversial issues, theme parks are, the essay notes, still stuck in their traditional niche of commercial entertainment. Dismaland, by contrast, turns theme parks’ established politics of theming on their head to give the medium a social and cultural relevance that matches its enormous worldwide popularity. After reviewing the public and academic debate about controversial theming, the essay shows how Dismaland combines the representational strategies of traditional theme parks with the themes of street art to creatively extend theme parks’ heretofore self-imposed and/or inflicted thematic restrictions. Accordingly, Dismaland’s iconoclastic use of Disney(land) imagery is read as reflecting a recent trend in theme park design that may be referred to as ‘autotheming’ rather than as ‘Disney-bashing’ or ‘brandalism’. The conclusion suggests that the critical theme park may signal the medium’s return to the controversially themed amusement parks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but, in the light of some of the apparent contradictions in Dismaland’s day-to-day operation, also focuses on the limits of the critical theme park.

‘The Happiest Place on Earth’

Towards the end of the promotional video for Dismaland, the temporary ‘bemusement park’ (as it called itself) created by the elusive British street artist Banksy in Weston-super-Mare (Somerset, UK) in summer 2015, a woman lovingly looks at her two children, who are sound asleep in the back seat of the family car after having spent the day at what the male voice-over proclaims is ‘the happiest place on earth’. The woman then looks at her husband, who is sitting next to her driving the car and – who has fallen asleep as well. Over the woman’s screams the animated Dismaland logo appears, which may remind viewers of the corporate identifier of the Walt Disney Company, in which Tinker Bell flies across the sky above the silhouette of Disneyland’s ‘Sleeping Beauty Castle’. Rather than lighting up the sky with her pixie dust, however, Dismaland’s Tinker Bell ignites the castle, which partly collapses and thus upsets the Dismaland logotype, written in the characteristic Disneyland font.

Due to its liberal and iconoclastic use of Disney(land) elements and imagery – not just in the promotional video, but throughout the entire site – reviewers, following the park’s opening on 21 August 2015, were quick to call Banksy’s park a swipe at Disney or even an ‘anti-Disneyland’ (Le Point, 22 August
Banksy himself, by contrast, has stated on the Dismaland website that the ‘Dismal Land branding isn’t about Disney at all’. While Banksy’s statements about his art are notoriously unreliable, I agree that Dismaland is not about Disney in particular. Instead, as I will argue in the following, the park is concerned with theme parks and their politics of theming in general: Dismaland explores the potential of theme parks to provide spaces for the articulation of social and cultural critique, something that has usually been considered either detrimental to the theme park or a trivialization of the issue at hand. Banksy’s new park, by contrast, engages with the medium to extend its heretofore limited range of expression and to give it a social and cultural relevance that matches its enormous worldwide popularity. The result is not a ‘spoof theme park’; as, for instance, Mark Hudson has described Dismaland (The Telegraph, August 20, 2015), but a new subgenre of theme parks that I call ‘critical theme park’ and that may, in fact, signal the medium’s return to its historical roots in the controversially themed amusement parks of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Accordingly, Dismaland’s references to Disney(land) reflect a recent trend in theme park design of theming theme parks to such historic predecessors of the medium as turn-of-the-century amusement parks. Referred to as ‘self-referential’ or ‘autotheming’, Dismaland takes up this trend, however, neither to parody Disney nor, as other parks do, to de-politicize its theming, but to differentiate itself from ‘traditional' theme parks and to politicize theming tout court.

Dissuing Disney?

It is perhaps no surprise, though, that Dismaland has been perceived as a swipe at Disney(land). Several of Banksy’s previous artworks and projects have freely used Disney characters and imagery, often employing the iconic image of Mickey Mouse to comment on Western consumerism and American imperialism: in 2003, for instance, Banksy’s ‘We Don’t Need Any More Heroes, We Just Need Someone to Take Out the Recycling’, which depicts a crucified Jesus figure carrying shopping bags, includes a pair of Mickey Mouse ears in one of the bags. ‘You Can’t Beat the Feelin’’ (2004) famously shows Mickey Mouse and Ronald McDonald holding hands with Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the ‘Vietnam Napalm girl’ from Nick Ut’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph taken in 1972. In 2011, Banksy ‘détourned’ a billboard in Los Angeles by adding an unshaven, intoxicated Mickey, pants open, leering at and indecently assaulting the young bikini-clad woman on the poster.

Finally, in 2006, in what probably constitutes one of his most spectacular installations, Banksy placed an inflated blow-up doll dressed in a bright orange coverall, a black mask, black gloves and handcuffs, against a fence next to the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad coaster in the Frontierland section of Disneyland in Anaheim, California. The installation thus confronted visitors with the provocative and ironic image of a life-sized replica of a Guantanamo Bay detainee, a prisoner of the US-initiated ‘War on Terror’, in the context of a themed space that celebrates nineteenth-century US territorial expansion and imperialism (see Nath 2013 as well as Banksy’s 2010 movie Exit through the Gift Shop, which includes footage from the artist’s ‘Disneyland stunt’).

Most of Dismaland’s references to Disney(land) are of a similarly iconoclastic nature, showing famous Disney characters and Disneyland elements in dilapidated and disheveled conditions: Dismaland’s ‘Cinderella Castle’ and the Little Mermaid statue in front of it represent destroyed or distorted versions of Disneyland’s ‘Sleeping Beauty Castle’ and ‘Ariel’s Grotto’; and several paintings by Jeff Gillette at Dismaland’s ‘The Galleries’ show the Disneyland marquee, the ‘California Screamin’ coaster and the ‘Mickey’s Fun Wheel’ ferris wheel partially destroyed and set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Further references to Disney(land) include Jimmy Cauty’s model village, entitled ‘The Aftermath Dislocation Principle Part One: A Small World Re-Enactment’ (an allusion to Disneyland’s ‘it’s a small world’ ride), the Mickey Mouse ears worn by Dismaland employees, and the promotional video, which quotes, as I have noted, both Disneyland’s logo and its tagline. Finally, the Dismaland brochure features a photograph of a woman with a Mickey Mouse sweater tied around her waist – since the sweater shows Mickey from behind, thrusting his head through a paper wall, however, it looks as if he was pushing his head into the woman’s behind (N.N. 2015, 63).
Hence, although Banksy stated that he ‘banned any imagery of Mickey Mouse from the site’ (Guardian, August 20, 2015) Disneyland and Disney are omnipresent at Dismaland. Nevertheless, the ‘Disney-bashing’ hypothesis misses the point of Banksy’s park, neither capturing the scope nor the depth of its argument. In order to fully understand this argument, however, one needs to be familiar with what may be called the ‘theming debate’, a long-standing and sometimes surprisingly fierce discussion among critics, artists and the public about the politics of theming in theme parks in general and in Disney parks in particular.

The theming debate

In fact, both Dismaland as well as Banksy’s 2006 intervention at Disneyland can not only be considered in the context of the artist’s continuing engagement with Disney(land) iconography and thematics, but also and much more generally as part of a long tradition of critical texts, subversive interventions and provocative installations that have all sought to problematize and challenge theme parks’ established politics of theming, i.e. the specific strategies of cultural and medial translation that guide and/or dictate the transfer from the theme’s ‘sources’ to its representation in the theme park.

Theme parks are permanent commercial installations that seek to immerse visitors into multisensory environments by combining kinetics with a wide variety of different art forms or media, including architecture, landscaping, music, theater and film. Along with e.g. themed hotels, restaurants and shops, theme parks belong to the category of themed or immersive spaces and like them, theme parks fuse different media in the form of rides, shops, restaurants and service areas (see Kagelmann 1993, 408). Time and again, however, the theme park has also been categorized as a medium in itself (see, amongst others, Avila 2004, 126).

Since the late 1960s, theme parks have been studied by various academic disciplines, including cultural studies, history, geography, sociology, architecture and anthropology. With the gradual broadening of theme park studies to themed environment studies about two decades ago, additional disciplines such as museum studies have joined the discussion. In countless monographs, edited collections and journal articles, critics have analysed virtually all aspects of theme parks, most prominently the ontological status of theme parks, questions of authenticity and the connections between themed and public spaces. One aspect that has recently become more and more virulent again is the unusual location of theme parks within the media landscape in general and, compared to other media, the curious self-inflicted and/or externally imposed content restrictions of theme parks in particular.

In fact, whereas turn-of-the-century amusement parks such as those on Coney Island included controversial topics ‘ranging from the Boer War and the Galveston Flood to the Fall of Pompeii and the gates of hell’ (Lukas 2015, 50–51), and whereas other themed environments, including restaurants, museums and even cruise ships, have increasingly addressed such serious and politically relevant themes as social justice (see Lukas 2013; 254–55), theme parks have, from the emergence of the medium in the mid-1950s, rigorously excluded certain themes or certain aspects of a theme such as (current) politics and social issues, violence or sexuality. Thus the depiction of ancient Greek culture in the Spanish theme park Terra Mítica, for instance, focuses on aspects that a modern European audience would immediately connect with Greek Antiquity (myths and sports) but entirely omits slavery (see Carlà and Freitag 2015); and thus the depiction of US frontiers at Disneyland focuses on cowboys but entirely omits Guantanamo Bay.

Almost from the very beginnings of research on theme parks, scholars have severely criticized especially the Disney parks for their theming strategies, variously identifying them as cases of Disneyfication’ (Schickel 1986, 225), a ‘politics of inclusion/exclusion’ (Lukas 2007; 277), or, in the specific context of historical themes, as ‘Mickey Mouse History’ (Wallace 1985), ‘Distory’ (Fjellman 1992, 59) or a ‘politics of historical erasure’ (Giroux 1999, 34). According to Janet Wasko, it is this ‘fashionable sport of Disney bashing’ – referring not only to the company’s theme parks, but its entire range of media and consumer products – that has been primarily responsible for the ‘boom in “Disney Studies”’ from the 1990s onwards (2001, 4).
More recently, however, critics such as Scott A. Lukas have also pointed out that whenever (Disney) theme parks actually attempted to diverge from their established politics of theming, they almost invariably met with fierce resistance from both academics and the general public. As cases in point, Lukas discusses a number of extant and never realized theme park projects – among them Holy Land Experience, Dracula World and Disney's America – and explores the reasons for the heated discussions they provoked (and that, in the case of the latter two, even led to their being abandoned altogether). With respect to Disney's America, for instance, he writes:

Much of the discussion of Disney's Civil War theme park seemed to emphasize the inappropriate connection of the content of Civil War history to the themed materiality of the proposed theme lands, attractions, and narratives. What is interesting and telling about the park and its relationship to the discourse of theming is how, unlike the many films dealing with the Civil War and the darkness of the United States' past, so many are unwilling to accept the idea of a Civil War-themed park. (2007, 276)

According to Lukas, then, it is the popular association of the medium of the theme park with ‘trivial’ content that has prevented theme parks from addressing such socially and politically relevant topics as the civil war.

There are several issues connected to these arguments. Firstly, historically speaking, early theme parks such as Disneyland consciously sought to differentiate themselves from such predecessors of the medium as the Coney Island parks and their controversial themes (see Cross and Walton 2005, 168). Secondly, as commercial enterprises and leisure spaces for all age groups that depend on attracting a maximum amount of visitors in order to be economically successful, theme parks have been careful not only to select themes that are immediately recognizable, but also to avoid controversial themes (or controversial aspects of a specific theme) that might offend or alienate potential customers. Thirdly, this self-imposed restriction of theme parks with respect to content has undoubtedly contributed to the widespread conceptualization of the medium as ‘mere places of entertainment and folly’ (Lukas 2007, 287) and, hence, as inappropriate for certain themes. Finally, given the extremely high initial investments required for theme parks, the general uncertainty of the theme park industry, as well as the failure of earlier innovative projects like Disney's America, it seems highly unlikely that any commercial enterprise would want to run the risk of creating a park about controversial topics in the near future.

Nevertheless, insisting on the significance of immersive spaces in contemporary American culture and their impact on the public imagination, scholars, activists and artists have contributed to the theming debate by imagining controversial theme parks, organizing subversive interventions and creating provocative installations. Apparently unsatisfied with merely identifying thematic omissions in existing parks, for instance, scholars such as Klugman, Gottdiener and Giroux have shifted attention away from purely textualist readings of the sites to the potentially subversive ways in which the latter may be used by their visitors. Thus Klugman invites ‘anyone who’ , like herself, ‘in the presence of constructed joviality, feels like a cultural misfit’ to go on what she calls the ‘Alternative Ride’ – an experience that turns, she asserts, ‘even the most ordinary situations into ironic social commentary’, as, for instance, when the Disney characters are ‘beheaded by mouths that are eating them as ice cream and candy’ (1995, 164 and 167). Likewise, Gottdiener and Giroux suggest that ‘analysts should search for alternate and possibly resistant behaviors’ in immersive spaces such as theme parks (1997, 158; emphasis original) and that the parks ‘should be mined for the spaces of resistance they provide and for the progressive possibilities they offer’ (1999, 26), respectively.

Klugman, Gottdiener, and Giroux may have been inspired in part by their own work as researchers – after all, spending their time at the parks photographing trashcans and jotting notes rather than riding one ride after the other, theme park researchers themselves display a kind of behaviour that may be considered ‘subversive’. They may also have been inspired, however, by the subversive theme park interventions of such activists as the Youth International Party: on 6 August 1970, a day that came to be known as ‘Yippie Day’, members of this party congregated at Disneyland, Anaheim, in order to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima by chanting obscenities, openly using recreational drugs and raising their flag on Tom Sawyer Island, with the result that the park was
shut down (see Strodder 2012, 451–452). Banksy's 2006 ‘Disneyland stunt’, which temporarily turned Frontierland into Guantánamoland, may likewise be categorized among these subversive interventions.

Rather than critiquing or intervening at existing parks, some scholars, artists and designers have also imagined their own subversive theme parks. In 1977, for instance, Real explored the possibility of an ‘amusement park exemplifying revolutionary socialism’ with rides and shows inspired by the ‘ideals of Marx, Lenin, and Mao’ (1977, 82). In 1988, the Seven Stages Theater in Atlanta produced ‘Bananaland: A Central American Theme Park’, a theatrical performance that used such theme park elements as themed rides, shops and restaurants to critique U.S. foreign policy (see Evans 1989). And 20 years later, Universal Studios Florida created Krustyland, a fictional theme park themed to the animated TV series *The Simpsons*, as part of its newly opened ‘The Simpsons Ride’. Much like Duff Gardens or Itchy & Scratchy Land, fictional theme parks that regularly appear in the series, Krustyland constitutes an exploitationist place that is run by overworked and underpaid teenagers, seeks every opportunity to rip off customers and features attractions that address precisely the kind of themes that have been excluded from traditional theme parks: traffic jams, natural disasters and sweatshop labour.

Dismaland, however, took these attempts at imagining controversial or subversive theme parks to an entirely new level, not only because in contrast to Real's socialist park or Krustyland Dismaland constituted a park that actually existed – if only for a limited time – but also because unlike Banksy's intervention at Disneyland it did not simply rely on altering an already-existing park.

**A critical theme park**

Although since the mid-2000s he has also increasingly produced legal art, Banksy is still, first and foremost, identified as a street artist (see Blanché 2016, 11). For a street artist to design a theme park, however, makes for a particularly interesting project, for as art forms or media, street art and theme parks seem – unlike, for example, movies and theme parks (see Freitag, forthcoming) – almost diametrically opposed: firstly, while the former takes place in the public realm, the latter are private spaces and use fences, high visual barriers and sometimes equally high ticket prices to restrict their accessibility to a paying audience. Secondly, whereas theme parks are permanent installations (this is what differentiates them from such historic predecessors as county and world’s fairs), street art is often ephemeral, as it is either ‘buffed’ (removed) by the authorities or painted over by fellow artists. Thirdly, street art’s close interaction with its setting (the wall and the surrounding urban space) contrasts with the thematic externality of theme parks, whose themes are usually as different as possible from what one may expect at this place in ordinary life (see Bryman 2004, 15). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, since they depend on the immediate recognizability of their themes to a maximum amount of people, theme parks work with and perpetuate visual and other stereotypes and may therefore be considered inherently conservative (see Carlà and Freitag 2015). Street art and particularly graffiti, in turn, have traditionally been considered oppositional and rebellious. As Philips writes: ‘The medium itself implies alienation, discontentment, marginality, repression, resentment, rebellion: no matter what it says, graffiti always implies a “fuck you”’ (1999, 23). Despite the antithetical relationship between the two art forms or media, Dismaland manages to creatively combine and fuse elements from both, and it is this unique combination that makes Dismaland a critical theme park.

Following its opening on 21 August 2015, online reviewers used various terms to describe Dismaland, among them ‘installation’, ‘exhibition’, ‘(art) show’ and ‘(spoof or parody) theme park’. Promotional material for Dismaland – a video, a poster, a short brochure (all available on the official website, www.dismaland.co.uk), and a 65-page catalogue (exclusively sold on site) – referred to it as an ‘event’, a ‘bemusement park’, a ‘visitor attraction’, a ‘fairground’ and a ‘theme park’; Banksy himself, in various interviews on the Dismaland website, in the *Guardian* (August 21, 2015), and in *Juxtapoz* (Pricco 2015), used the epithets ‘festival’, ‘family attraction’, ‘art show’, ‘amusement park’ and, again, ‘theme park’. In essence, however, Dismaland is quite simply a theme park: separated from its surroundings – visually, structurally and imaginatively – by a high wall, restricting its access to paying customers, and combining kinetics (in the shape of mechanical rides such as a merry-go-round) with various art forms (among
them music, film, theater, sculpture, and painting) to create immersive experiences around selected themes, Dismaland displays virtually all of the defining characteristics of the medium. Like other parks, too, Dismaland offers themed restaurants, shops, and games and features night-time events that complement the general atmosphere of the park. Employees wear themed costumes and play scripted roles that further enhance the immersion.

To be sure, there are several aspects that distinguish Dismaland from other theme parks. Some of these can be explained by the park’s presumably rather limited budget (as with most other parks, numbers have not been released). For instance, the fact that Dismaland is a temporary installation rather than a permanent park (after a five-week run, the park closed permanently on 27 September 2015) was not the result of a conceptual decision, but merely due to financial and legal issues. In an interview on the Dismaland website, Banksy stated:

I can’t extend the run because of technical calculations. We have tall structures which have been built and certified for one weather period. It gets windy [in Weston-super-Mare] and we’re not insured for one minute past the last day of September.

Where Dismaland contrasts most strikingly with other parks, however, is in its selection of themes (or aspects of specific themes): from environmental destruction (at the park’s oil caliphate-themed ‘Mini Gulf’ course, the ‘hook-an-oiled-duck’ game, and Dietrich Wegner’s mushroom cloud tree house) to post-apocalyptic visions (in Jimmy Cauty’s model village and Jeff Gillette’s paintings); from social and other protest movements (at the collection of protest signs at ‘Guerilla Island’ and the ‘Comrade’s Advice Bureau’, where various unions are represented) and official reactions to them in the shape of police violence (at the riot control vehicle turned water slide in Water Cannon Creek, in Gavin Grindon’s ‘Museum of Cruel Objects’; and again in Cauty’s model village); from contemporary political conflicts and war (in the works of the various Syrian, Palestinian, and Israeli artists represented at Dismaland) to their immediate consequence, the refugee crisis (in Banksy’s remote-controlled boats) – politics, conflict, war, violence, death and destruction all feature prominently at Dismaland.

Hence, one could argue that Dismaland quite simply turns theme parks’ established strategies of theming on their head, including what other theme parks exclude and vice versa. In fact, Banksy himself has stated that the choice of Dismaland’s themes was primarily based on the thematic range of other parks. Asked by an interviewer about what inspired him to create the park, the artist suggested on the Dismaland website:

It’s an experiment in offering something less resolved than the average theme park. For some reason it’s been labelled as ‘twisted’ but I’ve never called it that. We just built a family attraction that acknowledges inequality and impending catastrophe. I would argue it’s theme parks which ignore these things that are the twisted ones.

However, Dismaland does not merely ‘acknowledge’ the themes that other parks ‘ignore’; it rather focuses exclusively on those themes, thus offering, from a thematic perspective, a mirror image of a regular theme park. One of Banksy’s own contributions to Dismaland, the remote-control boat pond, is a case in point. The attraction, where visitors can steer miniature fishing boats full of dark-skinned refugees and/or (the attraction switches randomly) a border-control vessel in a pond representing the Mediterranean, acknowledges the horror of the current refugee crisis. Whereas Mediterranean-themed remote-control boat ponds at other parks (e.g. Terra Mitica) completely ignore this crisis, Dismaland focuses exclusively on it. Hence, the attraction shows theming’s strategies of selection and inclusion/exclusion at full work, but, compared to other parks, turned upside down. Seen from this perspective, Dismaland seems no less ‘twisted’ than other theme parks.4

Alternatively, one could argue that Dismaland takes the themes of street art and translates them into the medium of the theme park. Indeed, given that political conflicts, war, protest movements and their repression, violence, and environmental destruction are all themes that have played prominent roles particularly in Banksy’s street art, it comes as no surprise that they are also at the centre of his park.5 Yet not only its themes, but also street art itself is almost omnipresent at Dismaland (quite in contrast to ‘regular’ parks, from whose multimedia environments street art is virtually absent): not only are several of the artists featured in ‘The Galleries’ street artists, the Dismaland brochure also features
a humorous fictive dialogue between the Prime Minister and the Chief of Staff on the impact of street art, and on ‘Guerilla Island’, the park offers ‘workshops’ in do-it-yourself street art (specifically, in how to hack billboards). However one may account for Dismaland’s specific choice of themes, the site convincingly translates them into the medium of the theme park, thus resulting in new kind of theme park that offers spaces for social critique: a critical theme park.

Brandalism vs. autotheming

The analysis of Dismaland as a critical theme park also sheds a new light on the park’s use of Disney(land) imagery. The ‘Disney-bashing’ hypothesis (see above) suggests that by satirizing Disney, Dismaland employs a street art technique that Banksy has defined as ‘brandalism’. In *Wall and Piece*, he writes:

> They are The Advertisers and they are laughing at you. However, you are forbidden to touch them. Trademarks, intellectual property rights and copyright law mean advertisers can say what they like wherever they like with impunity. Screw that. Any advert in public space that gives you no choice whether you see it or not is yours. It’s yours to take, re-arrange and re-use. (2005, 160)

Elements of brandalism would, at least theoretically, complement Dismaland’s multifarious connections to street art – through the biography of its creator, the choice of its themes and the presence of street art(ists) on site. Yet Dismaland, a private space itself, hardly seems to be an appropriate place to criticize the usurpation of public space by corporations and their advertisements. Indeed, from the perspective of theme parks and theme park studies, Dismaland’s references to Disney(land) rather recall a technique that for about two decades has played an increasingly prominent role in theme park design: self-referential or autotheming. As with theming’s general politics of theming, however, Dismaland, as a critical theme park, turns autothemed on its head.

Since the mid-1990s, theme parks have started to rely more and more frequently on earlier versions of themselves and especially their historic antecedents (amusement piers, county fairs etc.) as themes. In such theme lands as the ‘Boardwalk’ section at Knott’s Berry Farm (opened in 1996) or ‘Paradise Pier’ at Disney California Adventure (2001), such restaurants and shops as Parc Disneyland’s ‘Walt’s’ and ‘Disney & Co.’ (both 1992) and such attractions as Europa-Park’s ‘Historama’ (2010), visitors encounter simulations of either older versions of the parks themselves or of their historic predecessors. The increasing use of such autothemed spaces in theme parks addresses a number of issues in the current theme park industry, including budget concerns and branding (see Freitag 2016): the amusement pier theme of ‘Paradise Pier’ and the ‘Boardwalk’, for instance, allowed designers to use comparatively cheap ‘off-the-shelf’ carnival rides, whose unthemed look contributes to rather than detracts from the area theme. At ‘Walt’s’ and the ‘Historama’, in turn, the representations of the very parks in which these spaces are located help to establish the parks as brands, an issue that constitutes ‘the most significant transformation of the theme park’ in recent times (Lukas 2008, 172).

Simultaneously, autothemed spaces have also contributed to de-politicize theming and can thus be seen as the parks’ reaction to the theming debate: seeking to avoid theming controversies, theme parks choose autothemed as a comparatively ‘safe’ alternative to the exotic, historical and fictional cultures that have traditionally served as theme parks’ sources of theming. Whereas, for instance, the depiction of Africa in the ‘Adventure Land’ section of Europa-Park entirely omits the horrors of colonialism and slavery, the depiction of Europa-Park and its history at ‘Historama’ merely omits the long lines at the rides. By contrast, far from de-politicizing theming, the use of autothemed at Dismaland, similar to Banksy’s intervention at Disneyland, underlines the omissions of traditional theming and thus politicizes theming per se. For instance, by displaying a destroyed version of the icon of the prototype of all theme parks – namely Disneyland’s Sleeping Beauty Castle – Dismaland’s autothemed elements serve as symbols of the park’s critical approach; just as it literally does with Sleeping Beauty Castle, Dismaland figuratively ‘destroys’ the traditional mould of theme parks in order to replace it with the new model of the critical theme park.

Hence, in the development from turn-of-the-century amusement parks to theme parks to critical theme parks, an interesting historical parallel can be established: both ‘traditional’ theme parks as well
as critical theme parks use autotheming to theme themselves to their respective historical antecedents – i.e. turn-of-the-century amusement parks in the case of ‘traditional’ theme parks and ‘traditional’ theme parks in the case of critical theme parks – albeit to much different effect: whereas ‘traditional’ theme parks have used autotheming to differentiate themselves from their predecessors through a much more restrictive politics of theming, the use of the technique in critical theme parks, in turn, reverses these politics again and may thus signal, as Lukas has recently predicted, a revival of ‘the dark and creative traditions of Coney Island past’ (2015, 51). The latter applies, of course, not merely to the specific use of autotheming in critical theme parks, but to their politics of theming in general: while they may tackle contemporary issues, their particular choice of themes simultaneously refers back to the less restrictive theming strategies of turn-of-the-century amusement parks such as those on Coney Island. However, as Dismaland illustrates, the critical theme park also has its limits.

The limits of critical theme parks

In an interview on the Dismaland website, Banksy has expressed doubts about the overall concept of his park:

By repackaging an art show as an amusement park everybody’s expectations are raised substantially. The branding writes a cheque that the event doesn’t cash. I was there looking at Ben Long’s sculpture of a horse constructed from scaffolding, a piece that if it was shown in the V&A alongside other sculptures would be remarkable, but the lady next to me asked her husband ‘Does it do anything?’ I suddenly realised the whole premise was wrong, I’d pushed it too far and it had gone from being a pretty good art show to a very sub-standard amusement park.

Considering the fact that Dismaland labels itself the ‘UK’s most disappointing new visitor attraction’ (on the official poster) and ‘mediocre’ (in Axel Void’s mural on the entrance building), it is hard to take Banksy’s statement at face value. Instead, his comment may be a characteristically twisted, Magritte-esque way of warning visitors that ‘ceci n’est pas un art show’.

Indeed, as I have tried to show, Dismaland is not an art show, but a critical theme park. This new subgenre of theme parks uses the medium of theming to depict issues and topics that have been excluded from ‘traditional’ theme parks, thus offering spaces for social and cultural critique in an environment that has, on the one hand, been frequently criticized for its avoidance of controversial themes and, on the other hand, regularly been dismissed as trivial and inappropriate for purposes other than entertainment. The success of Dismaland – the park brought in more than 150,000 visitors from all over the world and £20 million within five weeks (BBC website, September 27, 2015) – may owe a lot to the ‘Banksy’ brand, but it nevertheless shows the economic potential of a critical theme park. Moreover, such attractions as Banksy’s remote-control boat pond testify to the fact that theme park rides and experiences can tackle difficult issues with dignity. One may thus look for the theming debate and the medium of theme parks to take new and perhaps unexpected turns, turns that may lead us back to the dark and controversial themes of turn-of-the-century amusement parks.

Yet another incident, however, also indicates the limits of the critical theme park: two days into Dismaland’s five-week run, Palestinian artist Shadi Al Zaqzouq, one of the 60 artists chosen by Banksy to contribute to the park, was asked to leave the site after covering the two paintings he exhibited at ‘The Galleries’ with bedsheets that read ‘R.I.P. GAZA’ and laying down in front of them like a corpse. With this ‘organised performance’, Al Zaqzouq noted in a post on a social network, he sought to ‘show his discontent at being exhibited alongside an Israeli artists [sic!], one of them having served in the army’.

Park security removed the artist from the premises, but the covered paintings stayed, with Dismaland adding an explanatory sign and apologizing ‘for any disappointment’ (The Telegraph, August 29, 2015).

In many ways, this incident resembles Banksy’s 2006 intervention at Disneyland discussed earlier, with the somewhat ironic difference that instead of being removed from a theme park for tampering with its design, it was now Banksy himself who banned an artist from his own theme park. Banksy has never commented on Zaqzouq’s protest, although on the Dismaland website he did express his frustration with other security issues at Dismaland: ‘I didn’t realise that for the first week we had “real”
security searching people before they got to the “ironic” security [artist Bill Barmanski’s installation at the entrance to Dismaland], which obviously blunted the satire a bit.’

The Al Zaqzouq incident as well as the issue of the double security point to the fact that even though critical theme parks may challenge the thematic limits of the theme park medium, they still need to observe certain operational procedures to ensure visitors’ safety and the artistic integrity of their immersive spaces. Occasionally, this may contradict the ideological or political premises of critical theme parks and even threaten to subvert their critical goals. Yet this does not take away from their enormous and exciting potential.

Notes

1. Ellsworth-Jones (2012, 11) uses the term ‘détourn’ to describe the transformation of paintings by stenciling or painting over them, a technique extensively used by Banksy in his 2005 ‘Crude Oils’ show.
2. In addition, the video quotes the tagline of Alton Towers, one of the UK’s biggest theme parks.
3. As in the case of Disneyland’s Main Street, these private spaces often masquerade as public spaces; see Francaviglia (1977).
4. One interesting exception is sexuality: if anything, sexuality is even less represented at Dismaland than at other parks.
5. This may also explain the absence of the theme of sexuality from Dismaland, since it does not feature prominently in Banksy’s street art.

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