Simulated Imperialism

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Simulated imperialism is a paramount dynamic of the contemporary. It marks the mutual articulations of empire and hyperreality that build signifying distance into imperial formations and their discriminatory operations. The Disney empire is one of its most pernicious forms. This article looks to Disneyland to bring simulated imperialism into sharper relief by detailing its three interlocking movements: the signification of imperial processes generated by simulacra; the amplification of colonizing projects through simulation; and the interpellation of hybrid subjects between (im)mobility and (in)animation. It takes the It’s a Small World ride as its primary example. One of the oldest attractions at Disneyland, it provides a multicultural tour of a metaphorical global village wherein animatronic children, stylized in cultural stereotypes, sing and dance in the name of world peace. Yet this simulated world is one of deceptive heterogeneity. In fact, It’s a Small World reveals an idealized world to be one erased of all difference in favor of a white, English-speaking, and culturally American utopia. It thus spatializes the forceful presence of empire within its all-embracing discursive formation. To theorize simulated imperialism using this example is to position empire within the domains of unending semiotic breakdown and the globalized (im)mobilities that presently order our excessive, networked, high-carbon societies. This opens a way to think through imperial formations from the destabilized margins of signification, and from these limits, to search out radical possibilities for subversion and resistance in the spaces between the imperial and the hyperreal.

Behold, Disneyland: degenerate utopia of ideological fragments and childhood wishes. It is a self-declared land of futures, frontiers and fantasies, with strikingly porous boundaries between such symbolic geographies. Space and time press against each other here, passing, without rupture, from the furthest reaches of outer space to Main Street USA,

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from robotic futures to irrecoverable pasts determined by manifest destiny. We, too, pass seamlessly through these fictive lands where there are no borders or passport controls. It is a sort of time travel, for these are also the spaces and times of childhood, when a visit to Disneyland was the ultimate dream come true for so many. As children, we dashed between teacups and tiki rooms on a quest to experience every ride. At the end of the day, exhausted, we felt as if we had mastered the park, domesticating its characters and conquering its every land. We were imperialists in a Disney empire.

These sentiments of mastery are the percolations of imperial debris at play in everyday life. They are also markers of a salvage operation that resurrects the pleasures of imperialism linked to a seemingly vanished colonial order. Disneyland, as a place and an imaginary, entangles what Ann Stoler has called “imperial formations,” or processual constellations of decimation, displacement and reclamation that persist in the contemporary. These are the ruins of colonial empires resuscitated as processes that have their own life breath — surfacing and disappearing and resurfacing amidst physical remains (e.g., convict islands) and ruined bodies (e.g., landmine survivors) and damaged psyches (e.g., mental disorders). Imperial formations leave material traces, yes, but they operate more potently as relations of force — allocating, reappropriating, deflecting, excluding, denying, deferring, disavowing — within the politics of the present. How imperial formations persist in the present is exactly the challenge that Stoler set for postcolonial scholarship: to momentarily unbind, and thus to reveal, the sinews that link the “historical blunting” that has come to characterize postcolonial studies with “the political life of imperial debris, the longevity of structures of dominance, and the uneven pace with which people can extricate themselves from the colonial order of things.” It is this task that I take up here.

At Disneyland, imperial formations inhabit the interstices of the hyperreal, pivoting along simulated vectors of the physical and the psychic, interior and exterior, miniature and gigantic, copy and original. Simply put, this is a locus where the (post)colonial and the hyperreal converge. It is also where we can attend to the ways that protracted imperial processes interact with the precessions of simulacra that shape contemporary image society. It is here that a nexus of imperial formations is manifest that simultaneously generates, delimits and denaturalizes the impulse of our present historical moment: simulated imperialism.

This essay looks to Disneyland to bring the operations of simulated imperialism into sharper relief. It takes as its primary example the spatial practices of the It’s a Small World ride. As one of the oldest attractions at the theme park, it offers a multicultural tour of a metaphorical global village where animatronic children, stylized in cultural stereotypes, sing and dance in the name of world peace (fig. 1). This boat ride through an elaborate stage set is a simulacrum within the archetypal simulacrum that is Disneyland. Yet this miniature world is also one of deceptive heterogeneity. In fact, the ride’s spatial practices reveal an idealized world to be one erased of racial, cultural and linguistic difference in favor of a white, English-speaking, and culturally American utopia. Thus, the ride materializes the forceful presence of empire within its all-embracing discursive formation.

What follows is a close reading of the It’s a Small World ride that theorizes the three interlocking operations of simulated imperialism: the signification of imperial processes generated by simulacra; the amplification of colonizing projects through simulation; and the interpellation of hybrid subjects articulated between (im)mobility and (in)anima-tion. It shows the imperial and the hyperreal to be mutually constitutive in the contemporary. Such a theorization reveals

FIGURE 1. Exterior view of the It’s a Small World ride at Disneyland in Anaheim, California.
the positioning of empire within the domains of unending semiotic breakdown and the globalized mobility systems that order the excessive, networked, high-carbon societies of the early twenty-first century.

The built environment is an especially privileged site for this type of analysis because it gives fixed physical form to shifting imperial formations — as many architectural studies of colonial empires have shown. Here, I use the term “colonial” (and its variants) to describe an attitude that desires the forced settling of physical and psychic territories, among them the nineteenth-century European scramble for Africa and strategies of internal colonization. And I take “empire” (and its variants) to mean that curious sway of imperium and empirium that binds the neoliberal present to these variegated colonial pasts. Empire is thus always-already multivalent. It operates, unevenly and contentiously, across different temporalities and geographies, macro- and micro-scales, and political and economic spheres to establish and reinforce differential sovereignties that continue to subjugate the less powerful.

This essay calls attention to the particular constellation of empire and simulation that builds signifying distance into imperial formations, but that is no less potent in its discriminatory effects than more physical processes. The Disney empire is one of its most pernicious forms. To situate empire within simulation also opens a way to think about imperial formations — and empire — from the destabilized margins of signification. From these limits, we can stake out new theoretical ground that weakens the hold of empire. In other words, understanding the processes of simulated imperialism can renew radical possibilities for subversion and resistance in the spaces between the imperial and the hyperreal. It can create space for a world, small or otherwise, based on truly horizontal forms of belonging and harmonic difference.

**SIMULATED IMPERIALISM: SOME THEORETICAL NOTES**

*Simulated imperialism signifies imperial processes generated by simulacra.* This is best expressed in the built environment, where second-order fictive worlds such as colonial exhibitions and themed casino-hotels short-circuit the reality of a place and duplicate it through signs. Since these simulations arise out of different historical circumstances, the textures of their imperial formations vary accordingly. For instance, distinct gradations of sovereignty and scales of differentiation have been at stake, say, at the Rue du Caire at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris and at the faux Roman Colosseum at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas today. The former, shaped by nineteenth-century discourses of empire, participated in the colonial order(ing) of Egypt, while the latter engages the authentic fakery of Las Vegas’s postmodern monumental excess. Yet both simulacra are dislocations at which imperial formations surface. And both mark a “broader set of practices structured in dominance,” insofar as the visitors to each experience imperial affinities, becoming metaphorical Orientalists and Roman centurions, respectively.

*Simulated imperialism amplifies colonizing projects through simulation.* It thus brings the colonial past into the hyperreal present, suffusing the aforementioned practices of dominance with nostalgia for colonial space-time. The colonial, then, is always-already the consequence of shifting imperial formations. What is more, simulated imperialism evokes colonial pasts that have always been rooted in fantasy. It produces mirages, hallucinations, specters that do not correspond to historical realities. It is simulation at its best.

For example, the Bab Al Shams desert resort in southwestern Dubai evokes a colonial past that never existed. A self-styled Arabian oasis, it masquerades as a pseudo-Ottoman caravanserai where visitors can indulge their every Orientalist impulse, from gazing upon belly dancers to riding camels. If one so chooses, one can even go “behind the veil” by dressing up in a burqa. Thus, it offers a *tableau vivant* of revivified Oriental stereotypes, a collision of colonial fantasy and hyperreality where visitors may enjoy the pleasures that once belonged to European colonizers. Disavowal, too, structures this amplification, insofar as Bab Al Shams itself becomes the site of ideological illusion wherein visitors, knowing full well that the resort was built on the backs of modern-day slave laborers and continues to be run by indentured servants shackled to the yoke of the neoliberal economy, behave as if they did not know. In such ways simulated imperialism reproduces what Homi Bhabha identified as the fetishistic logic of European colonial discourse itself.

*Simulated imperialism interpellates hybrid subjects articulated between (im)mobility and (in)animation.* This hybridity is different from, but adjacent to, the hybrid forms scrutinized in postcolonial scholarship; it is hybridity conditioned by globalized mobility systems, in what John Urry has called the “new mobilities paradigm.” Whereas the limits of hybridity generated ambivalence and anxiety within colonial systems of order, simulated imperialism — operating in the interstices between the postcolonial and the hyperreal — interpellates subjects who exist between the mobile and the immobile, and more acutely, between the animate and the inanimate. This mobilized hybridity trades in the melancholic metaphysics of imperialist nostalgia; it is to mourn for what has been destroyed, fantasizing about an idealized former colonial life, and attempting to reconcile that loss through the petrifying fictions of “tradition.” In other words, imperialist nostalgia perpetuates the immobility to which the colonized are always condemned.

Simulated imperialism, on the other hand, performs a dialectical trick that seems to celebrate the resurrection of life. In a redemptive move against this fixity and disappearance, it reanimates the colonial subject . . . but only partially. The complete return of such subjects is always kept in check.

For example, the gondoliers and carabinieri [policemen] who wander the artificial canals and *calle* of the Venetian
Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas are hyperreal subjects who have been psychically settled by “Italy.” More accurately, they have been subjugated by the simulacrum of Venice, a melancholic city always on the verge of disappearance. As such, they become inscribed into an “Italian” order of things and interpellated as colonized subjects of the hyperreal. Not so predictably, however, they also appear to be quite mobile, strolling in silence as perfectly costumed copies of Italians elsewhere, resurrected in the American desert (of the real): mute flâneurs among simulated passages. These hyperreal Italian subjects reflect the very work of simulation itself.

According to Jean Baudrillard, “the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death. This is not always the case, however: when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death.” Thus, when confronted with their simulated doubleness — say, by a professor (me) who insists on speaking Italian with them — these gondoliers and carabinieri retreat into a colonial freeze-time, unable to speak or even look one in the eye, metaphorically re-fixed into a world of statues. In one instant, I witnessed the death of the hyperreal subject and the partial return of a colonial one, a figurative reanimation of the colonial. Simultaneously, I found myself sifting through the ontological borderlands between the mobile, animate, simulated subject and the fixed, inanimate, colonized one: hyperscapes where the hybrid subjects of simulated imperialism inhabit the space between.

THE WORLDS WITHIN: EXHIBITION RESIDUES, OR THE SIGNIFICATION OF IMPERIAL PROCESSES

In his study of the 1964 New York World’s Fair and the first iteration of the It’s a Small World ride, Lawrence Samuel speculated that Elias Disney’s experience as a carpenter at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair inspired his son, Walt, to create magical universes of his own. And magical worlds he did create — from kingdoms (Disneyland), to suburbs (Celebration, Florida), to feature films, to an “Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow” (EPCOT). Since the mid-twentieth century the Disney name has become synonymous with simulated worlds — be they microcosmic, animatronic, celluloid, suburban, or other. These hyperreal worlds constitute the so-called Disney empire.

Jean Baudrillard famously commented that Disneyland in Anaheim, California, exists as an imaginary to conceal the fact that we (Americans) live entirely among orders of simulation. As he wrote, Disneyland is merely a “deterrence machine” to rejuvenate fictions of a real that doesn’t exist; it is a space to regenerate the imaginary, wherein the recycling of “the dreams, the phantasms, the historical, fairylike, legendary imaginary of children and adults is a waste product, the first great toxic excrement of a hyperreal civilization.” How, then, might we clarify this imaginary and dissect the differential toxicities within it?

Rather, one might observe how the imaginaries are multiple at Disneyland. Each of its magic lands — future, frontier, fantasy, adventure — is linked to varying ideas of what is real, and each engages distinctive mechanisms of deterrence and imagination.

In Adventureland, the popular Jungle Cruise, one of the park’s original attractions (largely unchanged since 1955) circumnavigates a manmade river dotted with animatronic wildlife: hippos, elephants, crocodiles, and even spear-wielding “natives” (Figs. 2, 3). Visitors queue within a boathouse.
that belongs to an expedition company in an unnamed British colony of the 1930s. Material evidence of the colonizing project is everywhere — supply crates, photographs, ammunition, radios. And visitors wind their way through this detritus before boarding modified riverboat steamers with names like Congo Queen and Mekong Maiden. They then proceed into the wilderness, allegedly never to return (fig. 4). Yet every visitor does return from the simulated “jungle” with its menacing headhunters, and thus temporarily actualizes the fantasy of dominating nature — a fantasy that collapses indigeneity with the flora and fauna around it.21

The point here is that the deterrence and imaginaries at work in the Jungle Cruise are different from those of Disneyland’s other attractions. It actively perpetuates a fantasy of domination over nature, as played out on a simulated river in a simulated colony — an attempt to recuperate both a colonial real and a mastery of nature that never, in fact, existed. Yet Disneyland is not one, but multiple hyperrealities. Where the Jungle Cruise provides a simulated experience of dominating nature, the theme park’s other boat-themed attraction, It’s a Small World, aspires to nothing less than world cultural domination.

World’s Fairs as Simulated Imperialist Precedents. Fittingly, the origins of It’s a Small World lay not in the park itself but in an expression of American cultural dominance in the postwar era: the 1964–1965 New York World’s Fair. As laboratories of modernity, inventories of the world, and shrines to progress, world’s fairs (a.k.a. international and universal exhibitions) have articulated and embodied complex historical moments and cultural contexts.22 Walter Benjamin famously declared them to be “sites of pilgrimages to the commodity fetish.”23 Contemporary scholarship on them is extensive, much of it concerned with exhibitions as battlegrounds of signifying practices.24

![Figure 4](image-url)

**Figure 4.** The simulated riverboat — here named Congo Queen — is the instrument through which visitors conquer and domesticate pure nature.

One of the most ideologically charged practices at these fairs, as Timothy Mitchell’s study of visions of Egypt has shown, involved their representation of European colonizing projects.25 Whether along the Rue de Caire at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris or within the Libya and Albania pavilions of the 1940 Mostra Triennale d’Oltremare [Triennial Exhibition of Overseas Italian Territories] in Naples, these events both created and distanced the colonial object-world from its observer, establishing a simulated reality that was picture-like and legible, and thus able to be possessed. In terms of strategy, they referenced a world, inert and permanent, outside the exhibition, a world staked on the fixity of its synchronic essentialism. According to Mitchell, the effect they created “would always appear as though it were a conceptual structure . . . an order of meaning or truth existing somehow before and behind what would now be thought of as mere ‘things in themselves.’ Political authority itself would now more and more reside in this effect of a prior ordering truth.”26 Yet in these colonial worlds-as-exhibitions, he added, authority presided without ever really being present, and the political order(s) expressed were never quite accessible. What was novel about these exhibitions were the ways they rendered abstractions of authority into interlocking representational regimes of objects and order.

These worlds-as-exhibitions were simulacra par excellence, copies of an “original” artificially resurrected under the auspices of the “real.” As Mitchell wrote, “everything both imitates and is imitated — there is no simple division into an order of copies and an order of originals, of pictures and what they represent, of exhibits and reality, of the text and the real world, of signifiers and signified.”27

These processes of denaturalization and simulation were even more pronounced at colonial exhibitions staged on colonial soil, such as the Fiera di Tripoli [Tripoli Trade Fair], an annual exhibition staged in Italian-occupied Libya between 1927 and 1939. The event began as a series of temporary shed-like installations set along Tripoli’s seafort esplanade, but it was soon transformed into a sprawling 50,000-square-meter fairgrounds of permanent pavilions in a new, Italian-built neighborhood west of Tripoli’s medina (fig. 5). Similar to the exhibitions staged in the metropole, the Fiera re-created the architectures of quotidian colonial life in situ, from a suq, to metal workshops, to an Arab café, complete with “natives” on display.28 Visitors could observe this cleansed and enframed colonial order of appearance, and then, unlike at the exhibitions in Paris or Naples, they could walk outside the fair’s boundaries to observe the colonial “reality” with their own eyes. Yet Tripoli’s built environment had by then been entirely reconstructed — or, technically “reclensed” (ripristino) — by Italian architects. Its streets, buildings and monuments — indeed, the entire plan of the “real” city — had been manipulated and reformed by Italian colonial administrators since the 1910s.29 Architects and administrators alike had worked to rebuild Tripoli, in part, to conform with an ideal of the Orient that had never existed.30 Thus, the city itself no longer
bore any relation to reality; it was its own pure simulacrum. Together, the relation between the Tripoli Trade Fair and the city of Tripoli proper was that of two simulated environments bound up in an infinite calculus of figural exchange. Put another way, a strategy of *mise en abyme* typically structured imperial processes generated by simulacra. In these entangled orders, things were not just mimicked or doubled, but perpetually multiplied and enframed . . . and misrecognized. *Mise en abyme* thus lent a false sense of wholeness to these simulated appearances of order. The Tripoli Trade Fair, for instance, attempted to isolate and represent a coherent colonial reality. Yet the reality on the ground in Libya was entirely different than the idealized world presented at the trade fair. Gunfire still reverberated from skirmishes outside Tripoli; construction of infrastructure suffered long delays; and the eastern territory of Cyrenaica remained in a constant state of civil unrest. For decades, the nascent Italian empire was caught between the real and the hyperreal, an unsteady enterprise of unreal subjects and signifying distances. The bonds between coloniality and hyperreality coalesced around the limits of subjectivity (i.e., natives, Italians, Arabs) instantiated at the fair. And such ambiguous limits also opened up spaces of violence and disavowal outside the fair’s walls — for example, implicitly making way for the genocide that occurred within the Italian-built concentration camps of Cyrenaica from 1929 to 1933. The Tripoli Trade Fair emphasized the successes of Italian empire, insofar as visitors to it saw only the benefits of colonialism — e.g., modern buildings, agricultural produce, pacified natives — which reinforced the impression among Italians of themselves as good colonizers, or *brava gente*. Yet, at the same time that *mise en abyme* structured the simulated imperialism at work at the fair, it also intensified the misrecognition of colonial order(s). It represented this order to be complete and productive, and in doing so, shored up the edges of Italian empire. In short, simulated imperialism lent a false integrity to Italian imperial formations.

**Workings of the Disney Empire.** Like Italy’s empire in the past, the Disney empire of the present insists upon the totality of its entangled simulacral orders. Moreover, as history’s first copyrighted urban environment, it adamantly polices its imperial boundaries. The Walt Disney Company is famed for its litigiousness, going so far as to sue a childcare center in Florida over the unauthorized use of the image of Mickey Mouse on painted murals (it eventually forced the center to destroy them). And it engages a multiplicity of apparatuses (legal, cinematic, architectural) to safeguard the misrecognition of itself as an organic whole. Disney represents itself as a total imperial formation, an empire that transcends all locations. Michael Sorkin expanded this thought in his oft-cited meditation on Disneyland:

> But the empire of Disney transcends these physical sites; its aura is all-pervasive. Decades of films have furnished a common iconography of generations. Now there’s a television channel too. And years of shrewd and massive merchandising have sold billions of Disney things — videocassettes, comic books, pajamas, paper cups, postcards, and mouse-eared coin purses — which vaunt their participation in this exponentially expanding system of objects. The litter of Disneyland is underfoot in streets from New York to Shanghai. More people know Mickey than Jesus or Mao. Who doesn’t live in Disney World?

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**FIGURE 5.** Visitors explore the colonial pavilions that lined the central thoroughfare of the *Fiera di Tripoli* [Tripoli Trade Fair] circa 1930 in Tripoli, Libya. Image reproduced with permission from the collection of the Visual Media Center, Department of Art History and Archaeology, Lantern Slide Collection, Columbia University.
Disney’s imperial detritus literally surrounds us. It infiltrates, co-opts and adorns our daily lives, hanging on our bodies and infusing our thoughts, often without us knowing it. We willingly accept Disney’s imperial totality, and we even pay to consume it. We pay for the debris, financially and psychically, for our own piece of its exponentially expanding object universe. We pay to participate in its imperial formations — that is, in Disney’s “ongoing quality of processes of decimation, displacement, and reclamation.” We pay to imbricate ourselves in Disney’s imperialist order.

Some, too, pay more than others. Among them are those who choose to live within Disney’s own suburb of Celebration, Florida. Michael Pollan famously described it thus:

*The town of Celebration represents the Disney Company’s ambitious answer to the perceived lack of community in American life. . . . But Disney’s expertise is in building theme parks for paying guests, not towns for citizens. A real community is messy, ever changing and inevitably political — three adjectives that pretty much sum up everything the culture of Disney cannot abide. Very soon after the first homeowners moved into Celebration, Disney got its first taste of the unpredictability of community life. . . . Disney’s expertise at making places and synthesizing urban experience cannot be separated from its legendary obsession with control. . . . At Celebration, however, Disney has set in motion a story whose script it can only partly control.*

Celebration residents pay between $200,000 and $1 million for houses in the town that was founded in the mid-1990s. As residents, they also acquiesce to Disney’s need for image control, signing nondisclosure agreements that prohibit them from speaking about the community if they choose to move. They further agree only to decorate their houses in accordance with Disney’s Pattern Book — a set of strict covenants, codes and restrictions that dictates everything from curtain colors (white or off-white only), to garage sales (only one per year), to political signage (a single 18-by-24-inch sign), to parking (no on-street parking for pickup trucks). Residents live in an extension of Disneyland, the so-called “happiest place on earth,” and in doing so, actualize the misrecognition inherent in simulated imperialism; by living in Celebration, they literally buy into the place as a complete, productive, total community. With the curtain colors and garage sales and election signs, these residents live among the material residues of the Disney empire. In such ways, they integrate imperial formations — that is, thoroughly Disneyfied — into the practice of everyday life.

Returning to the theme park itself, each ride boasts a different heritage of simulation. Whereas the Jungle Cruise hearkens back to a fictive British colony, others are linked to the movie screen (e.g., *Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters, Peter Pan’s Flight*). Others still provide grist for a semiotic transfer that moves in the opposite direction. Most notable here is the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, which inspired the eponymous blockbuster film tetralogy. In turn, however, the original version of the ride was refurbished in 2006 to include characters from the films, including Captain Jack Sparrow and Davy Jones, voiced by the original actors. Here, “real” and “real” collapse, engaged in a reciprocal representational exchange, which establishes a heritage of simulation that vacillates between screen and site.

In the case of *It’s a Small World*, it was not the screen but the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair that provided this heritage. The fair opened at a tenuous moment in U.S. history — not long after the Cuban missile crisis and John F. Kennedy’s assassination, at a time when the Civil Rights Movement, the rapid escalation of violence in Vietnam, and the Cold War generally were threatening America’s sense of itself and its place in the world. It showcased American commerce, and proselytized the benefits of science and technology for a consumer-based society. As such, it was an attempt to mask the profound insecurity that gripped the nation. Yet the New York World’s Fair did not aim to merely assuage those fears of cultural upheaval; it disavowed them entirely. Thus, the fair’s president, the famed Robert Moses, enlisted Walt Disney’s help in creating a tightly controlled universe that reinforced the utopian promises of the postwar era. As Lawrence Samuel has put it, “By bypassing the uninviting near future for a more palatable far-distant one, the Fair offered its millions of visitors hope and confidence that utopia or something like it was not an entirely lost cause.” The fair was to become another Disney-built “happiest place on earth” in Flushing Meadows. Or, put another way, the idealistic promises of science and technology, coupled with the temporariness of the exhibition, suffused the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair with both senses of utopia: *eu-topia* (nowhere) and *eu-topia* (the place of happiness). It was to be, like Disneyland, the happiest place/non-place on earth.

Like the fair, the It’s a Small World attraction was a world-as-exhibition in miniature. It was developed on a crash schedule, with Mary Blair as lead designer. Having worked on numerous Disney films, she provided the graphics and color styling for the ride. However, it was Walt Disney, himself, who imagined its purpose: to create an “enchanting voyage around the globe [that] captures a simple, but profound idea — that the children of the world understand our commonalities and can create a harmonious future.” The ride was the centerpiece of a Pepsi-sponsored pavilion, and it proved to be one of the fair’s most popular attractions. Visitors stood in line for as long as two hours, and had to buy an extra 95¢ ticket (in addition to the $2 admission fee to the fair) for the twelve-minute ride. Proceeds from the extra ticket sales went to benefit the United Nation Children’s Fund (UNICEF). In 1965, at the fair’s closing, Walt Disney bid to turn the fairgrounds into a permanent theme park, but he was blocked by Moses, who envisioned a great public park in its place.
Disney packed up the ride and moved it to Disneyland, where it remains, almost unaltered, to this day. The attraction, too, has been replicated at all subsequent Disney theme parks; this “Small World” now has a global reach.

At each of these worlds-as-exhibition — the 1927–1939 Tripoli Trade Fair, the 1931 Paris Exposition Universelle, the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair, and present-day Disneyland with its “a Small World ride” — imperialist projects accreted upon and against one another. They informed, transacted and conditioned genealogies of imperial formations and nostalgia for past imperialist projects. The heritage of simulation was and is multiplex. Simulated imperialism operates through the messy strategies of disavowal, displacement and dislocation. These exhibitions thus became representational apparatuses that were always-already mechanisms of distancing, for they at once brought the future of an imperialist utopia close, but also kept it at bay. In this push and pull, an oscillation typically develops that allows us to gaze upon imperial futures, but which limits our participation within them. It is within this interstice that simulated imperialism interpellates its subjects — it is just one of its many mechanisms of control.

MODES OF CONTROL: SPACE AND MINIATURIZATION, OR THE AMPLIFICATION OF COLONIZING PROJECTS

At these exhibitions, the built environment proved the stage where simulated imperialism exercised its interpellative control. The practices of space delimited the values, subjects and futures contained within and marked by imperial formations. Parsing these spaces has been the task of many scholars, although few have considered how these built environments — colonial exhibitions, world’s fairs, Disney rides, and the like — were almost always staged in miniature.67 The spaces were, of course, metonymical — parts that represented a whole — but they also never reproduced the “real” at full scale. Subjects constantly negotiated between the multiple scales at play within these built environments. Yet it was the miniature, rather than the gigantic or the exact, that expressed a world frozen in space and time that could seemingly be possessed and dominated. Simulated imperialism, unsurprisingly, pivots on the worlds of the miniature.

To date, the most rigorous theorizations of the miniature, by Gaston Bachelard and by Susan Stewart, have approached it obliquely — that is, through representation in language.48 Both have interrogated the relationship between the miniature and the individual perceiving subject, and in different ways, asserted that the miniature allows that subject to dominate and possess. According to Bachelard: “The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it. But in doing this, it must be understood that values become condensed and enriched in miniature. Platonic dialectics of large and small do not suffice for us to become cognizant of the dynamic virtues of miniature thinking. One must go beyond logic in order to experience what is large in what is small.” For Stewart, it is possession executed with the body. For Bachelard, it is the potential for dreaming.

Yet, this, too, is a misrecognition. According to Stewart, what is involved in this process is the possession of the fictive, of a second-order world — of “an arrested life of a miniature object placed in the still context of infinite detail.” What is more important, then, is the significance that the miniature assumes in the distance between its representation and one’s perception of it. There is a gap between the representation of the miniature (i.e., in language, in physical form) and the experience thereof. And it is the subject’s perception of overcoming that gap that constitutes a possessive act.

This is possession from afar. As Bachelard wrote: “Distance disperses nothing but, on the contrary, composes a miniature of a country in which we should like to live. In distant miniatures, disparate things become reconciled. They then offer themselves for our possession, while denying the distance that created them. We possess from afar, and how peacefully!” We use our imaginative faculties to make this leap of possession to imbue the miniature, multum in parvo, with all the sensual diversity of the world of lived experience. As such, according to Stewart, the miniature transcends any limited context of origin, and simultaneously contains a neat and ordered universe.

In these acts of possession, a psychic resettling also occurs, situated between the meaning and materiality of the miniature. The miniature brings the world inside, a microcosm that attempts to reconcile an exterior, “real” world with one’s own interior, psychic world. It is both an experience of interiority and a process by which interiors are constructed. Yet the reconciliation is an impossible one, for the miniature is always an allusion to a space-time that is no longer (and never has been) available to us — an allusion that can only be recovered in fantasy. It is nostalgia embodied. What the miniature produces, Stewart wrote, “not only bears the tangible qualities of material reality but also serves as a representation, an image, of a reality which does not exist. The referent here is most often the fantastic, yet the fantastic is given ‘life’ by its miniaturization.” Psychic resettling also occurs with an act of disavowal: one knows that the miniature’s anteriority is unrecoverable, that reconciliation between exterior “real” and psychic interior is impossible, but one attempts to capture it anyway, as if one did not know. Rooted in this fetishistic logic of disavowal (as Bhabha has argued of colonizing projects generally), the miniature’s existence always hinges on the act of possessing and dominating a “neat and ordered universe.” In short, the moral consequence of the miniature is an imperialist attitude.

Indeed, all imperial formations are relations of force. And acts of possession and domination, violent by nature, condition the relationship between the miniature and the
individual perceiving subject. Through our imaginary capacities to possess and dominate, we “penetrate” the miniature. We observe its every detail. We rule it with our gazes and our bodies. We live out fantasies of omnipotence. Thus, acts of violence — possession and domination — subvert the space between the meaning and materiality of the miniature. These are the values engulfed, enriched and condensed within the miniature’s worlds — values that, according to Bachelard, cause men to dream. In the miniature, we find that possession and domination are both the values and the processes that constitute the foundational violence of simulated imperialism.

THE DREAM OF IT’S A SMALL WORLD

What, then, of the miniature in its built form of world-as-exhibition? At Disney’s It’s A Small World, simulated imperial formations amplify colonizing projects by way of miniaturization. They reinforce the fixture of colonized subjects into a petrified, Manichean order, and transform apparent colonizers into the colonized. The colonizer becomes but an illusion, imbricated in an unending multiplication of colonized subjects. Simulation builds distance into these proceedings. In and through the spaces between representation and reality, as well as meaning and materiality, simulated imperialism masks this second order of interpellation. We thus remain entirely unaware of this imperial effect that surreptitiously lingers among us, choosing to believe instead in fantasies of possession, domination and omnipotence.

Imperial préterrain. It’s A Small World begins long before one boards a mechanized boat and embarks on the “happiest cruise that ever set sail.” Disneyland’s préterrain, or the places that one has to go through and be in relation with to get to “the field,” is complex, composed of a series of détours and retours that compel visitors to travel in circuits. The first circuit takes one from parking garage to the ticket booth by way of motorized tram, winding through the back roads of Anaheim and the Disneyland hotel. The salient points of this circuit are marked by monetary exchange — parking passes, tips, an entrance ticket. Characteristically, the latter is not a ticket but a “passport” that allows access to this simulated empire. In this imperial préterrain, the dirty business of capital exchange takes place outside Disneyland’s well-policed borders. It is the final transaction that must take place in the “real” world before one can enter the happiest place/nonplace on earth.

Upon entering the park, another circuit begins — one conditioned by nostalgia. There is no choice but to walk down Main Street USA, the only route in and out of the park. This street marks the beginning and end to all visits. It is lined with shops under a pseudo-Victorian arcade with antique horseless carriages ferrying consumer-visitors up and down the street. Like many structures in the park, Main Street exists on a diminishing scale (Fig. 6). Every building becomes smaller with each story, so that the lowest level is built at full scale, the second story at 7/8, and the third at 5/6. This technique — forced perspective — fosters a sense of intimacy, making the buildings appear taller than they are without seeming too large and impersonal. With forced perspective, according to Disney’s own Imagineering Field Guide, “the designer plays with the scale in the real world in order to affect the perception of scale in an illusory world.” Thus framed by the diminishing scales of an illusory world, Main Street USA slides into miniature.

Figure 6. Forced perspective along Disneyland’s Main Street USA.
As an illusion, too, Main Street is an idealized construction of a small-town America that never was. The street was supposedly modeled on Walt Disney’s hometown of Marceline, Missouri (as well as Fort Collins, Colorado, the hometown of Disneyland’s first director, Harper Goff). However, several scholars have shown that Main Street was more a “mediation of a version of community that was already well established in popular American memory” than a replica of Walt’s nostalgic memories for his boyhood home.

Main Street leads to the space of fantasy (quite literally, Fantasyland), and “the utopian place to which Main Street USA leads is the fantasmatic return of reality, [a] hallucinatory presence.” The circuit of nostalgia ends at Cinderella’s castle, where other circuits then begin. One opens onto the fictively scientific futures of Tomorrowland; another to the colonial spaces of Adventureland; yet another to the American West of Frontierland. Borders are porous, and one may slip in and out of these space-times with little effort.

In a far corner of Fantasyland, there stands a blinding white-and-gold edifice reflecting the Southern California sun. From three hundred feet away, one hears a rhythmic ticking, of the sort used by hypnotists. There is also an instrumental version of the famed “It’s a Small World” song repeated ad nauseum. Upon closer observation, the source of the ticking is a smiling clockface with pendulous eyes mounted atop the ride’s central tower. Its syncopated ticking underlies but does not fall in rhythm with the instrumental song. It is as if the ride deploys two competing forms of acoustic torture upon the waiting crowd in an effort to overstimulate and control them. The sensory assault embodied by It’s a Small World is so effective and complete that Disneyland employees have nicknamed it “the Asylum” because of its capacity to drive employees and visitors insane.

**The Imperial Terrain.** The gleaming white-and-gold exterior of this self-proclaimed small world represents a two-dimensional world in miniature. On the one hand, abstract, geometric forms comprise the exterior — squares, circles, triangles, turrets — set against one another. There are also moving parts — pinwheels and discs — that spin in rhythm to the ticking clock. Visually, the ride’s exterior is overwhelming; the eye does not know where to look first (fig. 7).

Abstractions of several famous monuments stand out amidst this shimmering geometric collage, among them the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Parthenon, the leaning tower of Pisa, St. Peter’s Basilica, the Tower Bridge, and Venice’s campanile. These are monuments of a “Eurocentric” and “Western” civilization, but they are also imperial debris symbolically abstracted and affixed to the ride’s exterior (fig. 8). Each of these monuments signifies an empire of the past: Greece, Rome, Venice, etc. The only recognizable symbols that might be considered “non-Western” are two domes, which could be interpreted as elements of an Ottoman-style mosque (yet another empire). Alternatively, they might recall the architecture of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, such as St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow — an association which only reinforces the dominating Occidentalism of this small world.

![Figure 7](image1.png)

**Figure 7.** The It’s a Small World ride is overwhelming to eyes and ears.

![Figure 8](image2.png)

**Figure 8.** Most of the ride’s exterior designs are abstract, geometric shapes, but a few distinctly Occidental monuments are immediately recognizable.
While geometric forms overwhelm and disguise these abstracted monuments, the latter foreshadow what is to come in the psychic interior of the ride. Moving from exterior to interior, the small world expands from two dimensions to three, passing from physical to psychic realms. Put another way, the exterior presages the values enriched and condensed within this particular miniature. The glistening white exterior celebrates monuments to Occidentalism — and implicitly the values predicated upon an imperialist fantasy of a successful, dominant, Western, and particularly American civilization. They are values that espouse racism, classism, violence, and all the other trappings of colonizing projects. In sum, this is a small world — a miniature — where all racial, cultural and linguistic differences have been erased in favor of a white, English-speaking, culturally American utopia.

The Spaces of the Small World. To enter this interior, one waits and watches until it is time to board a mechanized boat with a dozen other people and depart for the miniature world inside (fig. 9). The boat rounds a corner, and in an instant, the blinding whiteness of the exterior disappears into the blackness of an interior tunnel that consumes all. This is the miniature’s threshold between outside and inside, light and dark, white and black. At this threshold, a sign declares the ride to be “The Happiest Cruise that Ever Sailed!” This is a preemptory move to set a positive tone for the experience to come; it is the rhetoric that validates the imperialist fantasy staged inside. Beneath the sign, the logo for Sylvania, a lighting company and the ride’s corporate sponsor, is also stamped onto the image of a sun (fig. 10). The ride thus implies that illumination is yet to come, another symbolic legitimation of its imperialist values — or perhaps, a compensatory gesture for the moral darkness contained within.

The tunnel opens into a cavernous chamber, and the boat is thrust into an explosion of multicolored lights, moving stages, singing and dancing animatronic dolls, cruising boats, and repeated musical refrains that bombard the senses. Here, the small world is divided into regions and marked by stereotypes. As arrested, fixated forms of representation, stereotypes deny the plays of difference within psychic and social relations. In this small world, colonial bodies are forever on display, and the shorthand of the stereotype inscribes them with racial and cultural difference. The bodies here are not “real” but mechanized, vivified by microelectronics. They take the form of animatronic dolls — simulated children — whose stilting movements seemingly resist the fixity of stereotypes even as they perpetuate them in broad strokes.

The tour begins in the Arctic, where fur-clad Eskimo dolls sing in Inuit among walruses and igloos. From here, one “sails” to Canada, the Baltics, and Europe. The exterior monuments to Occidentalism get reprised here, and countries are reduced to cultural stereotypes. Italy is Pinocchio, gondoliers, and the leaning tower of Pisa; Holland is a windmill, tulips and clogs; France is the Eiffel Tower and can-can dancers; Spain equals flamenco guitar; etc. (fig. 11). Next, the boat leaves Europe and sails to the Middle East, where a visual display signals Orientalism to be very much alive in the contemporary. There are snake charmers, flying carpets, a minaret, and belly dancers, all singing the “It’s a Small World” song in Arabic. Every female doll wears a veil, as does the sun,
covered by a long niqāb. All the diversity of the Middle East and northern Africa is collapsed into a well-worn Orientalist fantasy animated by child-like automatons (fig. 12).

The circuit continues through Asia, where the displays of cultural stereotypes involve pandas and acrobats (China); a Shinto shrine and kimono-clad dolls (Japan); rice paddies and water buffalo (Thailand); and the Taj Majal and classical dancers (India) (fig. 13). The boat next rounds a corner, and a surfeit of animal sounds (highlighted by monkeys) marks its arrival in Africa. Here animals outnumber people. There are hyenas, a rhinoceros, a lion, an elephant, giraffes and monkeys, yet few children. The dolls, black-skinned and dressed in tribal fashions, sing, dance, and make music with the animals (fig. 14). It is the only display in which the dolls do so. A rhinoceros keeps rhythm on a drum right next to a child who plays a flute while straddling a lion. Put another way, the attraction equates Africans with animals, a not-so-subtle expression of racism. Like the Jungle Cruise, it perpetuates a fantasy that collapses indigeneity with the fauna around it.

Riders then float out of Africa and into Latin America, the master signifier of which is a giant sombrero. Almost every doll wears a sombrero, and they sing the “Small World” song in Spanish. Like the Middle East, all the cultural diversity of the continent is collapsed into singular stereotypes — sombreros, donkeys, brightly colored rugs — which recall a world that has never, in fact, existed. Pacifica is next on the tour. Comparatively, this is a small display of Polynesian
island cultures, with stereotypes ranging from kiwis to hula dancers. While the Latin America display recalls a nonexist-
ient past, Pacifica references an imaginary past that is, to 
some extent, “real.” This is because it includes Disney car-
toon characters — Ariel from The Little Mermaid and Lilo and 
Stitch from the eponymous movie — in reference to a “reel” 
history accessible to visitors familiar with Disney’s cinematic 
eoüvre. Here, the artifacts of the cinematic screen penetrate 
the imperialist attitude of miniature, wherein “real” and 
“reel” subdend simulated imperialism.

The United States comprises the penultimate display of 
the Small World tour. The country is reduced to a single dyad 
of stereotypes: cowboys and Indians (Fig. 15). In this U.S., 
a cowboy sits atop a haystack set among a pastoral landscape 
of Midwestern farmland. Nearby, a cowgirl dressed in chaps 
plays guitar against a backdrop that clearly references the 
Southwest, possibly Monument Valley. Above her, almost 
marginalized from view, three Native American dolls dance 
and sing in English. Bedecked in turquoise jewelry and sur-
rrounded by pottery, they welcome the cowgirl with arms out-
stretched, allowing her to take center stage. It is almost as if 
they are welcoming her (musical) conquest.

The domination of Native Americans inherent in the 
United States display foreshadows the imperialist conquest 
implicit in the ride’s climax. Here, all the dolls from previous 
plays become united in a sort of “white wedding” finale 
(Figs. 16, 17). They are all dressed in white, and dance and 
sing in English. The white-and-gold color scheme of this fi-
nal interior now matches the attraction’s exterior, and in this 
way, inside and out, physical and psychic symbolically realign 
in space. While ethnic and national types are still grouped 
together, all cultures on display have been whitewashed, both 
literally and metaphorically, in a sort of Fanonian reversal. It 
is a world-in-miniature where racial, cultural and linguistic 
differences have been erased in favor of a white, Anglophone, 
Americanized utopia. These are the values enriched and 
condensed in this miniature. Thus, the ride’s built forms 
and spatial practices impose a simulated civilizing mission 
upon simulated global populace. It is a mission that advances 
a fantasy of American imperialism, exactly of the sort imag-
ined in the mid-twentieth century when the ride debuted at 
the 1964–65 New York World’s Fair. As visitors set their pen-
etrating gazes upon this miniature world, they are put in the 
metaphorical position of colonizers.

In the miniature, this second-order fictive world recalls 
an irrecoverable space-time that never existed. Likewise, in-
terpellation is always partial and evasive. Subjects surface in
moments, becoming and unbecoming, the psychic embodiments and intimate residues of imperial formations. Simulated imperialism complicates the dialectic between colonizer and colonized, which, like the dialectic between outside and inside, “are always ready to be reversed, to exchange hostility,” according to Bachelard. “If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides.” In simulated imperialism, the painful borderlines of interpellation inhabit the articulation between (im)mobility and (in)animation. It is here, in these ontological borderlands, that new forms of partial and hybrid subjects emerge — short circuits born of a hyperreal imperialist order.

THE SUBJECTS OF SIMULATED IMPERIALISM: INTERPELLATION IN THE SMALL WORLD

It is fitting that a giant, hypnotic, ticking clock anchors the exterior of It’s a Small World, for the clock was the first automatic device to be applied to practical purposes (fig. 18). Walter Benjamin noted that the whole theory of the production of regular motion was developed through the clock. He grouped the clock under the category of dolls and automatons, for all possess the bewitching power of automation. It is the motion — or rather, the mobility — that arises from automation that enchants. Yet automation, or mechanized mobilities, interpellates subjects who, for Benjamin, were repulsive. As he wrote: “the evil spell of this slippery path [of automation] readily take[s] the form, even today, of large animated dolls.” And, he added, “You have no idea how repulsive these automatons and dolls can become, and how one breathes at last on encountering a full-blooded being in this society.”

Automation rules Disneyland’s society. Mechanized carriages make their way, driverless, up and down Main Street. On the Jungle Cruise, animatronic elephants spray water at visitors on cue. At Space Mountain, the rollercoaster stops and starts at precise intervals, transporting new groups of visitors into outer space every 2 minutes and 48 seconds. In short, the park could not function without automation. It’s a Small World depends on it. The clock’s pendulous, anthropomorphic eyes and its hypnotic ticking depend on the mechanics inside. So, too, do the boats, which, instead of floating through the ride’s interior are propelled along a fixed track by well-timed water jets. Most importantly, the crux of the
attraction — its 300 singing and dancing animatronic dolls — are entirely controlled by automation.

In the simulated imperialist fantasy of the miniature, interpellation hinges on mobility. To be clear, interpellation occurs in the space between mobility and immobility. But this is hardly a straightforward process, for “mobility” itself is a nebulous concept. It’s a Small World exists in perpetual motion, yet this motion is completely automated. One might then ask: if it is a miniature that is not freely mobile, is this but an illusion of mobility? Does interpellation exist only in the potential for a self-determined mobility: move or ergo sum? Or can automation and mobility together condition interpellation? If so, what kind of subjects might they create? At first glance, the answer is deceptively simple: all subjects interpellated by simulated imperialism are automatous. At It’s a Small World, we see this most clearly with the animatronic dolls that “sing” and “dance.” They broadcast an illusion of spontaneity, or better yet, an illusion of agency, with their movements. Yet this mobility is not their own; it is generated and mediated by machines: they are automata.

Etymologically, “automation” and “automaton” both stem from the ancient Greek word αὐτόματος meaning “acting of one’s own will, of oneself,” which, in turn, has roots in αὐτός (“self”) and μάτος (“thinking, animated, willing,” a derivative of μένοιν, “to be minded, to have purpose, to intend”). In Greek, αὐτόματος could refer to people acting of their own will, but it could also refer to events and natural phenomena spontaneously happening in and of themselves. Most interestingly, αὐτόματος could refer to inanimate objects acting of themselves — that is, objects that come to life. In Homer’s Ἰλιάδ, for instance, Hephaistos’s self-moving tripods are described as αὐτόμαται, or “acting of their own will.”

Building on this Homeric reference, Aristotle engaged these animated tripods in Politics to ponder the nature of property, including human beings, particularly slaves. He yearned for a device that, like a slave, “could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others.” Yet he considered slaves to be animated instruments too, for as beings without agency, they were not entirely human. Likewise, Benjamin linked Aristotle’s conception of slave-as-automaton of the twenty-first century. In such ways, the animation of objects opens up a space wherein agency infuses the realm of the inanimate and allows for mechanized objects to mimic life. With automatons, we, too, move into the realm of the fable, as Benjamin noted — or perhaps more accurately, into the texture of the dream-work, into the “sublime dreams of living machines.”

In the small worlds of simulated imperialism, then, mobility interpellates subjects in between human and machine — a mechanistic humanity.

In Disney’s It’s a Small World, the doll-machines imitate human movements on a miniature scale. Some perform haltingly as can-can dancers in “France.” Others sway robotically as they perform the hula in “Hawaii.” Still others...
colonizers, in the form of theme park visitors, pass by in their boats, peripatetically penetrating this small world of (automated) statues. In such ways, the imperial formation always stays in motion.

These doll-machines clearly incarnate the well-worn trope of the colonized-as-child. Edward Said described it thus: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’.” Likewise, William B. Cohen noted: “The European imperial powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries viewed their African and Asian subjects as children, as men not fully grown, whose destiny had to be guided by the presumably more advanced states of Europe.” At It’s a Small World, the immobile, automatous, colonized subjects are quite literally children. There is not one adult doll-machine in the entire attraction. Instead, these children have been symbolically domesticated and thrust into performing adult duties. They dance provocatively, tend sheep, charm snakes, and even cultivate rice with a water buffalo. And the ride’s spatial stagings (especially the finale) reveal these automated children — colonized subjects — to be easily disciplined, transformed and whitewashed to conform with a white, Anglophone, Americanized miniature utopia. It is both a simulated imperialism and a simulated civilizing mission fulfilled.

However, these successes are but illusions. Here, the relationship between colonizer and colonized is also reversed, even collapsed, by the attraction’s spatial practices. The movements of seemingly hypermobile colonizers — theme park visitors — are controlled and disciplined by the ride itself. Like the doll-machines, visitors, too, can never move freely. They must go where the boat takes them, submit to its predetermined pace, and direct their gazes along prescribed vectors. Visitors are fixed into the boats, unable to move until the ride comes to an end. Thus, the small world imbus its visitors with an illusion of mobility — much like the stilted movements of its automata — through the preprogrammed mechanics that control its operation. In simulated imperialism, the possibilities for self-determined mobility vanish even among “colonizers” — as do their possibilities for agency.

Technologies of surveillance make sure these possibilities stay vanished. Video cameras constantly monitor visitors. The threat of discipline is everywhere: among the pernicious employees directing crowds, the multilingual warning signs (“Do not get out of the boat!”), and even the low ceilings of the entry and exit tunnels that portend severe head injury. Visitors who appear to be colonizers at first, dominating the small world with their gazes and bodies, instead become colonized subjects. This double bind of (im)mobility conditions interpellation in simulated imperialism. Or rather the vacillation between mobility and immobility hails the subjects of simulated imperialism into being. Fixed into mechanized boats, immobile, they become obeisant cogs within the infrastructure of a greater simulated imperialist superstructure, Disney’s empire.

Without mobility, we cannot exist as full subjects. If we cannot move, we cannot live. In such ways, all subjects of simulated imperialism are metaphorically paraplegic. For a few moments, we are frozen through and within simulacra only to have our fixity reflected back to us by the Other subjects of simulated imperialism — automat — which, in turn, cause us to question: “Who am I in reality?” This is the psychic debris of simulated imperialism.

At third glance, this question provokes us to question the ontologies of animation that are evoked by simulated imperialism, for bound up with animation is the very question of the soul. Returning to etymology, animation stems from the Latin animas, which referred to the “rational soul in man” in the most general sense. This was rooted in the Greek word ἀνέμος meaning “wind; air; breeze,” but also “breath; expiration.” Even further, this double meaning came from the Sanskrit an (to breathe), anas (“breath”), and anitas (“wind”). Thus the soul is tied to the breath, and there cannot be life without breath. Animation thus evokes the greatest border of all: that between life and death.

Given the stilted movements of the doll-machines and mechanized mobilities generally, what is the relationship between animation and interpellation in simulated imperialism? What shift occurs in the relationships between the soul, breath and life of these subjects? How might the partial (re)animation of these doll-machines change their ontological conditions? What does this mean for life and death? The subjects of simulated imperialism — literal and figurative automata — are kin to other (im)mobile subjects, who are either automatously animate (that is, animate without breath) or who hold the potential for (re)animation: cyborgs, vampires, mannequins, robots, clones, zombies, and the like. These are subjects that inhabit the in-between spaces and porous borders between life and death — and in many cases, between human and machine. They exist at the intersection of (im)mobility and (in)animation. They travel the boundaries of human and inhuman.

Yet in Disneyland, as in most simulacra, there is no place for death. Literally, one cannot die there. The theme park polices its borders to the extreme, particularly with regard to the dead and dying. If a guest suffers from a massive heart attack, employees call a supervisor first and then the ambulance. If that guest happens to die, she cannot be declared dead within the confines of the park. The guest’s body is whisked out of public view and shuttled out into the parking lot (or elsewhere off property), where paramedics can officially declare death. The Project on Disney has even described an incident in which a guest committed suicide by shooting himself in the head, and although dead on the spot, was not declared dead until long afterwards, far outside the park. In such ways, Disney can legitimately claim that no one has ever died on its property. It is a space outside and beyond death. It is a space where all subjects can live out “the blind dream of defeating death and achieving immortality.”
It is this fantasy of immortality that renders it the happiest place/non-place on earth.

In simulated imperialism, and at Disneyland specifically, death is a fiction, often a parodic one. Sometimes this is quite blatant, as at the Haunted Mansion, where the undead quite literally intermingle with visitors. Sometimes it is more subtle, as with the automata of It’s a Small World, whose ontological status as children intimate a time far removed from death (childhood) as well as the conquest of death through automation. At Disneyland, ghosts, automata, robots and animatronics embody the fantasy of resurrection, and they actualize the possibility of (re)animation. In short, the subjects of simulated imperialism perpetually come back to life. They defeat death through the artificialization of life. They successfully realize the immoral desire that is the fantasy of immortality.

In simulated imperialism, the fantasy of immortality marks our passage out of the (human) species and into the machine. Baudrillard, addressing the metaphysics of simulation, noted that we are now crossing a point beyond which nothing is human or inhuman anymore: “alone of all species, the human being seeks to construct his immortal double — crowning natural selection with an artificial selection.”59 We are sacrificing the human species, he wrote, for the privilege of unlimited experimentation in pursuit of immortality. It is in the realm of the virtual, the simulated, that we come closest to achieving this desire — our digital traces remain long after our physical bodies have gone, traces that might be reconstructed as a “self” in perpetuity. As Baudrillard added, “the human species, left to itself, can only duplicate or destroy itself.”60 True, simulated imperialism duplicates and destroys, but it also resurrects: it interpellates the living dead articulated at the intersection of human and machine.

Yet simulated imperialism covers over these operations of interpellation with the illusion that we still live in a deterministic society, rational and governed by dialectic relationships. It trades in distinctions between inside and outside, living and dead, acknowledgement and disavowal, colonizer and colonized, mobile and immobile, human and machine, presuming continuity and reciprocal exchange between all of these dialectics.

I, too, have been working under these presumptions, trending toward a general principle of equilibrium. But what if, instead, we thought of imperial formations as predicated on relations of nonequivalence? Can there be such a thing as discrete imperialism? Disneyland, for instance, has no meaning outside itself for which it can be exchanged. There is no equivalent to Disneyland but Disneyland itself. Thus, Disneyland, the ultimate venue for simulated imperialism, is founded on what Baudrillard would call an impossible exchange.61 This is an eccentric state of existence, wherein the sphere of the real is no longer exchangeable for the sphere of the sign. Both lose their force. It is a state in which illusion is the fundamental rule, and discontinuity alone is probable. What, then, if we were to think of imperial formations as radically unpredictable movements, their subjects shifting in and out of a quantum void? Such analyses would be challenging, yes, but I hope my analysis here has offered an idea of how simulacra might bring such imperial processes into sharper relief.

Finally, let us return to the subject to pose Fanon’s question once again: “Who am I in reality?” For Fanon, colonialism’s systematic negation of humanity inspired this existential angst. In simulated imperialism, this angst resides in the quantum void, that is, the irrational distance between “real” and “simulated,” in the unpredictable space between. Because simulation builds distance into interpellation, the subjects of simulated imperialism are seemingly once-removed from “reality” — members of a collective tele-subjectivity and a mechanized humanity rooted in simulation. It is not just the “I” but also the “reality” that is always in question. Likewise, the subjects of simulated imperialism emerge from the quantum void tentatively and temporarily, struggling to find an anchor on these unpredictable grounds. They can only ever exist as partial, for simulation insures their continual destabilization with its serial propagation of ever-shifting imperial formations.

With simulation, and simulated imperialism generally, there is no end to imperial formations . . . and thus, no end to colonizing projects, imperialist impulses, violent acts of possession and domination, colonized subjects immobilized, fantasies of immortality, the erasure of boundaries between human and inhuman, and the collapsing of any distinction between life and death. The living dead are resurrected from the void, reanimated as automata. Imperial refuse that refuses to die. They are both remains and remainders: remains of the undead and imperial processes, remainders of the hyperreal.

CODA

Somewhere under Disneyland, urban legend has it, Walt Disney remains suspended in a vat of liquid nitrogen, flash-frozen into cryostasis at the moment of his death. Disney’s personal fantasy of immortality becomes writ through this cryogenic body, hovering between life and death, as it awaits technology’s divine hand of reanimation. Fittingly, he is said to be suspended under the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, far below the animatronic buccaneers and boat-ridden visitors above. Tubes and chemicals and monitors dutifully preserve him, now both human and machine — an automaton. Locked into this cryogenic freezer, Disney is condemned to immobility, not unlike the colonized subject fixed and frozen into a world of statues. And there he waits and waits, in limbo, somewhere between man and machine, life and death, surrender and resurrection: this emperor of discrete simulations.
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4. Ibid., pp.192–93.

15. An imperialist nostalgia of not-yet, we lament Venice’s crepuscular existence and anticipatorily mourn its slippage into the sea, and yet we still call for its salvation (e.g., Save Venice, Inc.). I have argued elsewhere that The Venetian-as-simulacrum statuses off this time framespace; but what is of interest here are the people participating and performing, as it were, in The Venetian hotel-casino’s simulated cultural machinery. S.M. Hom, “Italy without Borders: Simulacra, Tourism, Suburbia, and the New Grand Tour,” Italian Studies, Vol.65 No.3 (2010), pp.378–79.
30. In the Italian metropole, too, Fascist architects and planners re-created spaces to conform with ideals that never existed,


39. AlSayyad, “Original Main Street USA and the latter with the former attracting tourists to the World’s Fair, Disneyland, and the It’s a Small World ride are all simulacra, they are also all illusory forms that are meant to be their pleasure a real one, or merely a form of thing makes happiness impossible — which are naturally nothing of the kind — as though facts were as easily changed as definitions . . . [they] believe that this type of thing makes happiness impossible — because, once you get used to it, you lose all capacity for real pleasure, and are merely obsessed by illusory forms of it.” Because the World’s Fair, Disneyland, and the It’s a Small World ride are all simulacra, there are also all illusory forms that are meant to be experienced and enjoyed by visitors. But is their pleasure a real one, or merely a form of delusion? See T. More, *Utopia* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p.74.


44. The double meaning of utopia raises the hypothesis, see V. Dhareshwar, “Toward a Narrative Epistemology of the Post-Colonial Predicament,” *Inscriptions*, No.5 (1989), pp.135–57.


48. Marin, “Disneyland: A Degenerate Utopia,” p.56. Nezar AlSayyad has pointed out that, ironically, both Marceline, MO, and Fort Collins, CO, “seized upon the expression of their ties to Disneyland’s Main Street as a strategy of survival,” with the former attracting tourists to the “original” Main Street USA and the latter “Disney-fying” its downtown. AlSayyad, “Global Norms and Urban Forms,” p.25.

49. In March 2013 a California court awarded $8,000 in damages to a handicapped man who had been exceedingly distressed after being stranded on the ride for thirty minutes while the theme song played continuously. According

65. Ibid., p.694.
76. Of course, this is exactly the question that Frantz Fanon identified as that prompted by the systematic negation of the colonized subject’s humanity. It is the question that arises from being the wretched of the earth. Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, p.182.
80. Ibid., pp.44–45.
81. Ibid., p.47.
82. Ibid., p.5.

All photos of Disneyland and its attractions were taken by the author in August 2010.