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Beyond the Limits of Narratology

Narrativity in Theme Parks

This essay draws on research in transmedial narratology to propose a model of *theme park storytelling*, thus addressing a curious gap in the scholarship. For, while theme park scholars have recently become interested in the narrativity of theme parks but have largely failed to engage with the theories and tools of transmedial narratology, the latter field has simply ignored the medium of the theme park so far. Based on two case studies drawn from European theme parks and located at scales rarely addressed by theme park critics – namely, those of the themed area and the park as a whole – we suggest that theme parks offer storyworlds whose eventfulness is (1) transferred to the visitor (who may also step into the role of the protagonist); (2) conceived in terms of cultural imagology as an implicit cultural history; or (3) shifted to texts with prototypical narration (e.g., narrative paratexts or narrative rides and shows).

1. Introduction: Haunted Mansions and Mystic Manors

For the massive 2011–2013 expansion of Hong Kong Disneyland, which would add no fewer than three new themed areas or ‘lands’ to the site over a period of merely three years, the Walt Disney Company decided to reimagine two of their classics, heretofore absent from the park’s roster of attractions: *Big Thunder Mountain Railroad*, a family coaster originally opened in 1979 in the “Frontierland” section of Disneyland in Anaheim, CA; and the *Haunted Mansion*, a dark ride first opened in Disneyland’s “New Orleans Square” in 1969. More or less identical copies of both of these rides had been installed at the Magic Kingdom in Orlando, Florida (in 1980 and 1971, respectively), at Tokyo Disneyland in Tokyo, Japan (in 1987 and 1983, respectively), and at Euro Disneyland in Paris, France (both in 1992). Hong Kong Disneyland, however, would receive not just copies, but thoroughly redesigned, updated versions of these popular attractions: *Big Thunder Mountain Railroad*, rebaptized *Big Grizzly Mountain Runaway Mine Trains* and opened in 2012, received a backward section and a catapult launch; and *Mystic Manor*, as the new Hong Kong version of the *Haunted Mansion* was called when it opened in 2013, featured a state-of-the art trackless ride system, a gorgeous new façade, and – a plot.

In a way, *Mystic Manor* thus returned to the roots of the *Haunted Mansion*: during the latter’s design phase, Dunlop (1996, 114) reports, “divided responsibility, time pressures, and a growing awareness of the intrinsic power of architectural space conspired to foil plans for a complex story” and the ride eventually opened in 1969 as “a plotless fun house [consisting of] a series of mildly frightening

episodes, each complete in its own right” (see also Rahn 2000, 24). For *Mystic Manor*, the designers revived the idea of connecting individual show scenes via a storyline and created two original characters – Lord Henry Mystic, a venerable nineteenth-century British explorer and collector of rare artefacts, and Albert, Mystic’s mischievous pet monkey and sidekick – that would set in motion a classic ‘something goes wrong’ plot when Albert opens a magic music box and brings the entire collection of Mystic’s artefacts to life (see Younger 2016, 108).¹

The *Mystic Manor* update of the *Haunted Mansion* illustrates a larger trend in the global theme park industry towards narrative experiences. Indeed, many earlier theme park designers had denied the medium’s narrative potential: for example, one of the creators of Disney’s *Haunted Mansion*, filmmaker-cum-pioneer theme park designer Marc Davis, had declared in a 1993 interview with the Disneyland fanzine *The “E”Ticket* that “[r]ides should be what people don’t expect them to be, and it doesn’t have a lot to do with continuity of story. It does have to do with the entertainment value of surprise and seeing things that you can’t see anyplace else” (N.N. 1993, 27). By contrast, many contemporary theme park designers see the theme park not only as a “media park” (see Birdsall 2022) but even as a narrative park, and themselves as “storytellers” (see sect. 2 below). Meanwhile, research on theme park storytelling has continued to increase since about the mid-2010s.

Nevertheless, the scholarly fields of theme park studies and (transmedial) narratology have yet to speak to each other: whereas research on (transmedial) storytelling has utterly ignored the medium of the theme park so far, theme park scholars have written about the storytelling capacities of the parks frequently without drawing on the analytical tools developed by (transmedial) narratology. This is, then, the point of intervention of our essay. Following a more detailed overview of the state of the art and an outline of our concept of *theme park storytelling*, we will use two case studies to attempt to integrate the medium of the theme park into the theory of (transmedial) narratology. Incidentally, both case studies will examine the narrativity of theme parks at scales heretofore neglected even by theme park scholars, namely, those of the themed area or land and the park as a whole. Our conclusion will return to the case of the *Haunted Mansion*-turned-*Mystic Manor* in order to complicate the narrativities of the two rides.

2. Theme Parks in/and Narratology

Over the past decade, an increasing amount of theme park scholarship has examined the narrative capacities or the narrativity of theme parks.² Taken together, these scholars have posited that narrativity constitutes a distinctive, pervasive, multi-degree, as well as multi-scale characteristic of the (contemporary) theme park – and that the theme park industry is also increasingly conceiving of itself as working in a storytelling medium. To be sure, Baker (2018, 28–30) has compiled a notable amount of quotes from both theme park fans and designers

who, much like Davis earlier, are less convinced of the integrality of narrative to theme parks. For example, Baker cites “fan analyst” Foxx Nolte, who argues that Disney overuses the term *story* and that “‘aesthetics,’ ‘experience,’ ‘emotion,’ and ‘architecture’ are the more important operators in the themed environment” (qtd. in Baker 2018, 28). Similarly, Kirsten Kischuk, a design coordinator for Nickelodeon Recreation, notes that “‘we may put too much emphasis on the need for there to be a well-packaged story when what we are giving guests is really an experience within a story world’” (qtd. in Baker 2018, 30).

Nevertheless, both scholarly publications and publications by theme park professionals themselves have noticed an increasingly widespread (self-)conceptualization in the industry of the theme park as a “story environment” (Hench / Van Pelt 2008, 21), a “story place” (Hench / Van Pelt 2008, 69), a “narrative space” (Rohde 2009), or a “space with narrative intent” (Rohde 2009); of theme park design as a “three-dimensional storytelling art” (Hench / Van Pelt 2008, 67) or “narrative placemaking” (Rohde 2010); and of the theme park designer as a “storyteller” (see Baker 2018, 360). And to a large degree, theme park scholars agree: Baker, for instance, argues not only that in the global theme park industry, narratives are pervasive, flourishing “in each time period and in all world regions” (Baker 2018, 366), and “necessary” in order “to be amongst the world’s most attended theme parks” (Baker 2023b, 8). Much more significantly, storytelling is also considered a distinctive feature of the theme park (as opposed to, for example, the unthemed amusement park), either directly or via the centrality of storytelling to the technique of theming and the latter’s intended effect on visitors: namely, immersion.

Thus, as early as in 1997, Karal Ann Marling claimed in *Designing Disney’s Theme Parks* that “[n]arrative was what separated Disneyland from all those other parks” (74). Likewise, Younger (2016, 83) has considered story “the differentiating factor for the theme park,” while Baker has variously suggested that story(telling) is “closely related to the designation of theme park” (2018, 21), “in fact a distinguishing factor of the medium” (366), and “inherent to the theme park” (2022, 75). According to some critics, the intimate connection between theme park and storytelling is due to the role of storytelling in the technique of theming. In *The Immersive Worlds Handbook* (2013), Lukas had defined theming simply as “the use of an overarching theme or key concept (like Western) to organize a space” (68; see also Lukas et al. 2023, 277; 279–281). However, for some scholars the “theme” or “key concept” may take the shape of a narrative: Philips (1999, 95), for example, has considered “the employment of stories” a “major strategy of theming,” with the theme of each of the lands of the Disney ‘castle’ parks corresponding “to a popular narrative genre” (96; see also Philips 2012). Likewise, in *Theme Park* (2008), Lukas initially describes “the use of narrative” merely as “a means of theming” (76; emphasis added), only to later characterize theming as “a materialized and mobilized form of storytelling” (2013, 214). The latter view corresponds to that taken by Bryman (2004), who defines theming as “clothing institutions or objects in a narrative” (2; see also 15).

For others, storytelling contributes to the goal of theming, namely, the emotional and behavioral effects of being immersed: for example, drawing on critics such as Murray (1997), Grau (2003), or Ryan (2015), Schwarz et al. (2023, 115) note that there are “[t]wo characteristics of medial artifacts that have been considered central to fostering states of immersion in theme parks,” namely, “the use of (fictional) narratives and bodily affect.” Moreover, they establish a link between the immersivity of narratives and that of theme parks, pointing out that theme parks

often meet some of the very same criteria of “narrativity” that make narratives immersive in the first place – namely their capacity to suspend disbelief, invite the audience’s presence inside the story and its storyworld, and, by absorbing their (almost) undivided attention, keep the real world at bay. (116)

Ten years earlier, Lukas (2013, 155; 52) had already considered “story” “the most relevant factor” and a “key aspect” of any immersive world. Fu et al.’s (2022, 893) more recent study of interviews with theme park visitors, in turn, has suggested that “the immersion through theme park storytelling involves four stages, namely spatial-temporal immersion, sensory immersion, conceptual-imaginative immersion, and emotional immersion.” At the same time, Baker (2018, 284) cautions that “[n]ot all immersive experiences are necessarily based in explicit storytelling.”

In fact, if scholars have identified storytelling a distinctive characteristic of theme parks, they have also stressed the versatility or multi-dimensionality of theme park storytelling, arguing that theme park narratives may occur in various degrees of intensity as well as on various geographical and temporal scales. For example, Baker’s comment on “explicit storytelling” refers to a distinction, originally established by Hover (2013; see Fu et al. 2022, 895) and Younger (2016, 98) and since taken up and somewhat modified by Baker (2022, 76; 2023a, 253; 2023b, 6), between different degrees or layers of storytelling in theme parks: (1) “explicit storytelling”: “the most intense form of storytelling in the theme park, in which the designer communicates a lot of information to the guest, leaving little room for interpretation” (Younger 2016, 98); “determined through the presence of spoken or written words as a key component of understanding the storyline” (Baker 2023b, 6); (2) “implicit storytelling”: “[e]xperiences and moments are provided, out of which the guest creates a story” (Younger 2016, 98); “the plot is conveyed through non-verbal or written means” (Baker 2023b, 6); and (3) “experiential storytelling”: “[t]he joy comes not from being told a story or immersed in a new world, but simply from the experience of the attraction of place itself” (Younger 2016, 98).³

Moreover, storytelling has been located on multiple geographical and temporal scales of the theme park and the theme park visit. Thus, although some of the first and most detailed articles on narratives in theme parks have focused on (dark) rides (see Rahn 2000 and Tsang Chun Ngai 2021, respectively) and single rides (as well as shows) are still considered “[t]he most prolific, unique narrative genre” (Baker 2023a, 257) to the theme park, critics have also observed land-, park-, and even company-wide storytelling. For example, whereas earlier critics

such as Philips (1999, 96) or Clément (2016, 44) associated themed areas or lands with multimedial (Philips) or filmic (Clément) narrative genres rather than individual narratives, more recent discussions, including those by Mittermeier (2021, 7) and Birdsall (2022, 159–160), have emphasized that narratives simply need to be conveyed differently on a land-wide scale since visitors navigate these areas more freely, which makes strategies such as linear storytelling difficult (see also below). And while Marling (1997, 74) argued that each of Disneyland’s lands “became its own narrative” because “[i]t is much harder to sustain that same narrative drive over the course of a day” – that is, on the scale of an entire park – Philips (1999, 98) has pointed out that parks such as Chessington, Thorpe Park, or Alton Towers are tied together through the use of a single narrator figure. Boittiaux (2021b, 31), finally, has shown how Disneyland Paris uses YouTube series to engage in corporate storytelling and assert its own “institutional competence to produce storytelling.”

Similarly, although Baker has argued in “Themed Attractions and Storytelling” (2023a, 253) that “in the early days of the themed entertainment industry, narrative was more unevenly applied other than in the ‘on-stage show’ elements of a theme park (rides, stage shows, etc.),” she has insisted here and elsewhere that in the contemporary theme park, narrative “is purposefully and explicitly applied to each stage of the visitor experience”:

Visitors will be exposed to brand stories and marketing during the anticipatory phase, will encounter staged experiences and on-site ancillary storytelling during the experiential phase, and will narrativize their experiences during the reflective phase. The organization likewise participates in this process by using strategies in each phase including crafting brand and destination stories, staging experiences with people and objects, and curating certain guest stories on social media. (Baker 2023a, 253; see also Baker 2018, 1; 2022, 74)

Boittiaux (2021a, 243–256) agrees, dedicating an entire chapter to how visitors use “retrospective narratives” (for example, in reviews) to structure the experience of their visit.

Yet critics have not only identified narrativity as a versatile or multi-dimensional but distinctive characteristic of the theme park as opposed to the (un-themed) amusement park. They have also argued that the theme park constitutes a unique and distinct case of a narrative medium (see, for example, Baker 2018, 370), thus implicitly claiming a space for the theme park within transmedial narratology. What distinguishes the theme park from other narrative media is, according to scholarship, above all its spatial and plurimedial character.⁴ Firstly, in theme parks storytelling takes place in space. One of the earliest statements on this comes from Marling, who argued in 1997 that “[a]t Disneyland, Walt translated that verbal and pictorial narrative into a material, spatial dimension” (85). On the one hand, however, the theme park’s spatial storytelling requires the movement of the visitors (see Schwartz 2020, 61), either mechanically or on foot: in a theme park ride, for example, Rahn argues, “the sequence of scenes is fixed in space – it is the audience that moves physically from scene to scene, literally *drawn into* the story” (2000, 19; italics in the original), but according to Clément, any of the visitors’ displacements in a theme park “seems to follow a pre-written

script” (2016, 72; our translation).⁵ On the other hand, and depending on whether visitors are strapped into a ride vehicle or sent on an unbranched path or not, spatial storytelling makes linear storytelling either virtually mandatory or at least difficult: for example, Younger (2016, 83) notes that while “[m]uch of the theme park is nonlinear, [...] [i]t is in the attractions [...] that the designer can take advantage of linearity, which allows (but does not demand) a more complicated story.” Mittermeier (2021, 7) agrees, arguing that “in the public environment of narrative space, [...] linear storytelling doesn’t read.”

The plurimedial character of theme parks, in turn, had already been noted by Richard Schickel in *The Disney Version. The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (1968), one of the first serious critical studies of Disneyland and published even before the term *theme park* had established itself in the scholarly discourse (see Freitag 2024). As “one of the best mixed-media shows ever devised” (Schickel 1968, 325), the theme park combines and fuses various media that in themselves have been conventionally viewed as distinct, including architecture, landscaping, painting, sculpture, music, theater, video games, written and spoken language, and film, and can therefore be classified as a “hybrid” medium (Rajewsky 2002, 203), a “composite” medium (Wolf 2005, 253), or a “meta-medium” (Geppert 2010, 3; see Freitag 2017, 706). Thus, however, the theme park may also draw on the narrativity and the narrative techniques of each of the media it chooses to include:

Unlike some mediums, which may rely on the set of principles associated with that medium, theme parks borrow and create as needed to support narratives. [...] They employ technologies as old as oral storytelling and written text and as new as interactive digital quests and virtual reality interfaces. (Baker 2018, 290-291)

Moreover, the narrative potential of theme parks encompasses not only the narrativities of the media involved as well as those of spatial storytelling but also the storytelling capacities of those media the theme park chooses to employ as paratexts (see sect. 4 below).

Hence, while it may have largely failed to engage “with theories of multimedial storytelling” (Baker 2023a, 252), theme park scholarship has nevertheless sought to make a case for the medium’s inclusion into discussions about transmedial narratology. The latter field, by contrast, has yet to acknowledge the narrativity of theme parks. This is all the more surprising given that, in the field of narratology – at least since the postclassical turn – there has been both a theoretical sensitivity to transmedia conceptualizations and a growing interest in storytelling across different media contexts. In its broadest sense, transmedial narratology is “often used as a fairly general umbrella term for narratological practices that focus on media other than literary texts” (Thon 2017, 287); however, after its “reconceptualization” (Wolf 2011, 159) and the accompanying “[r]econtextualization of classical narratological models and tools” (Herman 1999, 3) it is now interpreted as a “transmedial narrative theory,” which allows for the consideration of various “languages of storytelling” (Ryan 2004, 1) – or, to put it more precisely, which is based on the cross-media validity of storytelling

(i.e., its transmedial dimension) as well as on medium-specific potentials for its realization (cf. Kuhn / Thon 2017, 254).

However, although a valid framework can be considered established, the theme park as a narrative medium is absent from both overviews of “current trends” (Olson 2011) and from handbooks on the topic: While Olson’s anthology (2011) does indeed open up a transmedia, transgeneric, and interdisciplinary field of research – dealing with drama and with questions of how theoretical foundations might be constituted – theme parks are not addressed. In their collection of essays on “transmedial and unnatural challenges” Alber and Hansen (2014) present articles that outline theoretical foundations, for example, in the field of musical narratology, and focus on narrative media such as performing arts, films, and graphic novels – without bringing up the topic of theme parks. Finally, a seminal interdisciplinary handbook groups various forms including computer games, film, radio, web series, music, and theatre under the heading “media of narrative” (see Martínez 2017a, sect. II). Once again, however, theme parks are absent from this list as well. In light of this overall situation, one must conclude that, until today, the main effects of the postclassical reconceptualization – the pluralisation of models for analysis, the differentiation of narratological approaches, and the specialisation of disciplinary focuses and operationalizations – have not yet led to theme parks being brought into the spotlight as a narrative medium.

3. Towards a Concept of Theme Park Storytelling

This is precisely why we see this situation as an opportunity and are using the following starting points to conceptualize *theme park storytelling*: (1) within the given research framework and building on the preliminary work in the field of theme park studies, we define the term *theme park* in a broader sense to refer to “artificially created, stationary collections of various attractions” (Kagelmann 1993, 407; our translation; see also Brössel 2024, 9) and, in a narrower sense, to mean such “designed spaces” that have an overarching theme or are “internally divided into several thematic ‘worlds’” (Steinecke 2009, 63; our translation).⁶ (2) Drawing on existing research on the mediality of theme parks, we understand the theme park as a medium – in the semiotic sense understood as a supplier of signs and a channel of expression (see Posner 1986, 293–298) – and, more precisely, as a hybrid, composite, or meta-medium (see sect. 2 above). (3) The individual parks – whether Disneyland or Universal Epic Universe, Europa-Park or Phantasialand – constitute *textual artefacts*, i.e., concrete, coherent, and cohesive units of signs, which are accompanied by an extensive apparatus of paratexts. (4) Finally, theme parks can be regarded as an *integral part of transmedia storyworlds*: they create (themed) worlds of their own but at the same time also function as semiospheres – that is, “the totality of all texts presented simultaneously, the underlying codes, and the users of those codes” (Decker 2017, 437; our transla-

tion). These ‘spaces’ of signs extend beyond the park’s boundaries. Park semiospheres are heterogeneous, binary, and asymmetrically structured, as well as dynamically constituted (see Lotman 2011, 164–169). The center “is formed by the most highly developed and structurally organized languages” (Lotman 2011, 169; our translation), that is, those codes that are used and perceived as ‘park-specific’ and extend their influence all the way to the periphery, as in the case of souvenirs or add-on themes for web browsers. At the peripheries and boundaries of the semiosphere, there is contact with other codes and texts, and processes of exchange and translation may occur – as, for example, in the case of Disney’s acquisition of Lucas Arts and the subsequent implementation of Star Wars-themed areas in Disney parks. In all of this, the “process of self-organization” (Lotman 2011, 170; our translation) – which comes into play in storyworlds (Ryan 2014, 31–37) as well as in storytelling as a mode of representing a story – is central.

Our purpose – in keeping with postclassical narratology – is then to compile a set of tools for the analysis of theme park narratives. Firstly, we refer to a broad definition of the term *narrativity*, preferably one that makes storytelling in theme parks tangible in the first place. According to Matías Martínez, “[s]torytelling is the representation of events + x” (Martínez 2017b, 3; our translation). While the depiction of events, according to Martínez, is fundamentally characterized by the features of temporality and contiguity, the component ‘x’

serves as a placeholder for an indefinite number of different, more or less comprehensive narrative features that have been proposed in narratology over the past decades. Most of them qualify either the nature of the depicted event or the manner of its depiction through additional criteria, while others derive specific structural requirements from the pragmatics of storytelling. (3; our translation)

These narrative features include characteristics such as dual temporality, a narrating entity, causality, intentionality, wholeness, eventfulness, experientiality, tellability, and conversational pressures to act. What they all have in common is that they “claim optional status because they only partially capture the phenomenon of storytelling” (3). Martínez’s definition of storytelling allows us to work with the various dimensions of storytelling in theme parks because (1) it is broad enough to encompass narrativity at various levels of the object; (2) it is sufficiently nuanced to describe different manifestations of storytelling and varying degrees of it; and (3) it is concrete enough to identify the specific characteristics of narrativity in theme parks.

Secondly, and related to this, we would like to incorporate some of the basic assumptions and instruments of transmedial narratology: according to Ryan (2007, 26), “[m]ost narratologists agree that narrative consists of material signs, the discourse, which convey a certain meaning (or content), the story, and fulfil a certain social function.” She concludes that a “definition of narrative should therefore work for different media (though admittedly media do widely differ in their storytelling abilities), and should not privilege literary forms” (26). Moreover, she adds, rather

than regarding narrativity as a strictly binary feature, that is, as a property that a given text either has or doesn’t have, the definition proposed below presents nar-

rative texts as a fuzzy set allowing variable degrees of membership, but centered on prototypical cases that everybody recognizes as stories. (26)

Ryan presents a research matrix, which we interpret here not prescriptively, but heuristically. When storytelling is present – as it increasingly is in theme parks – these four dimensions are present in one way or another (28): a *spatial dimension* (the world and its inhabitants); a *temporal dimension* (transformations and events); a *mental dimension* formed by characters and their actions; and a *pragmatic dimension* that guarantees causality, fiction-internal factuality, and meaningfulness. The four dimensions are explained in greater detail in the following table:

Transmedial dimensions of narrativity	
<i>Spatial dimension</i>	Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.
<i>Temporal dimension</i>	This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations. The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.
<i>Mental dimension</i>	Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally of the states of the world. Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents.
<i>Formal and pragmatic dimension</i>	The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure. The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the storyworld. The story must communicate something meaningful to the audience.

Table 1: Transmedial dimensions of narrativity (*pace* Ryan 2007: 29–30)

Building on this, we will examine in our two case studies the mechanisms and strategies of theme park storyworlds, particularly with regard to cultural imagery and paratextuality (see sect. 4).

Finally, from the perspective of contextual narratology, theme parks can be understood “as part of the material dimension of culture, which is interwoven with collective codes or narrative patterns of a culture and with the social sign users” (Nünning 2017, 28; our translation). If cultures always function as “narrative communities” (Müller-Funk 2008, 14) and theme parks are integrated into this structure as participatory and functionalised “texts,” then it would be insightful to examine them in order to determine the mental dispositions of a society or, as Roy Sommer (2021, 74) has it, the “salient transtextual and transactional characteristics of storytelling.” One could think of the cinematic narratives brought to life in the Disney and Universal theme parks, or depictions of the unknown, the foreign, and the ancient and their respective semantics – all of this falls within this realm. Drawing on a semiotic conception of culture and utilizing Lotman’s semiosphere, we examine theme parks both as ‘texts of a culture’ and as narrated ‘cultural worlds.’ In the following, we will further develop and apply this model to two case studies drawn from several European theme parks: Phantasialand in Brühl (Germany), Europa-Park in Rust (Germany), and Disneyland Paris (France).⁷

4. Theme Park Narratives: Two Case Studies

4.1. Theme Park Storyworlds

According to Herman, the term *storyworlds* refers to “the worlds evoked by narratives” (Herman 2009a, 105) or, to put it more precisely, to “the worlds represented by narrative representations” (Thon 2016, 37). While “narrative representations are necessarily realized within the specific mediality of distinct media, the concept of storyworld can [...] be considered to be a transmedial one” (46). Furthermore, as Thon notes, storyworlds are “necessarily incomplete” (46) and are characterized by a number of features that we have drawn from Ryan above.

Storyworlds are crucial for theme parks in order to convey their narratives. They are material, i.e., physically constructed and accessible, and are (additionally) flanked by paratexts (see sect. 4.2 below); they thus extend beyond the park grounds, into the virtual realm. The storyworld is the glue that holds transmedia storytelling, the many subplots, together.⁸ One could go as far as to say that theme parks are “world-dominated” narrative media (Ryan 2015, 4): “In a world-dominated genre [...] the plot acts as a path through the storyworld that reveals the diversity of its landscapes, the variety of its biological species, and the particularities of its social system.” (4)

When we grasp the storyworld, we gain access to the narratives and their structural forms, and we can draw conclusions about the meaning-constituting organisation of the park as a whole. To gain insight into theme park narratives, we must first apply the concept of narrativity as outlined above. Against the broad backdrop of “representation of events” and when measured against a scale, theme parks may not necessarily fall into the category of “prototypical species of the narrative family” (Ryan 1992, 371) and may sometimes exhibit a low degree of narrativity – for example, in the form of “embryonic narrativity”: “an environment is established for the development of a plot, but the plot machinery is never set in motion” (Ryan 1992, 376). However, even in the case of theme parks, one must assume the presence of ‘narrative indicators’ which, alongside media hybridization or narrating entities, for instance, underpin narrative specificity. Our thesis is that a ‘narrative foundation’ established in this way can generally be assumed, particularly for themed worlds and attractions. However, eventfulness is either (1) transferred to the visitor (who may also step into the role of the protagonist); (2) conceived in terms of cultural imagology as an implicit cultural history; or (3) shifted to texts with prototypical narration (e.g., narrative paratexts or narrative rides and shows; these three cases somewhat correspond to the layers or degrees of “implicit,” “experiential,” and “explicit” storytelling; see sect. 2 above). Theme parks are not texts that tell a story – often, they simply provide storyworlds that may (or may not) activate, in one way or another, an actual story.

Let’s take a closer look at points (1) and (2). In addition to offering physical sensations, emotional experiences, as well as the chance to interact with heroes

and heroines from other media that have been ‘brought to life,’ the theme park experience clearly consists of making worlds or ‘cultures’ accessible and tangible to visitors (whether they are fantastical worlds from literature and film, such as Arthurian Avalon; historical eras, such as ancient Greece; or real-world cultural groups, such as the indigenous peoples of Africa). So when we speak of *cultural imagology*, we are referring to the ability of theme parks to create worlds or images of societies that reproduce themselves materially, symbolically, and intellectually.⁹ Phantasialand (Brühl, Germany), for example, is divided into several themed areas and worlds (see Brössel 2024, 17). A common feature of these worlds is that they each have a distinct “cultural” character, some with real-world references (Mexico, China, Africa) and some without.

An example for the latter case is “Rookburgh,” a separate area within the park that could be described as a mix of industrial, steampunk, and modern and creates a world of its own. Semantically central to this world are retro-futurism and the idea of the novelty. Indeed, the centrepiece of the area is the *Flying Launch Coaster F.L.Y.*, which embodies the spirit of innovation and at the same time carries and implements the programme in its name: unlike in conventional roller coasters, visitors lie face down in their seats, which gives them the feeling of actually flying. And that is precisely the event that everything revolves around in a world that is undergoing a fundamental change and appears decidedly progressive and exclusive. This impression certainly arises when you look at the waiting area, which provides insights into the planning and construction preparation – some kind of a ‘restrained narrative’ – or when you check into the park’s own Charles Lindbergh Hotel and are welcomed as part of the community of “aeronauts”: the visitor becomes part of the world itself. Finally, the strict isolation of the themed world from the rest of the park alone supports the assumption of exclusivity.

As for point (3), paratexts on the website flesh out and continue the story-world: the advertising is semi-diegetic in design, referring to a “revolutionary flying machine,” while the “explorer reports” come from fictional characters who bring the world to life.¹⁰ Hence, at the park level “Rookburgh” tells its story solely in the form of mimetic narrative texts (see Schmid 2014, 8), and at the paratextual level through a multitude of ‘voices’ orchestrated on the website. To be sure, the latter is only an ‘add-on’ and not essential to the park experience – in this case, one could speak of worldmaking (see Herman 2009b) through images, films, sounds, props, and staff.

More than just a loose collection of narrative indicators, Phantasialand’s *Mystery Castle* – a bungee drop tower – offers something more. On the one hand, it features narrating entities that convey the story – and thus fulfils a key criterion for “explicit storytelling” – and on the other hand, even more so than *F.L.Y.*, it draws visitors into the story. Right at the entrance to the attraction, a plate sets the tone for the semi-diegetic setting: “View the castle of the noble family of Windhoven. Experience an unusual tour [...] as well as a visit to the secret laboratories. A journey with the tower lift constitutes the end of the visit. You will shoot up by reaching a height of 65 meters and you will free fall back” (our

translation). What sounds like a harmless, albeit adventurous invitation turns out to be a ruse: upon entering the building, ghostly suits of armour hint at a mysterious curse that hangs over the family. At the end of the waiting area, we meet the last lord of the castle, who confirms and clarifies the eventful situation: an ancestor made a pact with “the evil” out of greed. The family was then cursed; no descendant reached the age of thirty. The “evil” could be defeated by participating in the Drop Tower. So, welcome, dear guest, get in, and lose your “positive energy.” A written text, two oral narrative voices, and the visitor as part of the narration – here, one thing flows into the next.

4.2. Theme Park Paratextual Narratives

Our second case study examines point (3), where eventfulness is shifted to such texts with prototypical narration as paratexts. *Paratexts* – a term originating in literary studies (Genette 1997) and later borrowed into media and cultural studies (Gray 2010) as well as, more specifically, theme park studies (Williams 2020; Freitag 2022) – have played a pivotal role in the narrativization of tourist attractions in general (Edelheim 2015) and in the narrativity of theme parks in particular.¹¹ This is mainly due to the fact that theme park paratexts often come in the shape of media that have traditionally and conventionally be viewed as highly narrative – e.g., film or written language – and that have been used to tell an explicit story where most theme parks do so only rarely, namely, at the levels of the themed area or land and of the park (and the company) as a whole. However, while Baker (2018) has relegated theme park paratexts to “marketing or branding before one visits” and “narrative items when one leaves (tangible merchandise or media like videos and music)” (1), maintaining that “a marketing pitch delivering a destination’s story is relevant, but it is not done within the park” (188), our second case study will show just that: namely, here we argue that paratextual storytelling in theme parks – and specifically narrative destination marketing – not only occurs before and after, but also during the visit (what Freitag [2022, 102–103], drawing on Gray, would term “in situ” paratexts, as opposed to “entryway” and “in medias res” paratexts).

Of course, so-called quests (virtually or physically guided “scavenger hunts” for visitors) as well as interactive video games have been used to add a spatial, temporal, mental, and/or formal and pragmatic dimension (*sensu* Ryan) to the narrativity of themed areas or storyworlds while visitors are exploring them. Baker (2018, 247–248) thus offers examples of quests from the “Fortress Explorations” area at Tokyo DisneySea, the “World Showcase” area at Epcot, and the “Adventureland” area at Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom, while Birdsell examines the rich paratextual apparatus of the “Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge” area, opened in 2019 at Disneyland in Anaheim, California:

The sense of a totalizing story world – one that is both firmly situated in the Star Wars universe but also left narratively open for the visitor – is further developed by transmedia texts, including Galaxy’s Edge books, comics, and interactive video

games. The books and comics introduce new characters and histories to the park space, while the interactive media reinforces players/visitors as protagonists in the Galaxy's Edge story. (Birdsall 2022, 2020)

What distinguishes the examples of “in situ” narrative paratexts in this case study from those of Baker and Birdsall is not only that they refer to the entire park and corporation rather than just one particular themed area but also that they come in the shape of two of the theme parks ‘native’ formats: the (narrative) stage show and the ride.¹²

Our first example, the stage show *Feel the Magic/C'est magique* thus tells the linear story of an ideal visit to Disneyland Paris. Performed on the Fantasy Festival Stage in the park’s “Fantasyland” area and on the “Discoveryland” area’s Videopolis stage from 1992 to 1994 and around 1997 (i.e., during the first years of the park’s operation), the roughly 25-minute stage show featured a pre-recorded soundtrack, a rather minimalist stage design that allowed for quick scene changes, and dancers as well as Disney characters and used its scenes/songs to precisely tell visitors in which order to visit the park’s various themed areas and what rides and shows not to miss: from “Main Street, U.S.A.” to “Frontierland,” “Adventureland,” and “Discoveryland,” reserving “Fantasyland” for the big finale; and including *Phantom Manor* (the aforementioned Paris copy of the *Haunted Mansion*), the *Lucky Nugget Saloon* (itself a stage show), the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride, and, somewhat ironically, the *Rock Shock Show* that would be replaced by *Feel the Magic/C'est magique* on the Videopolis stage in late 1992.¹³ Thus, however, the show would narrativize the park visit by featuring not only a spatial dimension (with each area and each ride populated by dancers and specific characters) but also a temporal (the non-habitual events of the park visit), mental (the joy of the characters and the visitors meeting each other), and formal or pragmatic one (the closure of the big finale, when all the characters appear on stage).

The soundtrack of *Feel the Magic/C'est magique* that was sold on cassettes and CDs at the park’s souvenir shops, in turn, features two additional scenes that, by fall 1993 at least, appear to have been cut from performances of the show at the park: “Thank God, I’m a Country Bear” and “Night Life/Macho Duck,” which refer to the Disneyland hotels (specifically the Davy Crockett Ranch and the Hotel Cheyenne) and the Festival Disney shopping and entertainment district, respectively.¹⁴ With these two songs placed after the opening numbers and before the musical tour of Disneyland Paris’s various lands, the soundtrack enlarges the spatial dimension of the show’s narrative and describes an ‘ideal’ (from the point of view of the Walt Disney Company at least) two-day vacation at the resort, a truly – to use the title of the second opening scene – “Supercalifragi Euro Disneyland vacation”¹⁵: following their arrival at the resort, visitors are supposed to check in at the hotel and explore the entertainment district before then (presumably on day 2) visiting the park, starting again with “Main Street, U.S.A.”¹⁶

Our second example, the *Europa-Park Historama* revolving theatre ride, constructs an even broader narrative about the history of Germany’s most visited theme park. Opened in 1990 on the occasion of Europa-Park’s 35th anniversary

and running until 2017, the *Historama*'s six fully mechanical stages, arranged like slices of a pie and surrounded by a ring of six seating areas that revolve around the stages, tell the story of the development of the park and its sister company, the ride manufacturer Mack Rides, in both reverse (show scene 2) and forward (show scene 3) chronological order. Show scenes 4 and 5 are then dedicated, similar to the case of *Feel the magic/C'est magique*, to the park's signature rides and shows, respectively.¹⁷ While the second half of the *Historama* narrativizes the park visit much like the later show at Disneyland Paris would, the first half turns the park and company history into a narrative with a clearly discernible spatial (here, the world featuring the park and the company themselves as "individuated existents"), temporal (the series of additions to the park and successes of the company), mental (the joy and pride of becoming ever more popular and successful), and formal and pragmatic dimensions (with every step in the story leading to the park as it appears on the day of the visitor's visit and as it is portrayed in the remainder of the *Historama*).

Both *Feel the magic/C'est magique* and the *Europa-Park Historama* thus show how theme parks have used the theme park-specific formats of the stage show and the ride as "in situ" paratexts to tell linear and even more temporally complex stories about the very places in which they are located – namely, the parks themselves. Scripting the theme park visit and the history of the park, these paratexts narrativize visitors' theme park experience while they are living it, turning individual rides into events in a causal chain that eventually leads to an 'ideal' visit and to the park as it appears today. While only the *Historama* features an explicit narrator (namely, the uniformed "train conductor" character), in both cases the protagonists of the story are the visitors themselves (at least in show scenes 4 and 5 of the *Historama*; in show scenes 2 and 3 it is rather the park itself and its sister company). Finally, with both *Feel the magic/C'est magique* and the *Europa-Park Historama* dating to the early 1990s, these paratextual narratives also demonstrate that the theme park has (also) been a narrative park for at least over three decades, making the generally still sparse interest in theme park storytelling in theme park scholarship – not to mention the complete disregard for theme parks in the field of transmedial narratology – all the more curious.

4. Conclusion: Fundamentals of a Theme Park Narratology

Usually you cannot bring large and heavy objects into a theme park but we hope they will make an exception for the toolbox of narratology. For while recent work in the field of theme park studies has argued that narrativity or storytelling constitutes a distinctive, pervasive, multi-degree, as well as multi-scale characteristic of the (contemporary) theme park, theme park studies has so far largely ignored the tools of (transmedial) narratology to examine theme park spaces and surprisingly little has been done to examine theme park narrativity beyond the classic dark ride. Meanwhile, the field of transmedial narratology has simply ig-

nored the medium of the theme park. Our model of theme park storytelling seeks to change that: drawing on the concept of the storyworld as well as Ryan's transmedial dimensions of narrativity, our model suggests that the theme park's various themed landscapes constitute storyworlds that provide the spatial dimension of narrativity and sometimes even contain hints at the temporal, mental, and formal and pragmatic dimensions of narrativity. Most often, however, these latter dimensions – or, the eventfulness of theme park storytelling – are either (1) transferred to the visitor (who may also step into the role of the protagonist); (2) conceived in terms of cultural imagology as an implicit cultural history; or (3) shifted to texts with prototypical narration (e.g., narrative paratexts or narrative rides and shows). Our two case studies have provided examples of all three of these cases and have also demonstrated that the storyworld may encompass the thematically unified realm of a themed land such as “Rookburgh” (case study 1) and even the entire park (case study 2), two scales heretofore largely neglected or sidelined in theme park research.

The story of the ‘plotless’ *Haunted Mansion* and the narrative *Mystic Manor* now presents itself in a new light: theme parks may have always offered storyworlds but it is in the contemporary theme park that these storyworlds are often given a temporal, mental, and formal and pragmatic dimension, for example through such texts with prototypical narration as the voice of an on-ride narrator or a paratext – which, in turn, may take the shape of a show or a ride. In the case of Disney's famous dark ride, whereas the original 1969 version of the *Haunted Mansion* may have provided clues but ultimately left it to riders to connect the dots and imagine a storyline, *Mystic Manor* has relieved the visitor of this task and has actualized the narrative potential of the ride's storyworld through the introduction of individual characters whose actions form a causally linked chain of events, thus demonstrating how a themed ride can become a narrative ride. At the end of the *Haunted Mansion* ride, a ghostly voice famously invites riders to “hurry ba-hack!” Theme park scholars certainly will, but hopefully next time they will be armed with the tools of narratology.

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How to cite this article:

Brössel, Stephan / Freitag, Florian: “Beyond the Limits of Narratology. Narrativity in Theme Parks.” In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research / Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung* 15.1 (2026). 1–20.
 DOI: [10.25926/0hkj-ij97](https://doi.org/10.25926/0hkj-ij97)
 URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20261008-102327-3](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20261008-102327-3)
 URL: <https://ejournals.bib.uni-wuppertal.de/diegesis/de/article/download/1781/3084/6380>



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¹ In fact, seven years before *Mystic Manor*, Disney had already updated Disneyland’s *Haunted Mansion* to feature a more coherent storyline, although the changes remained largely confined to one particular show scene (see Surrell 2015, 107–110). For Clément (2016, 69), who argues that all (Disney) rides are based on the plotline of a travelogue (departure, voyage, return), the *Haunted Mansion* has featured a story from the very beginning, of course.

² See, e.g., the work of Clément 2016, Younger 2016, Baker 2018; 2022; 2023a; 2023b; Boittiaux 2021a; 2021b; Tsang Chun Ngai 2021; Fu et al. 2022; and Birdsall 2022.

³ Baker points out that these degrees or layers somewhat correspond to Younger's "design style archetypes" (with "implicit storytelling" corresponding to the "traditional style design"; "explicit storytelling" to the "new traditional style design"; and "experiential storytelling" to the "presentational style design"; see Baker 2018, 106) and thus also historicizes them, as Younger has each style originate in a particular historical phase of theme park development (see Younger 2016, 149–159).

⁴ In Baker's terms, the theme park's "dimensional" and "combinatory" character, respectively (2018, 333–338; 347–350). For the other "significant characteristics of theme park industry narratives" discussed by Baker – namely, scale, communality, brevity, and a reiterative nature (see Baker 2018, 352) – examples from other narrative media can easily be found: film or theater, for example, is arguably at least as communal in its authorship as the theme park. As for Younger's list of "story techniques [...] unique to the theme park" (2016, 92) – concentricity, including, story hooks, peppering, and infodumping – they are all related to the theme park's spatiality.

⁵ The original quote reads as: "paraissent l'objet d'un scénario préalablement écrit."

⁶ According to Younger, 'theme' and 'world' are also closely intertwined: "The Theming [...] is the physical elements of construction that communicate the manifestation and dramatic themes, from form to décor: taking one thing (like a theme park restaurant) and associating it with something else (such as a Parisian bistro) through the use of signs, decoration, and design." (Younger 2016, 47)

⁷ The choice of European theme parks is a deliberate one and seeks to redress a critical imbalance. As Freitag et al. have noted, "in the past, theme park criticism has often focused on Western (and specifically the U.S.) as well as large destination (and specifically Disney and, to a lesser extent, Universal) parks" (2023, 5), with smaller and non-US-based parks having been comparatively neglected.

⁸ Ryan (2015, 4) confirms the assumption that the storyworld has a connecting function: "What holds these stories together is that they take place in the same storyworld."

⁹ The term must be distinguished from its metalinguistic use in terms of its object-oriented application. The latter – *comparative imagology* – refers to the self-conception of real-world cultures and addresses, among other things, questions such as which characteristics a given culture identifies as belonging to itself or excludes from its artifacts, what value judgments are made, and so on (see Gottdiener 1997; Brambilla et al. 2015; Schlehe / Uike-Bormann 2010).

¹⁰ See <https://www.phantasialand.de/de/rookburgh/> (date of access: 08/12/2026).

¹¹ In "The Happiest Virtual Place on Earth: Theme Park Paratextuality" (2022), Freitag has defined theme park paratexts as "medial artifacts [that] seek to guide the parks' "reception" and consumption" by establishing 'frames and filters' through which visitors experience the sites" (100). He names "images, narratives, maps, historiographies, behind-the-scenes looks, and spaces and objects" as examples (104).

¹² Hence, our examples could also be analyzed as themed rides and shows in their own right. Since they are both themed to the very parks in which they are located and offer guidelines to the latter's reception, we prefer to discuss them as paratexts.

¹³ Like other paratexts, *Feel the Magic/C'est magique* would not only offer guidelines or "frames" on how to experience the park, however, but also apply "filters" to eliminate or silence selected, less desirable aspects of theme park visit, thus applying the techniques of theming and specifically theme parks' "politics of inclusion/exclusion" (Lukas 2007, 277) to the park itself: "the journey to the resort and back, rides closed for maintenance, money spent, and the time it took to wait in line (which, had it been included, may well have turned out to be the longest scene of the show)" (Freitag 2022, 111) were all omitted. A recording of a 1994 performance of *Feel the Magic/C'est magique* also featuring backstage footage has been uploaded to YouTube (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wbcCTt5wwk> [date of access: 08/12/2026]).

¹⁴ The *Feel the Magic/C'est magique* soundtrack has found its way on YouTube as well; see, e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKszpD7O-2I> (date of access: 08/12/2026).

¹⁵ This scene, which was not cut from later performances of the show, also contains references to the Disneyland Paris golf course and tennis courts, thus hinting at the broader scope of the original show.

¹⁶ Here, too, of course, less desirable aspects of the visit (hauling your luggage to the hotel room, getting from the hotel to the entertainment district/park and back, and, perhaps most importantly, spending more money) have been entirely omitted from the soundtrack.

¹⁷ Stages 1 and 2 are used for loading and unloading the riders. Once again, the *Historama* story of the history of Europa-Park and Mack Rides is both highly selective and heavily edited for the purposes of self-promotion and brand-building: from their humble beginnings as a wagon manufacturer in 1780 and a small regional park in 1975, respectively, the company and the park are

depicted as steadily progressing to develop into a successful, innovative ride designer and into Germany's largest theme park. Scenes 4 and 5 are equally selective: a film montage of point-of-view shots of Europa-Park's coasters only shows their highlights (for example, the "big splash" in the case of water coasters) and cuts from one coaster to the next without any segue, thus refusing to show visitors waiting in line, people getting on and off the vehicles, or people walking from one coaster to the next, let alone breakdowns or accidents. An amateur recording of the show can be viewed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TM_DKTNlhPU (date of access: 08/12/2026).