



*Unreal Realms:*

*Coney Island and Immersion as a Lost Sense of the Real*

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ABSTRACT

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by Anna Granqvist

This thesis examines the concept of immersion concerning a physical space rather than a cinematic or virtual reality. The term has, within contemporary research of visual culture, often been ascribed to computer-generated realities in which the spectator is absorbed within a hermetically closed-off image space of illusion. Disconnected from the real, a critical aspect has been that the subject tends to lose his/her critical distance as a result of a total emotional involvement. My intention throughout this thesis is to show that the critique can be reversed—stepping outside of current realities can be a way to allow confrontation with alternative modes of cognition of the world, thereby questioning its principles. Using phenomenological theories about perception and embodiment, I will consider how experiencing immersion without technical devices or different layers of mediation that separates body and space can affect the experience as such, but also what consequences this might have on the subject.

Applied to the amusement park area on Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York, a focus on immersive spectatorship can offer a new way of understanding how we experience and make meaning of space, through our bodies and in relation to space as a visual spectacle. Despite the fact that postmodern theories around hyperreality may seem to conflict with the phenomenological approach, I will use this concept as a complementing view in the discussion about the real and the imaginary. This perspective is further motivated by the fact that Coney Island has become a kind of icon within popular culture, thereby functioning as both a visual space and as an image of that same space.

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## Introduction

Visiting the amusement park on Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York, in September 2009, what first struck me was how visually disconnected the site was from its surroundings. Signs, brands, themes and carousels all seemed to point backwards in time and away from contemporary patterns of visual culture and globalized mass production. It appeared as a bubble in which time and space had been preserved, and within this space the references to the outside were very few. Geographic location, visual codes and themes that break with everyday life make Coney Island appear as an enclosed environment. This state of immersion is often discussed in studies of contemporary visual culture, but they seem to be exclusively dealing with virtual and cinematic spaces rather than physical sites. Still, I would argue that the concept is highly relevant to the experience of sites such as Coney Island since it provides “[...] the sensation of entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favor of more bodily participation in the experience [...]”.<sup>1</sup>

Since Coney Island has become a kind of icon within popular culture, my claim is that the visitor can experience a sense of false immersion even before actually entering the space. The recognition felt upon arrival then results in a double sense of satisfaction, which might even strengthen the sense of immersion. In other words, the visitor does not only enter the physical space but also the image/idea of that same space.

The complex relation between representation and reality within postmodern society is a red thread in the writings of both Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, who have discussed sites like Disneyland and Disney World in terms of hyperreality and simulacrum.<sup>2</sup> These specific environments, in many ways comparable but still evidently different to Coney Island, are defined by Baudrillard as sites that are presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest of the world is real, which is claimed to be a myth. For him, this is a strategy for “[...] concealing the

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2008, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion about the concepts of simulacrum and hyperreality, see Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, Harcourt Inc., New York, 1986, Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Cambridge, 2001, and *Simulacra and Simulation*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2010.

fact that the real is no longer real, and thus saving the reality principle.”<sup>3</sup> Eco, on the other hand, seems to insist on a possibility to escape the hyperreal by acknowledging a sense of history instead of presenting fake models—or simulations—as real, or even superior to the real.<sup>4</sup> My research will engage with debates concerning the real and the unreal/imaginary since I claim that the relation between these is an important aspect for achieving and experiencing a sense of immersion. Still, I will avoid going too deep into abstract concepts of reality, since immersive spectatorship is always grounded in sensorial embodiment and a feeling of material presence.

### *1.1 Problem diagnosis and state of current research*

Immersion is often described as a state in which the subject is enclosed within and absorbed by a total visual environment—that is often artificial. The term has within contemporary visual studies mainly been connected to cinema and virtual reality and principles by which the subject, being situated in the realm of the imaginary, tends to become disconnected from the real.<sup>5</sup> Here, a critical aspect has been that the disconnection tends to make the subject lose his/her critical distance as a result of a total emotional involvement.<sup>6</sup> I will look at how the concept of immersion can function in spaces that are not computer-generated but real. That is, physical spaces that we can enter and navigate through with our bodies, without technical devices attached to them. I will use the amusement park area on Coney Island in New York as a focus of my discussion. Following the principles of immersion as an absorbed state of being, I will look at how this space is separated from its surroundings and how the spectator functions within this sphere of visual illusion. I will claim that the disconnection does not necessarily have to lead to a loss of critical distance, but that stepping outside of current realities can be a way to confront alternative modes of cognitioning the world, thereby questioning its principles.

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<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.13.

<sup>4</sup> Eco, p.30.

<sup>5</sup> Immersive spectatorship and its effects on the relation between body and cinematic or virtual image spaces can be found as a central thread in Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in Arts and Culture*, University Press of California, Los Angeles, 2009, Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine*, Oliver Grau's *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2003, and Magali Ljungar-Chapelon's *Actor-Spectator in a Virtual Reality Arts Play*, ArtMonitor, Gothenburg, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Grau, p.13.

I have chosen the panorama as the main example for comparison, since I share Oliver Grau's opinion that this medium in many ways represented "[...] the highest developed form of illusionism and suggestive power of the problematic variety that used traditional methods of painting."<sup>7</sup> In other words, I find it an illustrative example of an immersive image space that has radically challenged conventional forms of spectatorship as well as the status of art—by turning it into a site for participation. The focus of this thesis will not be to present a historical account of immersive visual phenomena. Yet, since it is a principle that has been applied to aesthetic perception and visibility since early modernity I will still give a brief historical overview—focusing on panoramas and a selection of its contemporary devices for optical illusion, as well as more recent attempts to engage the viewer within the world of the image.

Since I see many similarities between the experience of Coney Island and immersive spectatorship as discussed in relation to cinematic and virtual realities, a comparison to these fields will also inform my research. I will not suggest that these theories can simply be transferred to my specific field of interest, but rather that a focus on similarities as well as specificity and difference can be an interesting way to approach the subject.

When writing about Coney Island it is impossible to ignore its complex history of so-called freak shows with bearded ladies and pinheads. This will inform my research when I consider how narrative themes as well as visibility can constitute an immersive space. However, this is not an analysis of challenges to normativity or the carnivalesque in relation to contemporary political discourse.

### *1.2 Relevance of work, research goals, questions and hypothesis*

Contemporary visual studies tend to focus on virtual or cinematic spaces when discussing immersive spectatorship.<sup>8</sup> My claim is that it can be highly relevant to extend the concept to physical spaces such as Coney Island. Here, the spectator or visitor enters an environment that is geographically, thematically and visually

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<sup>7</sup> Grau, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> See Dyson, Grau, Griffiths and Ljungar-Chapelon.

disconnected from its surroundings. Since immersion has hardly been applied to contemporary physical sites, the knowledge about what happens to the subject navigating within these specific spaces is even more relevant to examine. Being a physical space through which the visitor literally navigates with his/her own body, a study of Coney Island further motivates an emphasis on the relation between embodiment, perception and its politics. By turning the identity of the spectator into that of a participator, the state of immersion can be seen to strengthen free agency and empowering the subject. Still, it is important to look at how and by what principles the concepts of power and mobility actually function within this kind of environment. My claim is that immersive spectatorship can function as both a sphere for escapism and an instance of manipulation.

The future of the amusement park on Coney Island is currently a highly debated issue.<sup>9</sup> While departments for city planning and agents of economical financing try to decide whether to restore or redevelop the site, it is still there to be experienced and examined as a historical area full of visual spectacles. In other words, it can be seen as a source for contemporary and living history; a fading icon under transformation and therefore an important visual space to catch before it potentially disappears.

In relation to Coney Island I will consider the following questions:

What strategies are used to make it appear as an immersive environment? What are the consequences and effects of immersion when it concerns a physical—rather than a virtual or cinematic—space or reality? How does the subject relate to and function within these kind of spaces? What is the difference in experiencing immersion without technical devices or different layers of mediation that separates body and space?

### *1.3 Methods and theories*

In order to discuss the questions posed above I will use an interdisciplinary and comparative method in which I put theories of immersive spectatorship connected to virtual and cinematic spaces in relation to phenomenological theories about aesthetic perception and embodiment. I will further look at the effects of immersion as

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<sup>9</sup> Charles V. Bagli, "City and Developer Spar Over Coney Island Visions", *The New York Times*, 17 February 2009, Section A, p.27.

experienced when visiting the site in real life, and finally draw connections to examples from art historical as well as cinematic contexts in order to show how spectacular visual phenomena have been used as a way to escape from reality. My claim is that immersion can have several complex functions and effects and that the state of escapism connected to it therefore can result in both manipulation and critical reflection.

The first chapter will focus on the term immersion in the sense of providing a disconnection from reality and an absorption in the world of the image. Here, I will sketch the outlines of contemporary academic discussions about immersive spectatorship, using Oliver Grau's *Virtual Art* and Alison Griffiths' *Shivers Down Your Spine* as my central sources—since both authors focus on visual phenomena that absorb the spectator within image spaces that create an illusion of a second reality. While Grau's focus on contemporary immersive spaces is mainly concerned with virtual reality, Griffiths is rather interested in showing how the concept of immersion functions within a cinematic context. For both, immersive spectatorship is closely bound to embodiment, which motivates an exploration of phenomenology and how it has been applied to visual culture. My claim is that these theories, while having been almost exclusively applied to cinema and virtual reality—when dealing with contemporary media expressions—can indeed accurately be expanded to physical spaces through which the observer navigates with his/her own body. Since the body and the senses are so central to the state of immersion, I will relate the concept to phenomenological theories of embodiment, as formulated by Merleau-Ponty. For him, vision is always a “[...] conditioned thought; it is born as occasioned by what happens in the body; it is ‘incited’ to think by the body.”<sup>10</sup> This is a manifestation of the aesthetic experience as an embodied practice. Merleau-Ponty's concept of spatiality is also relevant for my analysis of Coney Island and immersion, since space for him is not a network of objects to be considered from the outside but something that we have to experience from the inside, where we become immersed from all sides and angles.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, in Kearney, Richard and David Rasmussen (ed.), *Continental Aesthetics. Romanticism to Postmodernism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, p.296.

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p.298.

To explore Coney Island—past and present—as an immersive visual space in terms of an embodied mode of spectatorship, will be the main purpose of chapter two. Here, I will consider how the formation of a new urban-industrial society during the nineteenth century resulted in a distinction between working hours and leisure time, which in influenced to a new form of visual culture—crucial to the emergence of amusement parks such as those on Coney Island.<sup>12</sup> Since this amusement park area emerged at the turn of the twentieth century—contemporary with for example the emergence of cinema<sup>13</sup>—it is closely related to a paradigm of visuality connected to modernity. Experienced today, there are still a few historical traces visible on the site, but at the same time our perception is informed by the fact that Coney Island has become a kind of icon within popular culture—thereby functioning both a visual space and as an image of that same space.

In the third and last chapter I will discuss the concept of immersion and its consequences on visual perception, in connection to both modern and postmodern discourses. Turning to the concept of hyperreality, I will examine how Coney Island relates to the idea of reality in relation to artificiality and simulacra, in order to make a more nuanced examination of the relation between image space, perception and subject. Since this concept has been applied to similar spaces by theorists such as Baudrillard and Eco—in relation to Disneyland and Disney World—I find it important to consider how the notion of hyperreality relates to my own case study and the concept of immersion. Postmodern theories around hyperreality may seem to conflict with the phenomenological approach, but to investigate where these two perspectives might diverge and where they may complement each other will be an important outcome of the project.

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<sup>12</sup> John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1978, p.8.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectators and the Avant-Garde", in Wanda Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006, p.383.

## 1. Floating in Space: Concepts of Spectatorship, Embodiment and Space

This chapter deals with immersive spectatorship in relation to space, perception and embodiment. Using the panorama as an introductory example of how immersion is established through a set of visual strategies to create a sense of presence within an image space, I will move on to look at how the concept has been applied to more recent contexts of cinema and virtual reality. Essential to all these immersive spaces is their polysensory element, which motivates phenomenology as a point of departure.

### 1.1 The concept of immersion

In *Shivers Down Your Spine*, Alison Griffiths defines immersion as:

“[...] the sensation of entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favor of a more bodily participation in the experience, including allowing the spectator to move freely around the viewing space (although this is not a requirement).”<sup>14</sup>

A similar definition runs through the writings of Oliver Grau who points to “[...] strategies for removing boundaries and psychological distance between observer and image space”<sup>15</sup> as one of the main characteristics of visual immersive spaces. Both of these writers turn to the panorama as the first medium to intentionally try to establish this effect. For Grau, the panorama represented “[...] the highest developed form of illusionism and suggestive power of the problematical variety that used traditional methods of painting.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, it had obvious intentions to affect the spectator psychologically and emotionally by means of technological calculations made beforehand.<sup>17</sup>

In his book *The Panorama*, Stefan Oettermann agrees on the novelty of the

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<sup>14</sup> Griffiths, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Grau, p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

panorama, as a medium that came to influence the visual habits of observers—and ways they perceive a landscape, and in extension also the world. He stresses that, like all inventions, it had its precursors, but that it still offered an entirely new relation between image, spectator and perception.<sup>18</sup> In opposition to the belief that the panorama as an art form was an imitation of models already existing as natural formations, Oettermann argues that the medium itself came to influence how the landscape was to be perceived. For him, the panorama plays a part in transforming human vision but is, at the same time, a product of the same. It is seen as both a response to and an instruction for how to perceive nature and the world.<sup>19</sup>

Oettermann goes on to point to several examples that show how real landscapes have been experienced as (artificial) panoramas, stressing how the panoramic view has become the dominant mode of seeing. The panorama is thereby considered as a pictorial expression of a modern view of the world. As such it can be seen as an apparatus for “[...] teaching and glorifying the bourgeois view of the world [...]” at the same time as it functions as “[...] an instrument for liberating human vision and for limiting and ‘imprisoning’ it anew.”<sup>20</sup> This further motivates why Oettermann goes on to present the panorama as the first genuine “visual ‘mass medium’”.<sup>21</sup>

Despite being commonly used as a metaphorical term to describe a certain mode of seeing nature and landscapes, the word ‘panorama’ was first coined as a technical term for the new medium that emerged in Europe in the late eighteenth century. This specific form of landscape painting, invented around 1787, presented a 360-degree view that surrounded the observer in the closed-off environment of a rotunda.<sup>22</sup> Enclosing and absorbing the viewer within the world of the image seem to be what connects all immersive visual phenomena, reaching from fresco rooms and panoramas to circular cinema and contemporary computer art that address the viewer in a visual totality. At the core of this image type is its intense relation to the viewer, who appears as a contrast to the type of distanced spectator occupied in critical

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, Urzone Inc., New York, 1997, p.6p.

<sup>19</sup> Oettermann, p.13.

<sup>20</sup> Oettermann, p.7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Oettermann, p.5p.



reflection, that Grau classifies as “a hallmark of the modern era”.<sup>23</sup> Still, immersive image spaces does not offer any simple relation to critical distance. It is, in some instances, seen as an intellectual and stimulating process, but overall as a mentally absorbing state that is characterized by “[...] diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening.”<sup>24</sup>

In discussing his selection, Grau motivates why he has excluded illusionistic image spaces such as *trompe l'oeil* paintings, theatre and television in his study of immersion. These, he claims, are all examples where the medium is readily recognizable or delimited by a frame which tend to underline the difference between observer and image space. By leaving the observer outside, they are thus “[...] unsuitable for communicating virtual realities in a way that overwhelms the senses.”<sup>25</sup> What is instead in focus is media or art forms that blur “[...] distinctions between real space and image space”<sup>26</sup> and integrate the observer by filling his or her entire field of vision. Grau’s main area of focus is virtual reality which—as immersive visual spaces in general—has as its technological goal to give the viewer “[...] the strongest impression possible of being at the location where the images are.”<sup>27</sup> In his text ‘Music in Video Games’, Rod Munday shares this opinion, underlining the function of music in video games as a contributor to the player’s sense of immersion and by doing so, showing that the concept concerns not only the visual part of virtual realities, but is grounded in a polysensory or haptic experience. For a sense of immersion to occur, Munday argues that the normal sense impressions of one’s surroundings have to be blocked out. This means that “[...] the real world must be dimmed in order for the mediated one to be illuminated.”<sup>28</sup> One of numerous example of devices that has tried to create a sense of absorption and presence within the image space by means of a polysensorily occupation is the Sensorama Simulator [Fig.1], invented by Morton Heilig in 1962 as an attempt to enhance cinema with tactile elements and smell.<sup>29</sup> Seated on a vibrating chair that functioned as an imaginary motorcycle, the spectator got to travel through cityscapes and landscapes while simultaneously encountering smells and sounds that corresponded to the

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<sup>23</sup> Grau, p.5pp.

<sup>24</sup> Grau, p.13.

<sup>25</sup> Grau, p13p.

<sup>26</sup> Grau, p.25.

<sup>27</sup> Grau, p.14.

<sup>28</sup> Rod Munday, ”Music in Video Games”, in Jamie Sexton (ed.), *Music, Sound and Multimedia*, p.56.

<sup>29</sup> Grau, p.158p.

visuals. Though the Sensorama Simulator was mainly found in amusement parks in California during the 1960s, it is an illustrative example of the urge to extend cinema beyond the field of vision and to experiment with concepts of bodily perception.<sup>30</sup>



*Figure 1. Sensorama Simulator (1962)*

A similar definition of immersion is offered by Magali Ljungar-Chapelon, who in her study of immersive virtual reality technology as a means for artistic expression, describes the concept as a sense of entering an enclosed image world—or a realm of the imaginary. Stepping into this form of virtual spaces is metaphorically compared to “[...] a diver plunging into the water or an astronaut floating in space [...]”<sup>31</sup> Within this setting, the spectator is enveloped in a total visual environment which further engages him/her to become a participant in the events unfolding, rather than being a static observer.<sup>32</sup> Examining the soundscapes of virtual immersive environments, Frances Dyson also describes the concept as a process or condition whereby the viewer becomes totally enveloped within the image space. She further suggests a shift from the activity of looking at, to a sense of being in, the visual spectacle— which changes the status of the viewer into that of a navigator.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Grau, p.158p.

<sup>31</sup> Ljungar-Chapelon, p.22.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Dyson, p.2.

The concept of immersion, as clearly emphasized above, often includes an element of interactivity as well as an intention to appeal to other senses than the purely visual. As will be shown further on, the experience of Coney Island as an enclosed environment is grounded on, not only visual codes and sight, but on the movement of the body and effects felt when navigating through the space; encountering the smell of popcorn, hot dogs and the sea; hearing laughs and sounds from the carousels blurring with narratives from different stations of amusements; and the sensations felt by participating in the events unfolding. Before proceeding to my discussion about Coney Island in relation to immersive spectatorship, I will show how an understanding of the aesthetic experience as a haptic rather than optic experience can function as a suitable model for making sense of visual phenomena and culture. Furthermore, a recognition of spectatorship as grounded in embodiment is central for the analysis, since immersion heavily depends on the polysensory engagement of the observer.

### *1.2 Embodiment and the haptic*

According to phenomenology, as articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, perception itself is a form of immersive experience, since “[...] to look at an object is to plunge oneself into it [...]”.<sup>34</sup> In the same sense a phenomenological approach regards space as a material fact that, instead of being something that is positioned at a distance in front of us, surrounds the body and is “[...] an effect of the lived body’s own motility.”<sup>35</sup> Mind and body are not seen as two separate units, but incorporated as one and defined by our physical and worldly existence. Opposed to abstractions of the human body and the world seen in terms of opaqueness, phenomenology suggests a return to “[...] the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body [...]”.<sup>36</sup> It claims for a subject that is situated in a specific context, always in relation to objects and other bodies by which it defines itself and the world.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty discusses the perceiving subject,

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<sup>34</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London, 1989, p.67.

<sup>35</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, New York, 2007, p.195.

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p.288.

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p.289.

not as a spectator, but in terms of presence and involvement.<sup>38</sup>

Film theorist Giuliana Bruno applies this concept to cinema, shifting focus from the optic to the haptic in relation to spectatorship. This means stressing the fact that our apprehension of film spaces, as well as spaces in general, “[...] occurs through an engagement with touch and movement.”<sup>39</sup> By doing so, Bruno criticizes a theoretical tradition that has focused solely on the filmic gaze, for failing to address the emotions of viewing space. Instead of seeing the spectator as an immobile voyeur, Bruno suggests the term *voyageur*, drawing a parallel between spectatorship and traveling. Here, the spectator is seen as “[...] a passenger who traverses a haptic, emotive terrain.”<sup>40</sup> The similarities between cinema and travel culture are further emphasized by the special relation both have to the culture of modernity. Affected by ‘the panoramic spectacle of display’<sup>41</sup> the invention of cinema is seen as a part of a new spatio-visibility, referred to by Walter Benjamin as ‘the new urban phantasmagoria’.<sup>42</sup> This new form of visual culture was characterized by cosmic proportions and panoramic perspectives, and closely connected to venues such as railway stations, museums, sport palaces, wintergardens, department stores, boulevards and exhibition halls—which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> An essential aspect of these spaces is that they are all ‘sites of transit’<sup>44</sup> and thereby grounded in mobility. Throughout her book *Atlas of Emotion*, Bruno argues that this changed relation between spatial perception and bodily motion, “[...] prepared the ground for the invention of the moving image, the very epitome of modernity.”<sup>45</sup>

Audience mobility around viewing spaces is also a central concern for Alison Griffiths, who throughout her book *Shivers Down Your Spine* explores an expanded paradigm of spectatorship. She moves away from traditional approaches to film spectatorship in order to examine more embodied modes of encountering visual spectacle, of which interactivity and immersion stand out as important concepts.

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<sup>38</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.304.

<sup>39</sup> Bruno, p.16.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Bruno, p.17.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1991, p.92.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Bruno, p.17.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Characteristic for the spatial relations in immersive viewing practices is that they are often “[...] more complex, chaotic, and improvised (with spectators being afforded a level of freedom to move and, in the case of the panorama, look where they want, for however long they want).”<sup>46</sup> The concept of immersion is also closely tied to presence and aura, through “[...] the sensation of being drawn into the *mise-en-scène* [...]”.<sup>47</sup> A perspective that did not recognize the concept of embodiment as central for the experience within these image spaces would ignore the complex set of sensations presented and perceived within them.

In her discussion about precinematic visual phenomena, Bruno points to the ability to transport or hypnotize spectators as a central thread. Optical boxes—or peep shows—of the eighteenth century are one of the examples, functioning as “[...] an imaginative vehicle for travel”<sup>48</sup> in which spectators were to be absorbed into an image space. This did not take place by moving around in a immersive visual environment, as in the case of panorama shows, but by peeking into boxes that often showed views of cities, “[...] depicted in spectacular ways.”<sup>49</sup> Another example that inscribed the body of the spectator in a precinematic visuality was the panoramic wallpaper, which was also grounded on aims to engage the spectator haptically by simulating a sense of travel and movement.<sup>50</sup> Overall, these image types and visual devices, as well as cinema, are a clear break with the static and absolute vision represented by classical linear perspective. Instead, space is explored from “[...] multiple, incorporated and mobile viewpoints”<sup>51</sup> engaging the spectator in ways that included a haptic element that clearly resembles lived space.

A shift from an optic to a haptic understanding of cinema is, for Bruno, a question that is also closely connected to gender. She argues that, as wandering and urban street-walking was incorporated into early depictions of the cityscape—“[...] an imaginary form of *flânerie*”<sup>52</sup>—new horizons were opened up for women to explore public space. In the context of industrialization, film became a mass phenomena in connection to the increasing focus of leisure time. This opened up for a new mobility

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<sup>46</sup> Griffiths, p.2p.

<sup>47</sup> Griffiths, p.4.

<sup>48</sup> Bruno, p.157.

<sup>49</sup> Bruno, p.158.

<sup>50</sup> Bruno, p.166p.

<sup>51</sup> Bruno, p.178.

<sup>52</sup> Bruno, p.17.

between public and private, exemplified both by going to the cinema and by what was shown in the films themselves.<sup>53</sup> The simulated travels of the city film genre simultaneously had a formative function, making the streetscape into as much a filmic construction as an architectural one.<sup>54</sup> This is a similar discussion as the one concerning the influence of the panorama medium on ways landscapes were to be perceived, as mentioned in the introduction. It also points to the possibilities of cinema, and visual media in general, in influencing ways by which to perceive reality.

In *Music, Sound and Multimedia*, Jamie Sexton discusses how new technology has changed our perception of surrounding landscapes. He uses the Walkman—and other portable music devices—as an example of how the objective landscape has been transformed by technology “[...] into a media-like audio backdrop [...]”<sup>55</sup>, making the surrounding world aestheticised and heightened. This clearly emphasizes how senses other than the purely visual inform and influence the ways we experience a landscape—turning space into an audio-visual spectacle. In studying the perception of a visual environment like that on Coney Island, it would be ignorant to look at just sight. Sound, taste, smell and movement all relate to how we conceive our surroundings, which I intend to show in the following analysis.

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<sup>53</sup> Bruno, p.82.

<sup>54</sup> Bruno, p.27.

<sup>55</sup> Jamie Sexton (ed.), *Music, Sound and Multimedia: From the Live to the Virtual*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p.10.

## 2. Wheels of Wonder: Coney Island Past and Present

In the following chapter I will apply the concept of immersion to the amusement park area on Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York. My suggestion is that this space, by principles similar to the panorama, cinema and virtual reality, functions as a sphere that absorbs the visitor through certain modes of visuality. Before moving on to an empirical analysis of contemporary Coney Island, I will give a brief background in order to map its historical context and show how its early days as a visual spectacle of modernity influence its present state and status as an immersive environment.

### *2.1 The rise of Coney Island*

In his discussion about the panorama, Oettermann points to the distinction between working hours and leisure time as modern notions connected to industrialization. In contrast to the combination of pleasure and business in preindustrial societies, these two categories were more and more specialized and separated. The increased rationalization throughout society in the nineteenth century and the strictly regulated working hours that followed, resulted in “[...] organized forms of free-time entertainment”, of which the panorama is an illustrative example.<sup>56</sup> Contemporary to this was also the rise of amusement parks such as those that emerged on Coney Island in the late nineteenth century, functioning as a form of “[...] laboratories of the new mass culture”.<sup>57</sup>

The formation of a new urban-industrial society and its effects on economical and social conditions, are crucial to the cultural changes that gradually emerged at this time. Starting in the late nineteenth century and peaking as the twentieth century advanced, new markets for mass culture were sensed throughout most layers of society, especially in relation to the growing middle- and working-classes in the cities. The amusement parks on Coney Island that came to stand out as dominant in size, scope and fame, were made possible by growing urban populations and their increasing leisure time and spending power. Furthermore, the development of the

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<sup>56</sup> Oettermann, p.44p.

<sup>57</sup> Kasson, p.8.

amusements coincided with what historian Michael Immerso refers to as “the Saturday ‘half-holiday’ movement”<sup>58</sup> that was initiated in 1885. This meant that many industry workers, including increasing numbers of women, began to gain more time for leisure activities.<sup>59</sup>

Technological innovations like electric trolley systems that allowed an increased mobility—both geographically and economically—also influenced the rise and immediate success of the new amusement parks.<sup>60</sup> Of great impact for their appearance were also the World Expositions held at the turn of the century, which “[...] displayed the avant-garde wonders of technology”.<sup>61</sup> These fairs were not exclusively received in positive terms of social progress, but also criticized for their political effects seen from a class perspective. For Walter Benjamin, they symbolized a model for society that was constructed as a modern phantasmagoria in order to undermine social change by presenting technology as “[...] mythical powers capable of producing out of themselves a future world of peace, class harmony, and abundance.”<sup>62</sup> Without going further into the politics of phantasmagoria, I will move on to consider the role of the new technology in shaping (visual) culture as exemplified by what was emerging on Coney Island at the turn of twentieth century.

In his book *The Kid of Coney Island*, Woody Register writes about a theatrical and amusement boom that occurred between 1890 and 1910, resulting in hundreds of theatres and amusement parks throughout the United States. One of these was Luna Park [Fig.2], an amusement park on Coney Island founded in 1903 by Fred Thompson as an “[...] architecturally unified and exotic garden for enchantment, which mocked the drab circumstances of everyday life and specialized in the experience of the imaginative escape and thrilling fantasies.”<sup>63</sup> When writing about Luna Park, Immerso also emphasizes it as a fairy realm, where everything that contributed to otherworldliness was permitted into its architectural structure, while

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Immerso, *Coney Island: The People's Playground*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 2002, p.41.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Kasson, p.3pp.

<sup>61</sup> Immerso, p.6.

<sup>62</sup> Buck-Morss, p.85pp.

<sup>63</sup> Woody Register, *The Kid of Coney Island: Fred Thompson and the Rise of American Amusements*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p.7p.



“[...] anything that might diminish the effect was dispensed with.”<sup>64</sup> The exotic and fanciful facades of the rides and showplaces were used as a way to transport visitors to a faraway realm, which was taken a step further when they stepped inside. Here, Immerso stresses, the audiences could “[...] behold things that only existed in their imaginations.”<sup>65</sup>



*Figure 2. Luna Park on Coney Island (circa 1905)*

Together with Luna Park, Steeplechase Park and Dreamland were the most famous and extravagant amusement parks on Coney Island during its heyday. Its great importance to the emergence of a mass culture of public entertainment and recreation had a lot to do with the fact that it was available to most classes and ethnicities. Accessibility—in the form of improved and cheaper modes of transportations—together with the amusements themselves being affordable, turned Coney Island into a popular resort for a wide range of the population. As a celebration of the pleasure-driven spectacle, the amusement parks were contemporary with commercial amusements like music halls, dance halls, vaudeville houses and the movie theatres, making their way into Coney Island and society in general. All these venues aimed at “[...] sensory appeal and emotional release”<sup>66</sup> and offered a temporary escape from reality. The success of Coney Island in its early days can be mirrored by the fact that

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<sup>64</sup> Immerso, p.67.

<sup>65</sup> Immerso, p.100.

<sup>66</sup> Kasson, p.34pp.

twenty million people visited during the summer season of 1909.<sup>67</sup>

The disconnection from the real was based on visual spectacle as well as narrative themes, making the amusements on Coney Island appear as an enclosed imaginary environment and as such, a contrast to the rest of society. One of the early attractions on Coney Island—first appearing at Steeplechase Park but soon a part of Luna Park—was a show entitled ‘A Trip to the Moon’, which was a simulated journey to the moon. Using technological innovations, motion and scenic devices it offered the visitors a trip in an airship with an intention to trick all senses that this was a transportation to a faraway realm. Revolving screens were projected onto the walls of the ship to make the illusion appear even more real.<sup>68</sup> ‘Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea’ was another illusionary ride based on new technology that aimed toward similar goals as the panorama, absorbing the visitor in an imaginary space. Here, the visitors were taken on an underwater journey in a submarine from Luna Park to the North Pole.<sup>69</sup> These examples both used strategies similar to IMAX theatres and computer-generated 3-D spaces, as they set out to create a total environment that aimed to occupy all senses of the spectator. They further took ideas of travel, vision and spectacle as a point of departure, in a way similar to cinema as explored by Bruno.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the obvious contrast between these single attractions—in which the spectator was more or less immobile in front of simulated movements—and the reception of Coney Island’s amusement area as a whole, which is and was experienced through free movement around the visual space. In this regard, the experience of Coney Island in general is more similar to the reception of panorama shows than to IMAX and cinema. Still, it is overall a question of image spaces that we read differently than in the position of a distanced and static observer. On the contrary, one of the central characteristics is “[...] the idea of being virtually present at a depicted scene”<sup>71</sup>—an illusion of material presence within the world of the images.

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<sup>67</sup> Immerso, p.7.

<sup>68</sup> Immerso, p.61pp.

<sup>69</sup> Immerso, p.64.

<sup>70</sup> See Guiliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, for a further exploration of the symbiotic relationship between cinema and travel culture.

<sup>71</sup> Griffiths, p.81pp.

The clear break between amusement and everyday life is further emphasized by the flow of postcards sent from Coney Island at this time—a new form of “[...] communication for an age of mass leisure”<sup>72</sup>—resulting from a lifting of various post office restrictions on the mailing of postcards at the turn of the century. Historian John F. Kasson claims these postcards to be a way “[...] to celebrate one’s outing as a step outside the everyday world” and a proof of Coney Island’s appeal to its visitors as a contrast to conventional society, its routines and cultural authorities.<sup>73</sup> The postcards can also be seen as a way to preserve memory of the place, in addition to the increasing popularity of personal photography that saw its light at the end of nineteenth century. With the introduction of cheaper, more portable and less complicated camera techniques, the public could now engage in a production of images of memory and identity. One of the slogans that supported the distribution of the first celebrated Kodak camera was ‘You press the button, we do the rest’<sup>74</sup>, indicating the following popularity of the new device. Launched by Eastman Dry Plate Company in Rochester, New York, in 1888, the Kodak camera was the first of many intended for casual use by middle-class consumers. As Mary Warner Marien points out in her extensive exploration of the cultural history of photography, this “[...] enticed people to carry a camera and make spontaneous shots in a way that had not been done before.”<sup>75</sup> Another slogan—‘Memories are made of this’<sup>76</sup>—emphasizes the camera as not just a way of documenting events and places, but as an apparatus loaded with formative functions. Within this context, the establishing of the image of Coney Island from its early days is clearly grounded on ideal representations of the space as an instance for happy memories.

Another aspect where this break becomes visible is in a comparison of fashion and clothing in photographs from the beach on Coney Island—occupying one of its borders—and those depicting everyday scenarios in the city. The photographs from Coney Island show a less strict fashion as well as more intimate and relaxed relations between people, crossing borders of class as well as gender and ethnicity. Kasson’s argument is that this was not only a question of form and surface, but also something

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<sup>72</sup> Kasson, p.40p.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Patricia Holland, “‘Sweet it is to scan...’: Personal photographs and popular photography”, in Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p.139.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, Laurence King Publishing, London, 2007, p.169.

<sup>76</sup> Holland, p.147.

that changed the very behavior and power structures among the crowd.<sup>77</sup> In his writings about film theory, Robert Stam discusses Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival in relation to visual culture and cinema. As an example of non-realist traditions within Western society carnival culture is held to have a counter-hegemonic position in history, ranging from Greek Dionysian festivals to "[...] the grotesque realism of the medieval 'carnavalesque'"<sup>78</sup> and Surrealism. In its critical relation to realism, the carnival—according to Bakhtin and Stam—"[...] turns conventional aesthetics on its head in order to locate a new kind of popular, convulsive, rebellious beauty, one that dares to reveal the grotesquerie of the powerful and the latent beauty of the 'vulgar'."<sup>79</sup> Within carnival culture "[...] all hierarchical distinctions, all barriers, all norms and prohibitions, are temporarily suspended, while a qualitatively different kind of communication based on 'free and familiar contract,' is established."<sup>80</sup> By detaching the parks from their surrounding sites—by means of visual and narrative themes that turned everyday life on its head—the carnivalesque spirit could be strengthened, creating a sense of being situated in a faraway time and place.<sup>81</sup>

On Coney Island, the notion of play and conventions turned upside-down was not limited to the beach bordering the amusement park area, which on a crowded day could even be hidden from visitors' views. From several perspectives, the parallel to carnival culture and its function to reverse customary roles and overturn hierarchies are pretty obvious, but Kasson stresses that it was a unique version at hand on Coney Island. Instead of locating its festivity in time, it is here located "[...] in space as a special place on the map."<sup>82</sup> By entering this specific space, the world outside was physically left behind and new modes of behavior and structures became valid. Norms were, in other words, not only temporarily suspended—during the special occasion of the carnival—but also concerned a spatiality and a physical environment that was available whenever people felt the urge and had the chance to visit. Presumably they did so between May and September, when the parks were opened

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<sup>77</sup> Kasson, p.44p.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2000, p.156.

<sup>79</sup> Stam, p17p.

<sup>80</sup> Stam, p.155p.

<sup>81</sup> Immerso, p.58.

<sup>82</sup> Kasson, p.50.

and in full operation.<sup>83</sup>

One of the instances where the contrasts between the conventions and norms of society and the amusements of Coney Island becomes most articulated, is in its complex history of so called freak shows. Without going to deep into the challenges to normativity and surrounding politics—which would be beyond the scope of this thesis—my claim is that the sideshows, advertising “[...] the ‘greatest variety of sensational and living wonders from all parts of the world’”<sup>84</sup> was a strategy to heighten the sense of Coney Island as a sphere that was separated from everyday experiences within society.

Kasson stresses the experience of Coney Island as a whole as a powerful kinesthetic experience that “[...] overturned conventional restraints, washed away everyday concerns, buoyed and buffeted participants as they submitted to its sway.”<sup>85</sup> He further describes the area as an environmental phantasmagoria “[...] combining characteristics of the beer garden, county fair, Chicago Midway, vaudeville, and circus”<sup>86</sup>—a space to be experienced with all senses, not just the purely visual. Furthermore, Kasson emphasizes the importance of remembering to take all these aspects into consideration when turning to photographs for clues and knowledge about Coney Island’s history. We must also try to imagine, he writes:

“[...] the smells of circus animals, the taste of hot dogs, beer, and seafood, the jostle surrounding revelers, the speed and jolts of amusement rides, and, what especially impressed observers, the din of barkers, brass bands, roller coasters, merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries, and hundreds of other attractions—above all, the shouts and laughter from the crowd itself.”<sup>87</sup>

The principle of total involvement in the visual spectacle is one of the most important aspects of the reception of Coney Island. Thompson, the founder of Luna Park, had carefully designed the environment so that people were to be swept away by the festive mood, which was a way for him to guarantee a commercial success. The importance of immersion for controlling the behavior of the audience is in other

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<sup>83</sup> Kasson, p.37.

<sup>84</sup> Immerso, p.137.

<sup>85</sup> Kasson, p.49.

<sup>86</sup> Kasson, p.47pp.

<sup>87</sup> Kasson, p.49.

words recognized from the very beginning, which is clearly illustrated by the visual structuring of Luna Park. Despite having provided sets of benches around the amusement park, Thompson hated to see people sitting on them, since this could result in the visitors "[...] removing themselves as actors in the spectacle and becoming a potentially detached and critical audience."<sup>88</sup> This points to an awareness of immersion as a means for manipulation, visible in the physical structuring of the space, and thereby also the experience. To avoid visitors from stepping outside of the imaginary world, Thompson would dispatch a band of musicians to perform in front of the people on the benches. This would, he claimed, rouse their spirits and set them back into the mood he wished for.<sup>89</sup>

The aspect of play, fantasy and interaction returns as a red thread in the writings of Charles Denson—historian and director of the Coney Island History Project<sup>90</sup>, who points to the fact that the visitors to Steeplechase Park could rent clown suits to wear over their regular clothing. This was a strategy to put the visitors "[...] in the mood for fun"<sup>91</sup> at the same time as it blurred the borders between performers and visitors—transferring the visitors to the centre of the performance, in which they more easily could be immersed. According to Immerso, Steeplechase Park's ability to "[...] make the crowd a complicit instrument of its own amusement"<sup>92</sup> very much contributed to its success. Here, immersion is built up, not only by means of visual strategies but also by using certain narrative themes in order to disconnect the space from everyday life.

Several factors contributed to the decline of Coney Island's amusement park area. Despite a series of fires and a few financial issues throughout its first decades, it was during the aftermath of the Great Depression that the area saw its fortune turn. This historical crisis in global economy had major consequences for the area, and ultimately cost it at least half of its attractions.<sup>93</sup> A serious campaign to revitalize it began, according to Immerso, not until the creation of the non-profit organization

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<sup>88</sup> Kasson, p.82.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.coneyislandhistory.org>, 2010-05-02.

<sup>91</sup> Charles Denson, *Coney Island: Lost and Found*, Ten Speed Press, New York, 2007, p.33.

<sup>92</sup> Immerso, p.7.

<sup>93</sup> Immerso, p.143pp.

Coney Island USA in 1980.<sup>94</sup> In between the Great Depression and the 1980s, the amusements had occasionally been well-visited, like during World War II, but overall Coney Island functioned more as a beach resort that offered the masses an escape from the city. This eventually led to increased efforts from New York City Department of Parks and Recreation to control the area, and according to Immerso, to regulate the behavior of the crowd as well as the function of the space.<sup>95</sup>

## *2.2 Coney Island as an immersive visual space*

Pointing toward a wide range of visual strategies and themes calculated for shutting out the surrounding reality, there seem to be a lot of parallels between early experiences of Coney Island, the reception of panorama shows, and more recent immersive spaces. In his book *Amusing the Millions*, Kasson sets out to break with a general view of contemporary Coney Island in terms of faded glory, nostalgia and the fact that it now “[...] lives largely on the borrowed capital of its past.”<sup>96</sup> Instead, he points to its significance in the formation of modern mass culture as well as its contribution to “[...] the growing cultural revolt against genteel standards of taste and conduct [...]”.<sup>97</sup> Even if Kasson does not discuss Coney Island in concrete terms of immersion, he reflects on the experience of the space—in its heyday—as a spectacle in which the visitor was absorbed.<sup>98</sup>

It is impossible for contemporary visitors to imagine the sensations felt when visiting the amusement parks in the era of their novelty and heyday. Combined with the several changes that the space has undergone over the years, the conditions for our current experience of it are highly influenced by images reproduced within popular culture. This, I will argue, does not break down the feeling of immersion felt when navigating through the site. The principles of immersion still function in similar ways, absorbing the visitor in an imaginary reality, even if formal characteristics as well as historical contexts have changed.

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<sup>94</sup> Immerso, p.9.

<sup>95</sup> Immerso, p.148pp.

<sup>96</sup> Kasson, p.3.

<sup>97</sup> Kasson, p.8p.

<sup>98</sup> Kasson, p.65.

For contemporary visitors, the notion of nostalgia together with Coney Island's status as a cultural icon seem to be central in strengthening the sense of immersion experienced when moving around the space. Grounded on the fact that the place has been such a common theme within popular culture, ranging from film to literature and music, my suggestion is that a sense of immersion can be felt even before entering the space and that this can result in a double sense of satisfaction when actually visiting. Equipped with a set of imagery and concepts prior to the visit, the actual visit would then function as a form of affirmation of the space as a visual spectacle. At the same time, the satisfaction felt as a result of one's own presence—of being a part of the scenery—would strengthen the feeling of absorption. The visitor would, in other words, simultaneously feel immersed in the physical space and the image/idea of that same space—built up by cultural iconography. Contrastingly, the opposite would obviously be possible, if the space for some reason did not live up to the visitor's expectations—being closed due to a visit during off-season, or appearing as a disappointment because of, for example, weather circumstances. Still, this could, on the other hand, result in an even stronger desire to return—to try again to enter the image space that happened to be closed.

Situated in the southern part of Brooklyn, New York, Coney Island amusement park separates itself from the rest of the city not only geographically, but also thematically and visually. Reaching the site after a long subway ride from locations such as the centre of Manhattan, the visitor enters the area in a way that strongly resembles the experience of panorama shows in the late eighteenth century. Upon arrival the visitor enters a visual environment that appears as a bubble in which time and space have been preserved. Similar to the principles of the rotunda—an architectural solution that housed the panorama shows—where visitors entered the image space through a long dark corridor, the transportation to Coney Island strengthens the distance between the space of the imaginary and the rest of the city. In this sense, the subway ride can be compared to the corridor of the rotunda, which separates the space of departure from the space of arrival, emphasizing their complete differences when it comes to modes of visibility. By doing so, it also affects the sense of immersion felt upon arrival. When reaching the actual panorama show, the audience experienced themselves “[...] transported to a faraway place, as if by magic.”<sup>99</sup> Within the

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<sup>99</sup> Oettermann, p.51.



rotunda, the illusion of a second reality was held up through a disconnection of actual reality. A pictorial environment was constructed, that blurred the borders between painting and exhibition space as well as those between observer, reality and representation. Since all traces from the outside were shut out, there was no way for the visitor to compare artistic illusion with real surroundings, which in turn created a feeling of being absorbed, or immersed, within the image space. After having spent some time within this artificial landscape, the memory of the city was replaced by a new set of inputs—which helped to make the experience appear as even more real.<sup>100</sup> The construction of space on Coney Island functions in a similar way, enclosing the visitor in its own bubble from the very moment he or she enters. Since the ocean occupies the visitor's field of vision on one of the amusement park's borders—the most central one in connection to the Boardwalk—he/she has no other (artificial) visual signs to compare to those on Coney Island. The sense of immersion is, for this reason, sustained even when strolling on the connecting beach. My suggestion is that, observing the area from the beach can even contribute to the sense of having just been situated within an enclosed visual space. This further points toward immersion as a sensation that can be sensed even after having left the space, but I will return to this later, and more properly start with the arrival.

One of the first sights that appears to the visitor when reaching the amusement park area from the subway is *Nathan's Famous*, with old-fashioned signs stating the fact that they have offered 'World Famous Frankfurters Since 1916'. This is only one of several references to tradition, nostalgia and authenticity. Compared to archival material of this specific spot, present signs are identical to the originals and clearly underline the notion of nostalgia connected to the visual structure and experience of contemporary Coney Island. Moving further within the area, passing handpainted signs that advertise food [Fig.3] and sideshows, the visitor reaches Deno's Wonder Wheel Park, one of the few remaining amusements from Coney Island's heyday and furthermore an attraction awarded landmark status in 1989.<sup>101</sup> The Wonder Wheel [Fig.4], claimed to be the oldest operating ride at Coney Island with its debut on Memorial Day in 1920<sup>102</sup>, stands out like a form of symbol for the place—by being visible from all-over and reversely making the whole area visible all at once, when

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<sup>100</sup> Oettermann, p.51.

<sup>101</sup> Immerso, p.179.

<sup>102</sup> Immerso, p.130.

going for a ride. This shows that the haptic element is a central part of the experience of Coney Island. Together with all visual impressions, tastes and smells, movement is what radically alters the visitors' everyday experiences when experiencing the amusements. An observation from an early roller coaster ride states "[...] the sensation of being carried away by a cyclone, without the attendant sacrifice of life or limb."<sup>103</sup> Even if a lot of the haptic attractions of early Coney Island—with titles like the 'Earthquake Floor', 'Steeplechase Gravity Ride', 'Razzle Dazzle' and 'the Revolving Seat' referring to their focus on bodily sensations<sup>104</sup>—are gone, a selection of carousels, the Parachute Jump, the Cyclone roller coaster and the Wonder Wheel still offer moving sensations for contemporary visitors.



Figure 3. Handpainted signs on Coney Island (2009)

What makes Coney Island appear as an immersive environment—past as well as present—seem to be a combination of location, scale, narrative themes and visual strategies. Even if the experience of the amusement park area at first seems to take place without technical devices that separate body and space—in contrast to how immersion is built up in virtual and cinematic contexts—there are occasionally a few instances where mediation shapes the visitor's perception. The mechanical rides clearly affect the senses and the sensations felt—both from an optic and a haptic perspective—and shape our experience of the space as an immersive spectacle. Still, we navigate through the site physically, without technical devices attached to our

<sup>103</sup> Immerso, p.41.

<sup>104</sup> Immerso, p.57.

bodies, and are allowed to move freely around the viewing space—which makes the experience of the amusement park area in general more similar to the reception of early panorama shows. One important aspect that further makes the status of immersion on Coney Island different from virtual reality and cinema, is its appearance as a constant site rather than a temporary phenomenon.



Figure 4. Coney Island’s Wonder Wheel (2009)

Even if much has changed since the peak of the amusement parks on Coney Island, there are some traces left of its early days as a visual spectacle of modernity. Its importance as a historical and cultural site and the fact that it, as such, can function as a living museum as well as a site for contemporary amusement, has been recognized by turning some of its survived attractions into landmarks. Currently, the future of Coney Island is a highly debated issue surrounded by questions of preservation or transformation—grounded on cultural history as well as commercial concerns. In *The New York Times’* City Room Blog, Natasha Lennard discusses current plans for a new all-season amusement park which will be entitled Luna Park. With references to the old amusement park it has intentions to “[...] evoke Coney Island’s past as much as create a state-of-the-art amusement park [...]”<sup>105</sup> offering developed technology and new rides. The fact that the historic legacy of the site is taken into consideration when renewing it confirms the importance of visibility as a way to encounter a sense of the past.

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<sup>105</sup> Natasha Lennard, “Coney Island Rides Again”, *The New York Times* City Room Blog, uploaded 16 February 2010, accessed 3 May 2010, <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/coney-island-rides-again>.

### 3. Space as Spectacle

This chapter takes the concept of immersion and its consequences on visual perception as a point of departure for a discussion about the modern and postmodern visual spectacle. It looks at how a set of technological inventions connected to industrialization and modernity, not only resulted in new modes of transportation and expression, but also new ways of seeing the world. As a result of the division between working hours and leisure time, the idea of pleasure and entertainment became a central concern for structuring life, time and space. In this section I will consider how an emphasis on the visual spectacle can be seen as a transport toward imaginary or alternative realities, thereby functioning as a tool for escapism. I will also look at the relation between modernity and more recent contexts, reflecting on society in terms of the hyperreal and what consequences this might have on the body. Connecting this to Coney Island I will look at how immersive spectatorship functions when overlapping past and present and the fact that the amusement park can be seen as both a visual space and an image of that same space.

#### *3.1 Modernity and the spectacular*

The construction of Coney Island at the end of nineteenth century is still partly visible in the present context. Since the site can be seen as a clue for how visual culture and spectatorship could be regarded at the break of modernity, an exploration of the principles of perception—as discussed during and in connection to that time—would further explain why it is constructed the way it is. In this regard, the visual design of Coney Island can be an illustration of how concerns about the relation between vision, images and observers were applied, not only to two-dimensional surfaces, but to the construction of sites and plans within the city. By reading these as images, we can gain deeper insight the politics of perception and further understand why we make meaning of surrounding environments in certain ways—here in terms of immersion.

In his books *Techniques of the Observer* and *Suspensions of Perception*, Jonathan Crary examines the historical construction of vision, with an intention to show the connection between changing modes of perception and technology. He traces a break with what he refers to as ‘classical models of vision’ in the early nineteenth century,

when the representational conventions of modernity not only changed the way vision was structured, but also how knowledge and social practices were organized.<sup>106</sup> For Crary, the observer's changed status during this period depended on "[...] the priority of models of subjective vision, in contrast to the pervasive suppression of subjectivity in vision in seventeenth- and eighteenth century thought."<sup>107</sup> This change was, Crary argues, based on a shift from geometrical optics to physiological optics in scientific and philosophical discussions about perception.

The camera obscura was the most widely used model for explaining human vision during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, representing a view of the relation between perceiver and external world as two distinct entities. During the nineteenth century, however, vision came to be regarded more as "[...] an interrogation of the physiological makeup of the human subject, rather than the mechanics of light and optical transmission."<sup>108</sup> In accordance with phenomenological perspectives on perception, the sensory organs and activities of the viewer were now recognized as "[...] inextricably mixed with whatever object they behold."<sup>109</sup> This was influential for a series of optical devices that closely incorporated the body of the spectator in their very structure, exemplified by the stereoscope and the diorama.<sup>110</sup> Central here, in other words, is the connection between scientific research and entertainment in changing the discourse and status of the observer. This is where Crary's studies extend from theories of vision toward the politics of visual structures. By applying Foucault's theories of discipline on the optical devices of the nineteenth century, he claims that these—as much as the panopticon—involved "[...] arrangements of bodies in space, regulations of activity, and deployment of individual bodies, which codified and normalized the observer within rigidly defined systems of visual consumption."<sup>111</sup>

In *Suspensions of Perception*, Crary traces the problem of attention as a central consequence of modern—or subjective—vision. Modernity is accounted as "[...] a process of fragmentation and destruction in which premodern forms of wholeness

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<sup>106</sup> Jonatan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1990, p.2p.

<sup>107</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.9.

<sup>108</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.70.

<sup>109</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.72.

<sup>110</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.112pp.

<sup>111</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.18.



and integrity were irretrievably broken up or degraded through technological, urban, and economic reorganizations.”<sup>112</sup> According to Crary, this resulted in problems concerning distraction, which he further sees as inseparable from the parallel construction of an attentive observer that occurred in various domains.<sup>113</sup> One of many visual devices that is pointed out for trying to mechanically sustain the attention of the observer is the Kaiserpanorama [Fig.5]. This was a form of multiviewer version of a stereoscopic peep-show, where several spectators would simultaneously peek into holes in a circular exhibition design. The interior contained a motor that rotated image slides that presented three-dimensional views of local as well as faraway scenes. Every two minutes, the slides would rotate from viewer to viewer, which means that it functioned both as a public event and an individual reception of visual phenomena. Crary further sees the Kaiserpanorama as one of the numerous sites where “[...] an ‘industrialization’ of visual consumption”<sup>114</sup> can be located. Together with many other precinematic devices in the 1880s, as well as the emergence of cinema, it is defined as an apparatus that sought to present a sense of continuum to cover up the fragmentation of perception that was inherent to their technique.<sup>115</sup> Seen from this perspective the concept of immersion appears as a strategy to reconnect with the audience in order to create a more intimate relation between viewer and image space.

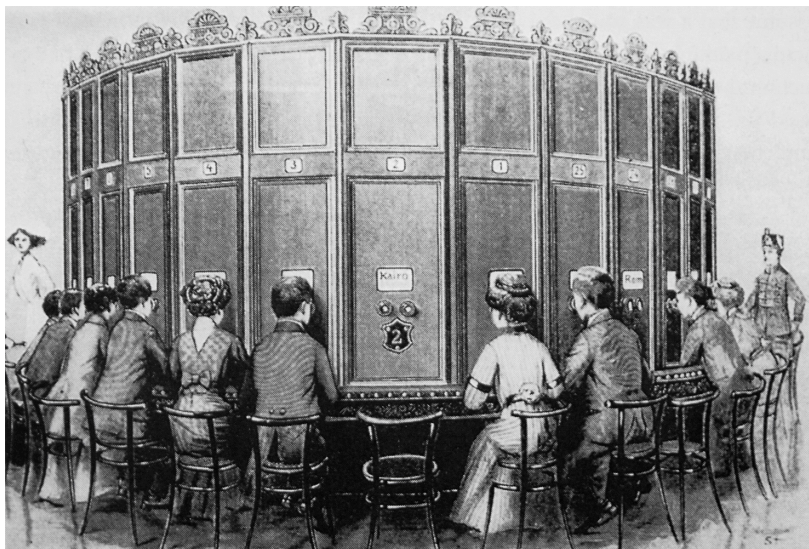


Figure 5. Kaiserpanorama (1880s)

<sup>112</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2000, p.48.

<sup>113</sup> Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p.49.

<sup>114</sup> Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p.138.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

Contemporary to this was also the emergence of fairgrounds such as those on Coney Island. Beginning in the late 1880s these included new kinesthetic experiences such as ferris wheels, slides and roller coasters. Crary refers to the bodily sensations offered by these mechanical rides as “[...] a fragmentary and mechanical recuperation of carnival energies” and further relates their kinematic form of visual fascination to what was to be presented by cinema.<sup>116</sup> The relation between early cinema and the emergence of amusement parks at the turn of the century, is also emphasized by Tom Gunning, who sees this as a ground for rethinking cinema as a visual attraction, rather than just a form of narrative storytelling.<sup>117</sup> Gunning uses the term ‘cinema of attraction’ to refer to an approach to spectatorship that he argues dominated early cinema from its novelty period until around 1906-07. With a drive toward display and visual spectacle, it is not seen as a counter-narrative, but as “[...] a different configuration of spectatorial involvement [...]”<sup>118</sup> and as such it can interact with other forms of addressing the spectator. What the concept mainly suggests regarding spectatorship is, as pointed out by Viva Paci in her text ‘The Attraction of the Intelligent Eye: Obsessions with the Vision Machine in Early Film Theory’, is the fact that it addresses the spectators directly—thereby turning them into “[...] privileged recipients of the pleasure of spectacle and an essential part of the show, whose moving images stimulate their senses and emotions.”<sup>119</sup> This suggests a clear focus on embodiment and the ability of cinema to immerse its spectators in the images unfolding on the screen.

As vision was determined to be grounded in the body of the observer, it was also recognized as something that could be regulated and controlled by “[...] external techniques of manipulation and simulation.”<sup>120</sup> This, Crary claims, has since the late nineteenth century remained a central concern within institutional empirical research and “[...] at the heart of a functioning of a capitalist consumer economy.”<sup>121</sup> Applied to Coney Island, the visual structuring of space at for example Luna Park—as

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<sup>116</sup> Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p.238.

<sup>117</sup> Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectators and the Avant-Garde”, p.383.

<sup>118</sup> Tom Gunning, “Attractions: How They Came into the World”, in Wanda Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006, p.37.

<sup>119</sup> Viva Paci, “The Attraction of the Intelligent Eye: Obsessions with the Vision Machine in Early Film Theories”, in Wanda Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006, p.121.

<sup>120</sup> Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p.12.

<sup>121</sup> Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, p.33.

discussed above—clearly stands out as a commercial strategy to gain profit by controlling the sensations of the audience. To distract visitors from stepping outside of the imaginary world of Luna Park, Thompson would, as shown in the previous chapter, use visual and aural techniques to gain and keep their attention.<sup>122</sup> Here, the function of immersion is clearly grounded in strategies of manipulation and commercial concerns. According to the concept of attraction, as discussed by Viva Paci and defined by Eisenstein, the ability of visual phenomena to manipulate the senses of the spectator, can have another function than a purely commercial one. In Eisenstein's view attraction was seen as "[...] the privileged ideological means for shaking viewers up and, in this way, for forcing them to act."<sup>123</sup> It was, in other words, not regarded in terms of losing one's ability to reflect critically, but on the contrary a way to use the attraction as a push toward reflection.<sup>124</sup>

### 3.2 *Between realities*

As I argued in the previous chapter, experiences of contemporary Coney Island are strongly influenced by images and ideas of the space as presented in popular culture. The fact that it simultaneously functions as visual environment and an image, strengthens the sense of immersion felt when navigating through the area. I will further suggest that, as Alison Griffiths points out in *Shivers Down Your Spine*, "[...] ways of seeing and signifiatory practices associated with one space become frames of reference for understanding subsequent architectural spaces and visual technologies "[...]"<sup>125</sup> In relation to this statement, my argument is that present experiences of Coney Island are based on, not only the space itself—as perceived when visiting for the first time—or its status as an icon or image in the minds of the visitors, but that the very mode of perception is grounded on a set of visual technologies that make us experience space as if it was a film in which we participated or were absorbed. Similar to the discussion of the panorama as a medium that shaped human perception, Susan Sontag suggests the impact of photography on our experiences of the real. In her book *On Photography*, she shows how photographic image techniques have formed new visual codes and taught us

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<sup>122</sup> Kasson, p.82.

<sup>123</sup> Paci, "The Attraction of the Intelligent Eye", p.124.

<sup>124</sup> Paci, "The Attraction of the Intelligent Eye", p.123.

<sup>125</sup> Griffiths, p.7.



what to look at and how to perceive the world. She defines this as a structuring of visual experiences—a form of “[...] grammar and, even more importantly, and ethics of seeing.”<sup>126</sup> Photographs are emphasized, not just as a way to record reality, but as a norm for how things and surroundings appear to us, thereby “[...] changing the very idea of reality, and of realism.”<sup>127</sup> This argument can be expanded to other media as well, suggesting for example the ability of cinema and computer-generated virtual realities to influence how an actual site is perceived and experienced. From this point of view, the sense of contemporary Coney Island as an immersive space would not depend exclusively on its visual structures, but simultaneously on a form of intertextuality—and the fact that immersion is strengthened by contemporary visitor’s habits of consuming imaginary three-dimensional spaces in other contexts and media. In contrast to Coney Island’s early visitors—whose experiences of hyperreality were far more restricted—today’s visitors are increasingly well-versed when it comes to encountering mediated realities, which influences the experience.

The question of mediation is a central concern in numerous postmodern theories of reality as transformed by the constant flow of images that surround us. First published in 1967, Guy Debord’s book *The Society of the Spectacle* is a critical reflection of a society—or reality—that by means of industrialization and capitalist production, has turned into a spectacle. According to Debord, everything directly lived has “[...] receded into a prepresentation”<sup>128</sup> and as such the world appears as something that can only be looked at, rather than interfered with. Debord underlines that the spectacle he refers to is not a collection of images, but a world view that has turned social relations between people into one that is mediated by images. In other words, the spectacle is not seen as a mere decoration or set of visual attractions, but as a structure that dominates every single instance of life and society.<sup>129</sup> The goal of the spectacle, he argues, is “[...] to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped”.<sup>130</sup> This is according to Debord achieved by an elevation of sight over the other senses—especially touch—making the experience of society into a generalized abstraction.<sup>131</sup> Here, I want to suggest that the concept of immersion and its focus on

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<sup>126</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Picador, New York, 1977, p.3.

<sup>127</sup> Sontag, p.187.

<sup>128</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Rebel Press, London, 2005, p.7.

<sup>129</sup> Debord, p.8.

<sup>130</sup> Debord, p.11.

<sup>131</sup> Debord, p.11.

the haptic can offer a more nuanced understanding of postmodern visual culture. I do not claim that the structural view suggested by Debord is entirely irrelevant, but that the model it offers can be seen as less static when comparing it to the concept of immersive spectatorship—which opens up for a higher degree of free agency. Furthermore, my analysis of Coney Island as a visual spectacle has hopefully shown that mediation plays an important role for the experience, but that the perception is also very much depending on senses other than the purely visual. Here, the idea of the spectator as a navigator or voyageur/traveler, as suggested by Dyson and Bruno, functions as a fruitful complement that offers a more mobile and empowered subject.

In a more recent context, Jean Baudrillard writes about the impact of mediation upon reality, using Disneyland as an example of the hyperreal. For him, the mixture and confusion of real and imaginary is central to the concept of simulations. These are different from fictions or lies in that they not only present the imaginary as real, but also "[...] undermine any contrast to the real, absorbing the real within itself."<sup>132</sup> Baudrillard defines Disneyland as a play of illusions and phantasms that is presented as imaginary in order to conceal "[...] that reality no more exists outside than inside the limits of the artificial parameter [...]"<sup>133</sup> The same example is found in the writings of Umberto Eco, who discusses Disneyland as a perfect example of the absolute fake, and a site where a fantasy world is reconstructed to appear as "[...] more real than reality [...]"<sup>134</sup> Contrasting it to wax museums—another site of illusions—Eco argues that Disneyland presents a strange mixture of real and fake objects which ends up favouring the fake as superior. For example, real rocks and real water are used at Disneyland when rocks and water are a part of the settings, but fake models are not just used as a way to present the impossible—like dinosaurs. Instead, fake objects—or models of objects—are presented as a perfected version of the real. Eco uses the example of a real crocodile that can obviously and easily be found in a zoo—but there they have the chance to hide and be invisible to the visitors. A fake model much more corresponds to our daydream demands, Eco argues, and by turning to these, Disneyland not only produces illusions of the real,

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<sup>132</sup> Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, p.6.

<sup>133</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.12pp.

<sup>134</sup> Eco, p.45.

but simultaneously glorifies technology for its possibilities to "[...] give us more reality than nature can."<sup>135</sup>

Eco further describes Disneyland as a form of immersive environment that builds on human scale in order to absorb its visitors in the world of the imaginary, presented as more real than reality. Within the bubble of Disneyland, he claims, it is "[...] impossible to glimpse its limits."<sup>136</sup> A similar strategy operates at Coney Island. Its location by the sea refuses the possibility of a comparison with any environment other than the infinity of the ocean and the horizon. No other (artificial) visual structures or artifacts are visible on this side of the amusement park area, which sustains the impression of being—or having just been—situated in the world of the imaginary. Still, Coney Island is in many ways different from Disneyland. It is not built up as a centrally managed and corporate theme park, but consists of several agents in charge of their own business which makes it less homogenous and more diversified. It also functions as a site that refers only to its own space—and the history of that space— not primarily to a film oeuvre and its containing stories. As such it does not present any clear references to narratives outside of what is directly presented and imagined within its own sphere. Disneyland, on the other hand, is a site with an overall narrative character that was designed to appear as a park in which Disney could extend and reconstruct his fantasy world "[...] within surroundings of realistic landscape effects."<sup>137</sup>

Even if both Eco and Baudrillard write about Disneyland in terms of hyperreality, their approaches to the real and the unreal/imaginary seem to differ at one important point. Where Eco seem to argue that there is still a possibility to "[...] escape from the temptations of hyperreality [...]"<sup>138</sup> by for example not denying the sense of history—exemplified by a New Orleans wax museum that presents its reconstructions of legends precisely as such, instead of masking it as "the real thing"<sup>139</sup>—Baudrillard seems to deny the very idea of a reality altogether. Turning to the example of Coney Island, I insist that it presents a very different relation to the

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<sup>135</sup> Eco, p.44.

<sup>136</sup> Eco, p.45.

<sup>137</sup> Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, p.13.

<sup>138</sup> Eco, p.30.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

concept of hyperreality, than what is at hand at Disneyland—exactly due to Coney Island’s sense of history, visible both within the contemporary amusement park area as well as in a museum devoted to its own history, located on the site. By leaving certain traces of history, and even entitling the amusement park that is being constructed at this very moment, Luna Park, parallels to actual changes concerning time and space seem to break with the idea of the hyperreal. What is presented is not a celebration of the world of Coney Island as something real—or even more real than the real—but an emphasis on the space as an imaginary realm grounded on the concept of play.

## Conclusion

In his book *Virtual Art*, Oliver Grau defines the panorama as a medium that changed the status of the image from a picture to "[...] an image space where the observer was physically present and was able to set him- and herself in relation to it."<sup>140</sup> The intention of the panorama show was to create a sense of presence within the world of the images—absorbing the observer in a second reality by disconnecting the real surroundings.<sup>141</sup> In a more recent context a similar approach to spectatorship can be found in the field of computer-generated virtual realities. Here, Grau discusses the impact of the computer and digital technology for having transformed the image—suggesting that it is now possible to enter it.<sup>142</sup> Alison Griffiths offers a similar explanation, defining immersive image spaces as grounded on an ability to draw spectators deeper into the view than traditional forms of exhibitions—exemplified by 2-D movies and panel paintings.<sup>143</sup> Central to the concept of immersion is, in other words, a blurring of borders between image and observer, but also between reality and representations.

The main argument of this thesis has been to show that the concept of immersion is well-suited for an examination of a physical space like the amusement park area on Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York. Asking what strategies are used to build up this form of immersive visual space has been a way to show the impact of visual structures on the visitor's experience. As shown in previous chapters, the sense of being in a bubble that I referred to in relation to my first visit to Coney Island can be explained by a set of visual strategies together with narrative themes, location and scale. Even if a lot has changed since Coney Island's early days—especially concerning its scale and the amounts and form of attractions—its visual environment still evokes a sense of history and points back to the emphasis of the spectacular as designed in the context of modernity, when the area emerged as an amusement zone. Within this enclosed environment, the visitor is disconnected from everyday life and the surrounding city—thereby losing the sense of the real. Still, I argue that it is not a question of reality disappearing altogether, as in the concept of hyperreality as

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<sup>140</sup> Grau, p.59.

<sup>141</sup> Grau, p.97.

<sup>142</sup> Grau, p.3.

<sup>143</sup> Griffiths, p.3.

discussed by Baudrillard.<sup>144</sup> What I instead want to suggest is that Coney Island, by clearly emphasizing its historical signposts as well as the bodies of the visitors, can be seen as a contrast to the model offered in the writings of Baudrillard. This becomes especially clear in his text 'The Ecstasy of Communication', where he writes about postmodernity as a context of "[...] miniaturization, telecommand and the microprocession of time, bodies and pleasures."<sup>145</sup> Within this context, the view of our body—Baudrillard argues—appears as basically useless in its extension, since today "[...] everything is concentrated in the brain and in genetic codes, which alone sum up the operational definition of being."<sup>146</sup> Considering the experience of Coney Island from a phenomenological point of view suggests instead that the body has not disappeared as an agent but is, on the contrary, the very point of departure for our experience of space, and the world. When visiting Coney Island we do so with our bodies, and what appears to us within the space does so in relation to more than one of our senses. It is out of these elements that we make meaning of space, rather than by means of a total abstraction.

Even when spatial relations are mediated by technology like in the instance of the internet, there still remains desire for a habitable space, or a sense of being connected. Bruno points to the wide range of metaphors of spatial connectors—web 'sites', 'home' pages, 'visiting' a site, 'surfing' and 'browsing'—as signs of this desire for virtual mapping and the haptic.<sup>147</sup> So, even if more relations within contemporary society are mediated, the embodiment of the spectator is still relevant. An important aspect of technology and its consequences on the subject, is that it still encourages a polysensory reconnection. For a previous visitor of Coney Island, the possibility to enter Google Maps and stroll around the area means remembering the sense of immersion felt on site—offering a re-visit without actually going back to the spot. For someone who has not visited, this simulated visit could evoke a sense of symbolically experiencing immersion, since what is presented is more than a static image.

The haptic or polysensory element is characteristic for the majority of immersive

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<sup>144</sup> See Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, for an exploration of the hyperreal.

<sup>145</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication", in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The New Press, New York, 1998, p.149.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Bruno, p.107.

visual spaces discussed in this thesis—as a strategy to get the spectator’s full attention and to draw him/her deeper into the world of the images. Still, this can be considered as an instance where an exploration of immersive spectatorship can break with the somewhat static idea of society having turned into a spectacle—leaving us with a reality that we can no longer grasp. Instead of functioning like the spectacle presented by Debord—which elevates sight over all other senses in order to turn society into something that can only be looked at<sup>148</sup>—the concept of immersion can offer a less cynical approach to the subject in regard to mobility and free agency. The spectacular element of many of the image spaces discussed in relation to immersion rather put the spectator in the position of a participator, than in the role of a screen onto which to project representations.

Despite being experienced without technological devices that separate body and space, there are—when looking closer at Coney Island as an immersive space—certain layers of mediation obviously operating, which influence the experience. On the one hand, the experience is mediated through a set of mechanical rides within the amusement park area. The Wonder Wheel extends the visitor’s field of vision but also his/her sense of gravitation and bodily experience of space. On the other hand, Coney Island has been made an icon within popular culture and when the visitor navigates through the site, what is experienced is not only the actual site in front of him/her, but also a sense of entering an image given beforehand. This points toward a common thread in postmodern studies of visual culture, stating that “[...] we are never outside representation—or rather, never outside its politics.”<sup>149</sup> Still, my argument is that this can be taken as a motivation for applying a phenomenological perspective on postmodern ideas about simulacrum and hyperreality. Opposed to the notion of abstracted bodies floating in space of cyberspace, we still navigate through the world—and in relation to the flow of images presented by contemporary visual cultures—with our physical bodies. In relation to Coney Island, it is rather a question of a set of visual strategies and an emphasis on the imaginary and spectacular, than a disappearing reality altogether. Looking at space as a set of visual images, I suggest, does not necessarily have to mean a confusion of the reality principle—or making the real disappear—but to be able to decode structures underlying it.

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<sup>148</sup> Debord, p.11.

<sup>149</sup> Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, The New Press, New York, 1998, p.xvi.

In other words, by recognizing the space of Coney Island as an image space, or a visual phenomenon, I suggest that visitors do not have to lose their critical ability as a consequence of immersion. Instead of defining the concept exclusively in terms of manipulation, it can be regarded as an illustrative example of how visual structures are used throughout society, to create certain responses. My argument is that an understanding of the principles of immersion can turn the temporal escape from reality that is offered, into a source of aesthetic pleasure, rather than an instance of control and manipulation.<sup>150</sup> In the same way as films can be regarded for their escapist functions, so can a site like Coney Island be seen as a way to temporally be absorbed in the spectacular—without visitors losing their ability of critical reflection. Furthermore, despite productional goals, stepping outside of current realities can even function as a way to allow confrontations with alternative modes of cognitioning the world—thereby questioning its principles.

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<sup>150</sup> This does not mean that I deny the ability of immersive image spaces to manipulate spectators, rather that I suggest that this is not its only function and effect.



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