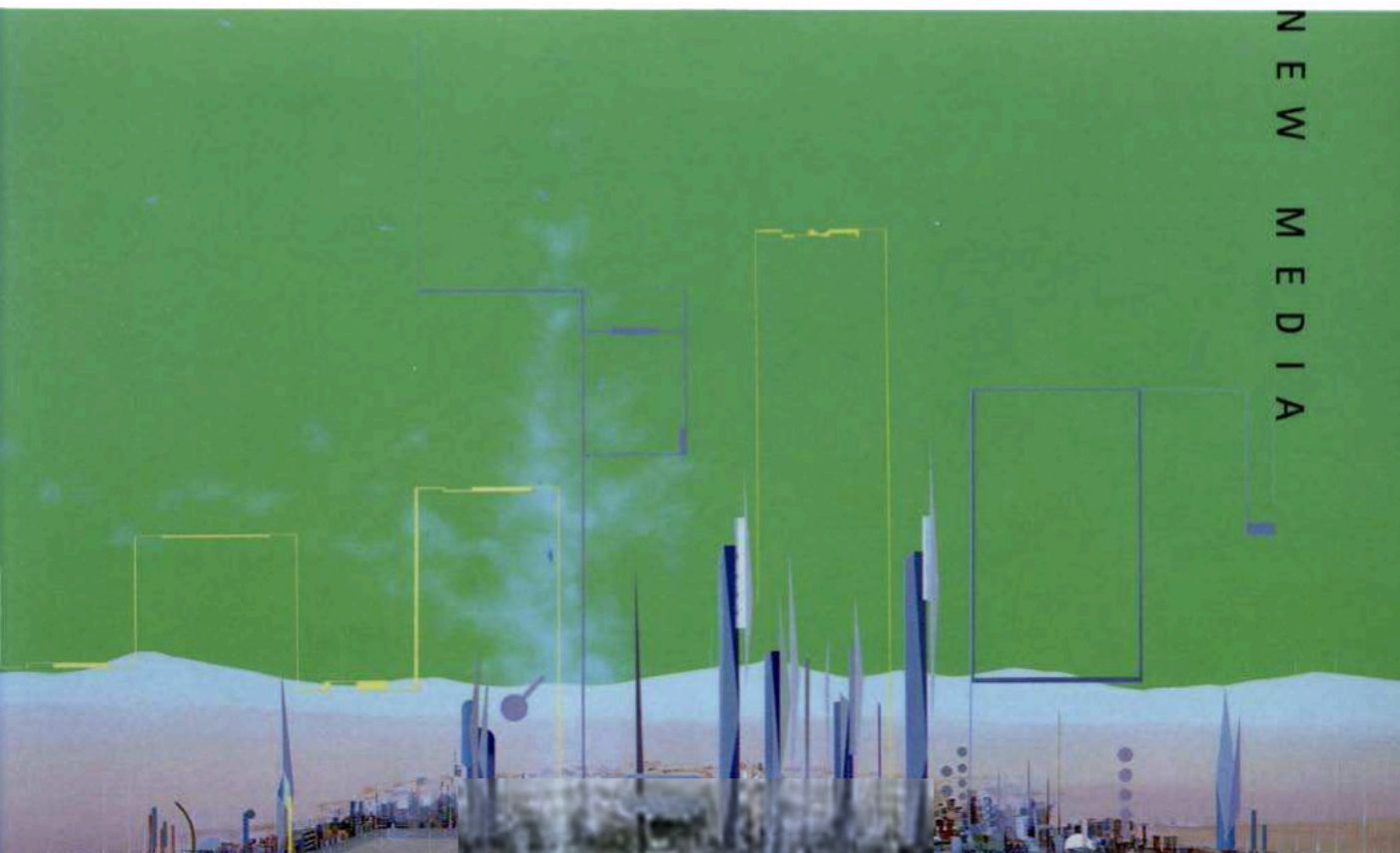


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THE DIGITAL DIALECTIC

NEW ESSAYS ON NEW MEDIA



Musings on Amusements in America, *or* What I Did on My Summer Vacation

Prelude: SIGGRAPH '94

It was a dark and steamy night when I arrived in Orlando, traveling alone to attend the SIGGRAPH conference and give a couple of talks. It would be two days before the Little Kid, my official excuse for cruising Disney World, would arrive on her first solo flight. In the meantime I would have to content myself with the amazing flight-sim-motion-platform-big-vehicles-making-loud-noises VR demos on the SIGGRAPH exhibit floor. Terence McKenna and I, feeling like aliens for different reasons and thrown together by virtue of speaking on the same panel, set out to make a 15-minute tour. With his invariably apt cynicism and unerring sense of the bizarre, Terence is the best imaginable tourguide for this sort of expedition.

The first thing we stumble on is a kind of marine mammal combat game. Intended to break the gender barrier in location-based entertainment, Iwerks has concocted a weird undersea adventure with something for everyone. For the girls, a nurturing goal of saving the eggs of the Loch Ness monster ("Nessie"), earnestly narrated by a thirty-something blonde "biologist." For the boys, a great big metal



submarine with grappling claws and guns and very loud mechanical noises. For the girls again, the guide character of a cute little dolphin whose enthusiasm is dimmed not one whit by the staggering load of military equipment strapped to his lithe little body. Once you get underwater things get really mixed up - the gun shoots paint balls and the grappling claws latch onto Nessie's eggs with the satisfying clang of big metal. The bad guys are also zipping around in a nasty metal submarine but are rendered

immediately irrelevant by their paint-ball-only weaponry. Iwerks has come up with a bad recipe for gender-encompassing entertainment-like Tiny Tim, a gender blend that makes everyone a little queasy.

Disney is demonstrating their première VR demo-a magic carpet ride through the movie world of Aladdin. The contrast between the virtual world and the exterior of the installation is extreme-inside, you slide slick as celluloid on a path through Aladdin's cartoon world complete with gratuitous one-way conversations with those adorable Arab characters, all at 60 Hz since no body parts are being tracked; outside, a shiny black HMD elongated to resemble the face of one of Cameron's aliens clamps onto your head, and you straddle the vehicle-sim interface like a big black Harley. Little girls look really, uh, funny doing this.

Meanwhile, in the backwaters of SigKids and the Edge where only wandering breeders seem to go, there is a little dolphin exhibit. Young men talk to you earnestly about the puzzling evidence: swimming with dolphins leads to dramatic medical reversals in some cancer patients. "We don't think we can simulate it because we don't know what it is," they say, and add apologetically that "it seems

to be volitional on the part of the dolphins." Nevertheless, they offer you a therapeutic dolphin experience. You lie on a waterbed with your head under a curtain wearing polarizing 3D glasses, little pads with obscure functionality on your temples, and earphones. Presently, new-age music heavy with low frequencies and mixed with dolphin sounds begins to vibrate through the waterbed and into your marrow. Turquoise velvet art-deco flowers start blooming out of your sternum. The empty video screen above you fills with 3D first-person POV film of dolphins with whom you are evidently swimming. They glide by circumspectly at first, then nose your midsection, and finally, as the image fades, they grin right in your face. Two minutes later you float out of the installation moving very slowly, wondering what happened to the tension between your shoulder blades. [\(1\)](#)

Although the SIGGRAPH big-VR crowd doesn't seem too keen on tracking bodies, the SIGGRAPH animation crowd is ever more adept at mutilating, exploding, stabbing, and amputating. The 1994 video show vacillates between images of utter despair and meaningless abstraction, one notable exception being a brilliant Smirnoff commercial in which a bottle of vodka carried on a tray by a waiter, as it passes between the viewer and various everyday objects, transforms what was seen through it into fantastical objects of desire. Even the effects reel from "Mask" features only moderately disturbing demonstrations of technology without content. This is the art of the nineties-worse, the mid-nineties-smack in the middle of a decade of anesthesia-too early for the millennium, and nothing goes over threshold. But then, what can we expect from a year in which a superhighway is supposed to be an interesting metaphor?

Eventually the conference powers down. I leave Terence sorting things out with a pal from Costa Rica and head for the airport to pick up my six-year-old daughter, Brooke, a nineties kid par excellence-recovering from a divorce, seriously attached to Dad, and ready to be bored, hard-boiled, or pissed-anything but the kid, or the family, that Walt had in mind.

Cracks in the Kingdom

The air is viscous with humidity when we catch the bus to the Magic Kingdom on Saturday morning. By the time we reach the monorail port we are both dripping wet. The overabundance of green plants, bugs, and slithery things that normally accompanies such a jungle-like atmosphere has been removed, presumably to bring this landscape into line with its all-but-obliterated dual in the LA desert.

Upon arriving at Main Street we know exactly where we are by virtue of our previous visit to Disneyland in California. Streetwise Disneyworlders both, the first thing we do is make reservations for dinner in Cinderella's Castle. While we watch a troupe of effusive young actors battle dripping makeup and limp crinolines in a musical revue, I ask Brooke which ride she would like to go to first, and she chooses the Submarine because Daddy had taken her there once and it brings back fond memories. We hike to the upper left corner of the map where a courteous sign informs us that the wait in line will be 45 minutes, and since this is our first line of the day, Brooke feels that this is an acceptable interval.

Several surprising things happen in this line-things that would not have



happened 25 or 10 or even 5 years ago, at least not with the same flagrancy and frequency—things that reveal some cracks in the Kingdom. For example, the idea of an entire family actually standing in line behind the people who are in front of them—a rule that was followed without question by nearly everyone a decade ago—is now observed only by a slim majority of sluggish suburban types. Three different extended families—two groups of African-Americans dressed in matching t-shirts proclaiming family reunions and an enthusiastic bunch of Italian-Americans from New York—put proxies in the line, one or two patient elders. As the proxy reaches the entrance to the ride, suddenly fifteen or twenty relatives of all ages come bursting through the line at open throttle, those who can leaping over obstacles, others lifting small children and passing them across the serpentine undulations of ropes and people, and all of them piling into the next submarine in a noisy chaotic parade of utterly insular celebration.

A few ladies in crumpled linen shorts grumble. Some, like me, give their kids a halfhearted lecture on manners and the necessity of standing in lines, which dribbles off into a reverie of what it would actually be like to have a family like that—so numerous, so unrestrained, so alive. I grip Brooke's hot, clammy hand a little harder, searching in vain for a pulse that might indicate the possibility of such a family. The uniformed teenagers hired by the Kingdom to manage the line do not notice these incidents. They cannot notice them; they have no category to put them in and no way to prevent or avert them without violating the Prime Directive of Disneyland: Pleasantness.

Yet another assault to the Line Ordinance comes from a band of well-dressed white teens, all looking superficially serious and vaguely athletic in coordinated shorts outfits and expensive shoes. Brooke and I are within a sub's length of the end of the line when this crew parades gravely through the handicapped entrance pushing one of their fallen friends in a rented wheelchair. He has a shoe on one foot and only a sock on the other and wears a long-suffering look. Twelve of his closest friends have accompanied him and line up with their hands behind their backs in a paramilitary at-ease position facing the sweltering multitude in the line. There is a tense moment while the uniformed teen line managers absorb the magnitude of this effrontery, but for this breach, too, they seem to find no course of action but feigned normalcy. You don't just ask someone in a wheelchair to prove that they are crippled. The temporarily handicapped youth and his bodyguards commandeer the next sub.

When we finally get on a submarine, Brooke is critical. "It was better at Disneyland," she grumbles, careful to make the distinction between the LA park and Florida's Magic Kingdom. "We couldn't be 20,000 leagues under the sea—I can see the top of the water." "Yes, you're right—it's pretend," I reply seriously. "You were younger at Disneyland. I think the idea is that we're supposed to make believe." She harrumphs and crosses her arms, but her eyes draw her involuntarily closer to the porthole as we pass the mermaids—"I'm looking for trick wires," she says—and by the time the tentacles show up she is genuinely startled. At the end of the ride cynicism returns—"the pilot was all the way out of the water, see? No way that was 20,000 leagues."

Seeing the day in jeopardy and thinking fast, I suggest that we shop. She drags me to the gift shop she has already cased out in Cinderella's castle. Out of the fifty bucks I've given her to spend on the three-day trip, she immediately chooses a thirty-dollar plaster castle with a crystal mounted on one of the turrets. "That's a lot of your money gone," I say. This is a bad move; she feels criticized and looks for a way to strike back. "I'll take this to Daddy's house," she retorts, giving me a hard stare. "I'd like you to keep it at my house," I say, "so I can remember this swell trip too." "Maybe I'll take it back and

forth," she concedes.

So the day continues. After a fifteen-dollar hot-dog lunch, we ride the carousel-she runs on ahead and I breathlessly catch the horse next to her, fumbling with my camera to get a shot of her smiling. She catches me in the act and her face twitches as she considers the power of a frown, then graciously grants me a photogenic grin. As the carousel turns distant thunder begins and cheerful teenage vendors appear with five-dollar Mickey Mouse rain parkas. When we dismount Brooke catches a few bars of "It's a Small World After All" on the wind and we dodge fat warm raindrops to enter the 45-minute line to the ride I've been dreading most, because I know it will set up a music virus in my brain that will last for weeks.



There are punks in the line for "It's a Small World." This baffles me - this, the most sugary and least high-tech ride in the park. Why are they here? They jostle the family-values crowd and make loud cynical remarks, sit on the ropes, and act bored when they run out of wisecracks. Meanwhile a weary overweight mother carrying a baby startles me as she shouts at the toddler who is peeking through the crowd to see the boats up ahead. She grabs his hand and yanks him back to her side. "Stay with me, I said," she snarls, and brandishes a green willow switch. I have not seen a switch like this since I was a kid in Indiana. The woman closes her eyes and the toddler stands very still.

Water from the cloudburst is pouring through the line as we get into a boat. Brooke asks for a penny to throw into the water - I don't have one so I give her a quarter. "Bigger wish," I say. The ride is just as I remember it - identical animated dolls with chubby kid faces, in different colors and native costumes. They are all singing that song. Sometimes I think I hear voices singing in different languages. The boat moves through large chambers that represent the continents. Somehow Disney has miraculously avoided offending any particular culture by translating each into equally innocuous sixties kitsch. There is a warm breeze in our faces as we move. My brain begins to whisper, "Full leisurely we glide..." Brooke is entranced. People become quiet as the line of boats winds slowly through the singing dolls. As we arrive again at the dock, I look at the faces in our boat. Some people are smiling; all are subdued. There are tears on my face, and I see that one of the punks has been crying, too.

We determine that the line will always be too long at Space Mountain and Splash Mountain, and we proceed to other rides-Peter Pan, Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, the Haunted House. Brooke is starting to get into the spirit of things. As we pass the graveyard near the entrance to the Haunted House she asks, "Mommy, are there really dead people buried there?" We make eye contact. "Oh, yes," I reply gravely. "Good," she says, and takes my hand.

After another thunderstorm and a brief shopping frenzy in Adventureland, we are ready for dinner at Cinderella's Castle. Cinderella herself is there, all dolled up in her ball gown and graciously signing autographs. The waiter calls Brooke "milady" and gives her a paper crown. We are seated next to stained glass windows in the tower of the castle from which we have an admirable view of the pea-green sky and sheets of rain sweeping across the carousel and courtyard. Yellow-parka-ed people scurry about below like ants whose anthill has just been kicked over. The waiter brings rolls with butter molded into a perfect three-dimensional figure of Mickey Mouse. Brooke gets really excited

and grabs her knife. "I think I will cut off his ears first," she exclaims, then adds reasonably, "since that's the right amount of butter for a roll." She asks, "Will they fix him if I don't eat him all?" We imagine a hospital for little maimed butter Mickeys. I search in vain for a winelist.

As we emerge from dinner it is clear that the rain has settled in for the night. I convince Brooke that the Electric Light Parade will be cancelled; we have already learned that Tinkerbell is indisposed and will not make her traditional flight from the tower to the courtyard. My bones are aching. We sash our way back down Main Street to the monorail station, past anxious parents and hopeful kids huddling under their regulation parkas on the curbs, waiting in the rain for the parade that won't happen. When we finally get back to the room we order chocolate sundaes from room service. Brooke calls her daddy and we both have a good cry. The rain stops at ten and I hope she doesn't hear the distant sound of the fireworks we are missing. She falls asleep in a puddle of chocolate. Finally, I order a glass of wine.



EPCOT: Yesterday's Tomorrow

The next day, we arrive at EPCOT2 [\(2\)](#) after a room-service breakfast of various sugar-based substances - I have given up on healthy food for the duration - and Brooke is consumed with curiosity about the big white geodesic dome that stands at the entrance to the park. The line is short - in fact, the place seems almost deserted. The dome houses what I judge to be the very best ride in Disney World, AT&T's "History of Communication." Walter Cronkite's narration transports me instantly to the sixties and my pulse rate rises like the night I watched the moon landing on TV. Jetson-like cars take small groups through the dome, past exhibits with Disney's finest animatronics enacting great moments in communication from Lascaux to modern times - a scene from Greek theatre, a Roman messenger, Gutenberg's printing press, an early American telegrapher, a twenties-style telephone operator. Things start to veer off from reality as we pass the automated office and are seriously off course as we reach an array of computer terminals with images from outer space. The ride attempts a climax as we rise and swirl weightlessly through a starry sky. Cronkite's thrilling, fatherly voice trembles with excitement and hope as he describes a future when man finally travels to the stars.

As we reenter the daylight I see that Brooke is bored. Perhaps the narration has been over her head. But it strikes me that there is nothing in our culture now to replace the swelling hope of those times, the heyday of the space program, the age of which this ride is an artifact, a future that Brooke never knew. Those grand stirrings have been narrated into complacency by cultural myth; we no longer need

the space program for excitement, we have Star Trek for that - and there are more important things to spend our money on. As I look up at the dome in the sunlight I feel that the finest thing a president could do to rekindle hope in America's youth would be to revitalize the space program. I imagine how it would be to taste that hope again, and wonder if anything else could ever come close.

Seeking refuge from the bright heat (now nearly a hundred degrees), we settle in a trendy chrome espresso joint on the periphery of the fountain to survey the scene and make a plan. We are the only customers. We look out over the fountains and across the lake at the center of the park; all of the national pavilions encircle the lake, and there are elaborate fireworks launched from floating platforms at night. Brooke reads over the schedule of events. "Mom!" she says. "You are really not going to like this." There is an evil gleam in her eye. "What?" She waits a beat for dramatic effect. "Barbie," she intones. "Oh my God," I reply, "do you think I can have my picture taken with her?" She gasps; I score. "MOM!"

We have twenty minutes to wait at the site where Barbie signs autographs after her live stage show at the far side of the lake. Heat rises from the all-but-deserted plaza, but suddenly we see a sizable whorl of people forming near a hot pink sign: "Barbie's Autograph. Please form one line. One photo per family." We wait patiently with little girls from everywhere and their Moms in the shade of a few palm trees. We are instantly bonded, an ad hoc community waiting for Barbie. After several minutes, a muscle-bound young man in a hot pink polo shirt materializes and reiterates the rules. "Do you know Barbie?" I ask him. "I know Ken," he replies, eyes front like a Marine.

Fifteen minutes have passed when our heat-oppressed brains are roused by a surreal vision. A hot pink limousine emerges noiselessly through curtains of heat-distorted air. As it draws close we see that it is an eighteen-wheel limousine; it is the biggest limousine I have ever seen; it is an Andy Warhol limousine. Ken's friend's eyes narrow and he assumes a rigid pose. The limo stops and Barbie steps out. She is wearing a hot pink halter top and has very big blonde hair. Skipper bubbles out behind her, chewing gum. Everyone lines up. Barbie and Skipper saunter over into the shade, smiling. Ken's friend announces the rules again. Then he ceremonially draws back the hot pink velvet cord that separates Barbie from the rest of us.



Brooke and I are third in line for pictures; since we are only allowed one shot I ask a mom from Oklahoma to photograph us with my camera. Barbie smells like Chantilly. I slip my arm companionably around her waist and she shoots me a look meant to kill. I scowl and the Oklahoma lady refuses to take the photo. "Not till you smile," she chirps. I grimace, she snaps, and Ken's buddy ushers us over to the limo for a look. There are photos of all of Barbie's friends on her ornate dresser, along with a French Provincial telephone and several gilded hand mirrors, brushes, and combs. The seats are upholstered in hot pink velvet. Barbie has a TV, a stereo, and a VCR in her limo, as well as a cut-glass pitcher of pink lemonade with matching glasses. Peeking out from under the third seat is a pack of Marlboro Lights. I snicker and hustle Brooke off to the gift shop to get out of the heat. It is truly weird, I muse, that Barbie is the main attraction at EPCOT. She is definitely not Walt's type.

We wander off to the Canada pavilion where there is a CircleVision movie called "Oh, Canada!" Brooke is feeling nostalgic for Banff (where we lived all last summer) and she's excited about the prospect of seeing a movie about place where she's been. The theatre building is an enormous faux log lodge with lots of atmospheric stuff like antlers and old pottery. The movie, made in the early 80s, is narrated by a woman who was probably pretending to be Quebecois before it was problematic. She takes us from coast to coast, stopping at famous cities and tourist attractions like Lake Louise, with smatterings of history and geography woven into what is otherwise a long commercial for tourism.

All of the faces in the movie are white. At the end Brooke and I look sideways at each other and enter into a silent conspiracy. "Well, sweetheart," I begin loudly, "I noticed that there were some people missing in the movie, didn't you?" Brooke looks around to see that we're getting some attention. "Yes, Mommy," she replies in her best schoolgirl voice. "There were no Japanese people, and I didn't see a single Indian." A few more people turn and look at us, blinking; we can see that we've made some of them notice the oversight.

As we leave the theatre building Brooke scolds me sotto voce. "Mom, why do you always have to get upset about that stuff?" "Because your great grandpa was an Indian." "I know we're part Indian," she says, "but I'm half Scandinavian." I sigh, resolved not to argue. "Yes, that's why you usually have cold feet." She nods and seems satisfied that her roots have been fully examined.



We spend the hot afternoon strolling around the lake and sampling-Germany, Japan, Italy. At the Chinese pavilion, we sit on the sizzling cement to watch the Red Panda acrobats. We are close enough to see where their costumes are mended, and also to marvel at their unflinching nerve and unwavering smiles. A girl on a very tall unicycle catches bowls on her toe then kicks them up to land in a stack on her head. Another girl twists and curls her body through a series of impossible positions, moving like a slow, graceful snake. A young man juggles blocks, batons, china. But a fourth man, older than the rest of the troupe and wearing a grim expression, does nothing at all except stand formally in his costume at the back of the stage. He takes a bow with the rest of the troupe. This is Brooke's favorite attraction, and the spiciest part of it is speculating about the sad, mysterious man. "Maybe they are his slaves," she speculates. "Maybe he's a spy. Maybe he used to be an acrobat but has a terrible disease now but they let him be here anyway because otherwise it would break his heart."

For dinner we visit the Coral Reef Restaurant, scoring a table for two with an excellent view of an enormous aquarium through the glass wall. We can dimly see visitors to the "Living Seas" exhibit at the other side of the expanse of water. The waitresses' clothing, tablecloths, napkins, china, and crystal are all various shades of sea green. With the menu Brooke gets a program for the aquarium, showing the silhouette of each kind of fish with its name printed underneath. You can also order many of these types of fish to eat. Remembering Butter Mickey, I feel that there may be a streak of totemism running through the collective Disney unconscious-or at least a kind of entertainment-oriented eating disorder. As we dine we watch a scuba diver in the tank who appears to be feeding butter lettuce to the fish. He strokes the manta rays as they slide under his hands like affectionate cats.

After an excellent meal we walk about the aquarium. Brooke has always loved to watch fish. She admires the peaceful way they glide about; I can feel the calming effect that the underwater world has on both of us. But upon returning to the plaza at dusk, Brooke declares that she has HAD ENOUGH OF EPCOT and demands that we go back to the Magic Kingdom-where the action is-to watch the

parade and fireworks. I tell her that the fireworks on the lake at EPCOT are world famous and sure to be better than those over Cinderella's Castle, but she will not be persuaded. She wants to be with fellow kids. Back on the monorail, I wonder about EPCOT-this artifact of yesterday's tomorrow, more poignantly off the mark than the Jetsons or Tomorrowland, a Woodrow Wilson fairy tale of benign nationalism and Higher Values, where memories of fantasies of cultures of the world glide like fish around the lake-where adults stroll about, nostalgic and fragile, imbued with a sense of the world in which today's children cannot engage.

On our third and last day we go directly to the Magic Kingdom. Brooke has an agenda-to repeat rides she has enjoyed, and to leverage her remaining seven dollars into several more souvenirs by asking for matching funds. In late afternoon, after the obligatory thundershower and before our encore dinner at Cinderella's Castle, Brooke wants to visit "It's a Small World" one last time. As we stand in the line, I wonder why I am not dreading it. Perhaps the raging emotions of the last three days have exhausted my potential for anxiety. I am asking myself why this silly, annoying ride makes me cry. The ride is familiar now, and I study visual details as the continents slip by. I wonder again why the clown in the balloon has a sign that says "help," I notice the bird that only comes halfway out of its egg in the Rainforest, I enjoy the volcanic eruptions made of blowing scarves.

In the last chamber of the ride, it hits me. Everything here is more or less white. Dolls from all the different countries are here, still in national dress, but their costumes too are white. They are all mixed up, all dancing and singing together. I ask Brooke, "Do you think this is supposed to be heaven?" Without turning toward me she shrugs her narrow shoulders. She is gripping the side of the boat, looking at the dolls with shining eyes, singing along in a whisper.

Meanwhile, Back in the Midwest

Two weeks later we find ourselves in Indianapolis beginning a visit to the Midwest in August, a folly that can only be explained by the fact that relatives reside hereabouts. Brooke and I are joined by my 9-year-old daughter Hilary, my boyfriend Rob, and his 7-year-old daughter Suzanne. This is something of an obligatory journey of mutual family sniffing, as well as a social experiment in long trips with little girls and the efficacy of adjoining rooms in motels. The Grand Objective and culmination of this tour, however, is to visit the world's largest state fair-the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines.

Indiana is a funny place-"funny-peculiar," not "funny-ha-ha." The local news carries the same stories for two days in a row about a head-on car accident in which an extended family met their deaths and a fire that claimed the lives of several small children while their mother was in a bar (peace in the Middle East and other tidbits of world news are discussed, if at all, after sports and weather). Rush Limbaugh harangues us through my mother's radio. After a three-day visit that exhausts my mother and her husband, the children - who have been assiduously deprived of these flavors of mass media in California - are beginning to exhibit an unhealthy interest in the television. We snatch them up and

plant them in the back seat of a rented Lincoln Town Car before their hungry little minds disappear beneath the waves of fire, blood, and tornado warnings and take off on a one-day gonzo road-trip from Indianapolis to Des Moines. Strip malls and suburbs have overwritten the landscape I grew up in like colonies of toxic bacteria in a petri dish. As we clear the edge of the sprawl, the baroque green abundance of the Midwestern countryside causes me to make happy little noises in my throat.

The road trip passes without major ugly incident, due in large part to Rob's superb ability to engage the children in a game called "Would You Rather." Rob has evidently played this game for years; I encountered it as a gross-out technique in college⁽³⁾ and have noticed the tendency to create horrific alternatives in both of my kids as they graduated from toddlerhood⁽⁴⁾. Rob's questions typically combine kid-level humor with a good dollop of sensory imagination⁽⁵⁾. But the genius of his approach lies in his style - he asks these questions in the persona of an intensely curious psychological theorist who feels that he is on the verge of a major breakthrough in understanding the human mind, and he follows up the children's answers with a penetrating, "Why?" They delight in explaining their choices to him as he nods gravely and occasionally exclaims, "Aaah! I see!"

About halfway across Illinois the children grow restless and it begins to rain. We stop for gas at a place that calls itself ambiguously, "the World's Biggest Truck Stop in Illinois." This warehouse of Road Culture offers everything from Harley t-shirts to enormous chrome exhaust pipes to lenticular mud flaps with the silhouettes of reclining naked women on them, their gravity-defying breasts pointing skyward. The children are both intrigued and grossed out by a display of dash-mountable beer can holders, the handles of which are shaped like scantily clad, wide-eyed blonde women held up by very large breasts draped over the frame of the device. The merchandise in this establishment achieves the impossible: the girls find absolutely nothing that they want to buy.

Golden late afternoon sunlight slants out from beneath flat-bottomed purple cumulonimbus clouds in visible rays. My best friend in Indiana used to call this kind of display an "advertisement for God." Rob notes that it is starting to look like Iowa - miles and miles of corn-forested swells, breathing with the wind. The country is somehow bigger now, and houses, too, are bigger, more gracious, and farther apart. I feel as though I am traveling back in time, riding through a country made big by my smallness, seeing the towns and cities of my childhood, without malls or convenience stores or tract houses or sodium-vapor-poisoned night skies. In the outskirts of Des Moines I see incandescent streetlights coming on at dusk. A few lightning bugs are signaling in the front yard when we pull into Rob's parents' driveway. Everyone shows up - parents, brothers, brothers' wives and children, a new baby, two dogs, three little blonde girls, and us. We begin our acquaintances, share food, then retire for the night to adjoining rooms on the eleventh and top floor of the Fort Des Moines hotel-once the tallest building in town - where the bellman is so old I offer to help him with the suitcases. We tuck the kids in between thick white sheets.



Up bright and early in the morning, everyone gathers at the house to make a caravan to the fair. Rob's mother Barbara serves us all a breakfast that falls just tastefully short of enormous. We climb into two cars and a pick-up, Rob's "sensible" brother in the lead. After much stopping and starting and waiting in traffic, we finally find ourselves more or less adjacent parking places in the once and future mud of the Iowa State Fairgrounds. The children,

who are after all California girls and having been exposed only to Disneyland and Great America, cannot parse the scene. No well-designed, top-down theme park with coherent messages and an integrated style, the Iowa State Fair's only consistent features are neon, noise, and dirt. The girls are further frustrated by a routine that the natives take for granted: we march through the midway without stopping to find the animals.

Our first destination is a petting zoo where the children ride ponies and then make friends with a large and diverse group of goats. The smallest kids (as in young goats) are slipping in and out of the fence at will to be petted and fed by a hundred filthy little hands, the initial coating of cotton-candy residue now enhanced by goat slobber and bits of straw. An older goat chews urgently on the hem of Hilary's skirt. Brooke is about to split a gut in frustration - "why are we doing this?" - when she spies vending machines across the way with live animals inside. The game cabinets are very old, with such labels as "Play Tic-Tac-Toe with a Chicken!" and "Watch the Duck Play a Ukulele!" She begs me for quarters; this is the most interactive entertainment she has seen in a long time.



After a suitable interval of rising suspense (including a downright cruel interlude of viewing unusually large vegetables), we begin the trek back to the midway. As we pass the public restrooms I snap and order the children to go inside and wash their hands; they reemerge with dirt lines at the wrists and demand corn dogs and lemonade. We wolf down our food as the kids survey the scene through slitted eyes, calculating how many rides they can go on for the number of tickets we've given them, measuring each ride for its throw-up factor and rejecting those on which a number of little kids appear. After warm-ups on the bumper cars, Hilary and Suzanne choose what is without question the most seriously barfogenic ride at the fair - something called the Kamikaze - two sythe-shaped structures that violently swing their occupants upside-down. Brooke puddles up because she is too short ("You must be 48 inches tall and prove it!") and cries until I offer to buy her a whistle.

The kids move on to one of many stand-up spin-around rides that now seem to be run by young Black dee-jays who perform vocal improvisations over loud rap music, exhorting the riders to raise their hands or shout in a kind of call-and-response rhythm. This is an element of carnival culture that has changed since I was a kid; in those days men of indeterminate ethnicity operated the rides with minimal interaction with their patrons. You could imagine them sitting around together at night - the "carnies" seemed to be a pretty homogeneous lot. These young rappers are new squares in the quilt. I wonder how well everyone gets along at night, whether they drink together and tell stories, and whether I am remembering something real or just snatches of old Ray Bradbury stories. My grandma used to tell me that the gypsies would steal me if I strayed too far from the family, and I don't suppose that was true either, but it was a delicious sort of fright.

Rob and I leave the girls with an uncle and take a ride on the double Ferris wheel. Having inherited my mother's propensity for motion sickness, this is the most daring ride I am able to contemplate.



The first time we are at the top of the top wheel I start screaming; Rob looks horrified. The second time we are at the top of the top he kisses me, presumably to avoid embarrassment. Pastel neon blurs against the pastel sky and I am floating; it is the Midwest, it is the State Fair, I have just been kissed on the Ferris wheel, and I am surely not a middle-aged lady.

Several hours and a few hundred dollars later we haul semi-comatose children back to the hotel for a good scrubbing. Later in the evening we reconvene at Barbara's house for a meal that includes sweet corn, pasta with fresh herbs from her garden, and deep red tomatoes that are just about as good as sex. Barbara digs out a black and white photo of Rob and his brothers walking down the boulevard at the State Fair as kids. Each one is carrying cotton candy on a stick. I note what a nice picture it is, how well it seems to capture the day. Barbara remarks that the boys' father made them walk down the boulevard three times before he got the picture he wanted. This sets me to musing on all the video and photographs we have been taking on our summer vacation. If we are not careful, we reduce life with kids to a series of photo opportunities. Certainly, Disney's Empire is optimized for this worldview. We are more than our artifacts, I think, and if we are living life well our photographs are puzzling evidence of experiences that are only legible as character and desire.

On our last day in Iowa, Rob's little brother Bill takes us all to a friend's place outside of town where there is a pond - an expanse of deep green water ringed by cattails and graceful old trees, with an old wooden dock that wiggles and creaks when you walk on it, and an old rowboat pulled up among the weeds. This is the archetypal Pond and we are having, it seems, the archetypal Midwestern Day. Hilary complains that there is nothing to do and wanders off to poke things with a stick. The grownups sit on coolers or fiddle with fishing equipment; Uncle Jack takes the girls (all except Hilary) swimming in borrowed life jackets. One of the dogs goes for a swim and produces squeals of dismay when she shakes her coat. Bill lets each child catch a fish-slick yellow-green bluegills about as long as your hand flopping and gaping on the dock just long enough for a kid to look at it, touch it, wonder at it, and throw it back. Rob and I eat little cherry tomatoes picked warm off the vine and drink cold beer. Jack's wife produces pineapple cookies made after his grandmother's recipe; everyone nibbles them reverently while agreeing that they are surely too sweet. Rob piles all five little girls (including Jack's two) into the rowboat and paddles them noisily around the pond.

When the children have returned to fishing I ask Rob to give me a ride in the boat. I rediscover that I cannot row; the physics of it defeat me and I give up as the boat turns in slow circles. Rob rows close to the water's edge, and I am reminded of my turtle-hunting adventures as a child - I caught and sold dozens of them to the local drugstore until it dawned on me what their fate was likely to be. Sometimes I would find them with fragments of elaborate paint jobs spread apart like puzzle pieces on the expanded segments of their shells. We are too noisy to catch a turtle today; they hear us coming. The sun is very bright; Rob and I drift for a while in and out of shadows along the bank. The children begin waving at us from the dock. "Rob, come back!" Little voices drift across the water. For a moment time has stopped; now time is past. "We need another ride, Rob!" "Mommy, there's nothing to dooooooo!"

The next morning we say our farewells over another sumptuous breakfast. Barbara and I have our heads together over old photographs until the last possible moment. Bill's baby smiles like a Buddha as the girls coo over him and kiss him goodbye. The trip to the airport is a blur; somehow the luggage is checked and we find our way onto the plane, children squabbling about seating arrangements and debating what will be served for lunch. The plane rises, weightless, through white Midwestern clouds into timeless blue. We are going home, I realize, someplace vaguely to the west. I sleep, and dream myself a turtle, slipping noiselessly from sunlight into dark green water.



Notes

(1) Dolphins often engage in sexual play when they are in contact with humans. In the early 1980s a young computer scientist who now works as a high-level executive with a Japanese videogame company went on a pilgrimage to swim with Lilly's dolphins. Shortly after he entered the pool one of them began masturbating on his leg. The man informed Lilly of the situation and asked if he could leave the pool. Lilly advised against it. "Best wait it out," he counseled, "or things could turn ugly." This may explain something.

(2) When I met Ray Bradbury in the early eighties, he told me something of the plans he and Walt cooked up for EPCOT before the great man died. It was going to be a real residential community, an "experimental prototype community of tomorrow," with non-polluting moving sidewalks and monorails and affordable housing and community activities and uniformed bands playing in little gazebos on the green like the last scene of "Yellow Submarine." "Then the real estate people got a hold of it," Bradbury mourned.

(3) For example, "Would you rather slide down the edge a razor blade into a pool of alcohol, or suck all the snot out of a dog's nose until his head caves in?"

(4) For example, "What if there was an earthquake and you were left all by yourself and you had to decide whether to starve to death or eat the cat?"

(5) For example, "Which would you rather do, put on a hat full of chocolate syrup, or put on a pair of shoes with raw eggs tucked in the toes?"