

ISSN: 1472-586X (Print) 1472-5878 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rvst20>

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To cite this article: Chaim Noy (2017) 'Look at me! Oh Lord have mercy!': images of roller-coaster riders and the work of self-recognition, *Visual Studies*, 32:1, 47-59, DOI: [10.1080/1472586X.2016.1243018](https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2016.1243018)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2016.1243018>



Published online: 03 Jan 2017.



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‘Look at me! Oh Lord have mercy!’: images of roller-coaster riders and the work of self-recognition

CHAIM NOY 

The omnipresence of screens in contemporary life presents an unprecedented variety of ways of displaying as well as ways of seeing, reacting to and consuming images. This paper focuses on commercial and mediated leisure spaces in the shape of theme parks and on on-site procedures of production and display of images of roller-coaster riders. Contemporary roller-coaster machines combine speed with high-resolution photography, to supply an enmeshed, mobile-cum-visual product, and the study asks how the images are displayed – by the corporations who run the theme parks and how they are received – by the consumers. First, the material settings in which images of roller-coaster riders are produced and displayed are explored, and then the ‘work’ that viewers engage in when they see themselves is addressed ethnographically in detail: What discursive actions and reactions are publicly performed when consumers face their images? I conceptualise the activities of viewing, and specifically of viewing images of oneself, as ‘work’, a concept which I borrow from Erving Goffman (as in ‘face-work’) and, more recently, from Mark Andrejevic (‘the work of watching’). By using qualitative and ethnographic methods, the study supplies up-close observations and analyses of the media spaces and logic in contemporary amusement parks, and the ‘work’ that viewers undertake when confronted with their images. This study contributes to our understanding of the proliferation of images of oneself in leisure and tourism, of the mediatization of consumer publics, and of consumers’ activities of viewing their images and reacting to them when the latter are displayed commercially on public screens.

INTRODUCTION

The omnipresence of screens in contemporary life presents an unprecedented variety of ways of displaying as well as ways of seeing, reacting to and consuming images. Mobile or immobile, intimate or expansive, hot or cold (McLuhan 1964), presenting corporate- or user-generated contents, it is hard to argue with Casetti’s (2013, 22) observation, that ‘media has become media-

screen’. My concern with the vast category of visual technologies of display gathered under the umbrella term ‘media-screen’ is bounded in consumer spaces, focusing on the proliferation of *images of oneself* in the spheres of leisure and tourism, and on consumers’ activities of seeing and reacting to their images when displayed commercially on public screens.

The work brings into conversation multidisciplinary approaches and bodies of knowledge, including a wave of recent studies that examine the role screens play in the construction of public spaces and the related notions of subjectivity and publicness (Berry, So-Yöng, and Spigel 2010; Berry, Harbord, and Moore 2013; Dijck 2007; Gitlin 2001, 4). These studies focus on visual technologies and mediatization processes, arguing that the ‘presence of media has transformed our understanding of both “space” and “publicness”’ (Eckardt et al. 2008, 5). Screens are ‘public entities’ (Berry, Harbord, and Moore 2013, 6), which are agents in the process of the mediatization of both publics and selves, and as such their materiality and technology come to the fore (Krajina 2013). These studies also suggest that visual media are instrumental in the dual constitution of publics: publics are reconstructed or reassembled by being both visually displayed (framed as spectacles) and by being audiences or viewers of that display (framed as spectators).

The proliferation of media-screen technology in leisure and tourism spaces serves as my point of departure, because it elicits a rich array of on-site, visual activity on behalf of consumers. The screens and the images I address are presented in amusement parks in the United States and specifically at roller-coaster rides, where they allow studying the semiotic contexts and visual settings of site-specific media *and* the viewing practices performed by riders when they view their images. Both bodies of research on media-screens and on the visual turn in tourism (more on this below) address the techno-material affordances that visual technologies allow, to which I add an emphasis on how viewing activities are actually pursued. The latter

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point has been somewhat neglected, due to the methodological challenges involved in observing and evaluating actual (on-site) viewing activities.

I conceptualise public viewing activities as ‘work’ that audiences engage in. I borrow the term ‘work’ from sociologist and interactionist Erving Goffman, who, from his early writings in the 1950s (collected in Goffman 1967), has argued that actions actors take during the course of social interaction are best described as labour or work (as in his phrase, ‘face-work’). More recently, and building on political economy theory, Andrejevic (2012, 2004) employs the term to address ‘the work of watching’ (oneself or others), noting that for some time now, communication studies has ‘needed to take seriously the notion that audiences were working when they were watching television’ (Andrejevic 2012, 231). Andrejevic’s studies examine reality TV and surveillance, and his notion of ‘work’ specifically addresses consumers’ visual activities. Between Goffman and Andrejevic, a conceptual space is opened, inviting up-close study of an array of consumers’ visual activities or visual work. This inquiry leads to broader questions concerning mediatisation of leisure, which I will illuminate through up-close, qualitative inquiry of *site-specific media* (Couldry and McCarthy 2004; McCarthy 2001).

IMAGES OF ONESELF IN LEISURE, TOURISM AND AMUSEMENT PARKS

The spheres of leisure and tourism have been historically permeated and shaped by visual technologies and media, employed by highly lucrative corporations as well as by consumers (Lübbren and Crouch 2003). Studies in the field of tourism and leisure, which comprise the ‘visual turn’, typically examine photos and images rather than the practices involved in their production, circulation and consumption (Feighery 2009). Where the latter is explored, the focus is often on tourists’ picture-taking practices of attractive/exotic people and places, with scarce research on how the industry portrays its consumers and sells that latter their images. Feighery (2009, citing Tagg 1988, 246) critically notes that, in tourism, photography is ‘a practice [that] depends on institutions and agents which define it and set it to work ... across a field of institutional spaces’ (166). This turn, from tourists’ images of the exotic-Other to industry-generated images of the consumers themselves embodies the move from the modern, authenticity-seeking tourist to the postmodern, self-indulgent *post-tourist* (Ritzer and Liska 1997). This turn corresponds with (though is not identical to) the current proliferation of the visual genre of the *selfie*. In touristic contexts, images of the tourist themselves were associated with particular places

and attractions, confirming the cultural capital entailed in positioning the tourists at the site of familiar, sought-after attractions. Unlike selfies, however, the images that are the focus of my study are commercially produced (rather than by the consumer), often without the consumer’s permission or even knowledge.

Although popularly coded as recreational and apolitical, amusement parks are powerful mechanisms of a consumer economy, nested within the highly visual economy of tourism. Furthermore, amusement parks have their own rich history of visual technologies and activities, leading back to World Fair Exhibitions (the predecessor to amusement parks), on the one hand, and to early cinema, on the other, as spaces that established the conventions of viewing in the twentieth century. In the World Fair, Gunning (1994) argues, ‘the ability to purchase goods was replaced by their purely optical consumption, [which] imaged the commodity as spectacle ... As such it served as one of the great training grounds and laboratories for a new commodity-based visual culture. It raised the act of spectating to a civic duty and a technological art’ (423). Historians’ view of the transformative visual significance of World Fair Exhibitions sheds light on contemporary amusement parks as well, seen as the ‘fairgrounds of the post-modern age’ (Strehovec 1997, 206). Research on amusement parks (Strehovec 1997; Clavé 2007; King and O’boyle 2011) is mostly inspired by Baudrillard’s (1994) well-known thesis, according to which the ‘Disney’ entertainment mode-and-model captures the zeitgeist and powerfully promotes hyperreal and simulated experience. Current research typically applies theories from the field of cultural studies to examine a park’s history, design, and profound visual and cultural effects. Yet again, little is done in terms of studying actual visual displays at amusement parks, and the work of viewing that their audiences perform.

A VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF ROLLER COASTERS

With the aim of studying the work that riders engage in when viewing their images *and* the material settings in which images of roller-coaster riders are presented, I take a qualitative and ethnographic approach. Ethnography is not a single method of inquiry, but ‘a cluster of disciplinary practices’ (Clifford 1997, 8), an array of observational, interactional and participatory techniques. While traditional ethnographies – media ethnographies included – rest on extended periods of study and on a rhetoric of immersion (going native), studying tourists and amusement-park audiences demands more micro-ethnographic modes of observation.

Opportunistic ethnography (Bird 2003, 5) and passing ethnography (Couldry 2003) are good examples of site-specific observations, where there is no 'community' to be immersed in, where the 'native' is more transient than the ethnographer and where observations yield 'knowledge under particular conditions' (Couldry 2003, 44).

Ethnographic observations are effective for the study of site-specific media, because ethnography is highly contextual and because it is a practice-oriented approach. Ethnography is praxiological because it is ideally suited for portraying the richness of human activity as it transpires within specific material settings. In this study, I complement media ethnography with insights from Ethnography of Communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1964), which emphasises the *discursive dimensions* of interactions with and about images (Noy 2008a, 2008b, forthcoming). I marry, in this way, the visual studies and discourse analysis.

This study is part of a larger research project that examines production, circulation and reception of images of tourists and visitors in and to recreational spaces and attractions. The observations take place in a number of large theme parks and cruise ship lines in the United States (mainly in Florida, see Noy 2014). The observations for this article are from an analysis of Busch Gardens (BG) amusement park in Tampa, Florida. BG is a large park, owned and operated by SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, which owns and runs a number of large parks in Orlando, San Diego, and other North American locations. BG hosts 4–4.5 million visitors annually (Rubin 2014, 29), most of whom are white and English-speaking. The park offers a rich semiotic environment that combines a large zoo (the park opened in 1959 as a zoo), with seven roller coasters. The zoo and coasters are thematically linked by the theme 'exotic Africa' (the park's former names were BG Africa and BG: The Dark Continent), and the rides carry names such as Cheetah Hunt, Kumba and SheiKra, animating what Fjellman (1992, 225) called 'cute colonial racism'. The park also includes souvenir shops and dining facilities with 'African' sounding names.

I made a dozen, 1-day visits to BG during 2013–2014, observing the settings in which the images of roller-coaster riders are displayed and where riders perform their reactions to these images. In these locations, riders can see their images on public screens immediately when they disembark from the roller-coaster rides. I complemented the observations with interactions with the park's personnel and visitors. I presented myself as a scholar studying imagery in tourism and recreation, and my identity was marked by a large badge with my name and

academic affiliation, and by the notebook I carried. In all interactions, I made sure to provide my academic business card, so my professional identity would be clear and contact information provided. I recorded the observations in field notes, arriving at an up-close description of visitors' situated reactions vis-à-vis the screens.

Orientalism and the Visual Hunt after the *Acinonyx Jubatus*

Roller coasters supply a good illustration of the heightened technification of leisure activities, or how leisure and entertainment are 'increasingly being coded and arranged by machines' (Strehovec 1997, 200). The reason for this is that above the vertigo-centred, stimulated entertainment (Strehovec 1997), coasters also offer a visual product. I am referring here to the new wave of coasters, which begun populating parks in the 1980s, which are *hybrid machines* that enmesh *visual and mobile technologies*. Unlike earlier coasters, where the pictures were produced by cameras that were not integral to the machine's design and structure, contemporary coasters are built as assemblages, where photographic technologies are assimilated into the ride's structure. These assemblages include digital equipment that captures real-time images of riders as well as multiple screens that display these images in designated spaces that are part of the ride's design.

In all the locations I examined at BG, the screens have a similar media logic: high-speed cameras capture images of people on the ride, which are then displayed on public screens that greet riders as they disembark. Both the capturing and the display devices – the high-resolution cameras and the screens – are located *strategically*: the former are positioned to capture images of riders at peak moments of the ride, such as when the coaster takes a 60 mph, 130 ft fall, and the latter are positioned so riders must face them when they disembark. Figure 1 shows one of three clusters of capturing devices that are positioned near the riders, each cluster consists of 11 cameras (amounting to 33 cameras per coaster). This impressive visual apparatus, which allows instantaneous display of riders' images (which can be further modified at the consumer's request), constitutes the digital mediatisation of the ride's experience: the ride is not only about (high-)speed, but also about riders as visual spectacle (Dubrofsky 2011; Dubrofsky and Magnet 2015). I note in passing that these technologies have been adapted from closed-circuit television and surveillance contexts, now lucratively serving financial conglomerates in the entertainment industry.

Before addressing riders' reactions, I want to describe the screen-suffused settings that provide the immediate



FIGURE 1. Recording riders: one of three clusters of roller-coaster cameras (photo by author).

material and semiotic contexts of the rider's visual operation. While waiting in line for the roller-coaster ride, multiple screens are visible, displaying short movies and informative videos about the specific ride. The movies narrate the ride's experience and serve as 'on-site markers' for tourists, which single out the attraction and frame it as 'thrilling' and 'exciting'. At the Cheetah Hunt ride, which is the site I will draw most of the examples from, the genres are mixed, combining a nature documentary about cheetahs in Africa with images of highly excited Cheetah Hunt roller-coaster riders. The narrator supplies information about the cheetah ("The *Acinonyx Jubatus*, more commonly known as the "Cheetah") establishing zoological authority and an analogy between the natural speed of the (African) cheetah and the mechanical wonder of the (North American) Cheetah Hunt ride. This is a dramatic orientalist juxtaposition of the primordial and the modern. Towards the end of one of the movies, a map of the Serengeti region in Africa is shown, on which colourful photos of roller-coaster riders are spread. Figure 2 (image from the movie) presents a collage, where images of exhilarated riders are superimposed on the Serengeti map, to suggest that the spaces of the Serengeti



FIGURE 2. Images of riders and cheetahs displayed against the map of the Serengeti (photo by author from video).

and of the ride are mediated and assume qualities of Otherness. Travel to and representations of the exotic and faraway are deeply interrelated because the history of western representations of the Other – as Said (1978), Pratt (1992), and many others have shown – is visual and tightly associated with travel and (later) tourism.

The screens and the movies teach us that what we can expect from this experience is more than mere 'fun': what we will gain is akin to authentic travel and a real encounter with/experience of the exotic. The screens are also pragmatic, and teach us what we can purchase: the movies make the point that the ride is a remarkable attraction and worthy of visual memorabilia, and that we can use the nearby kiosks to order out pictures.

Lastly, recall that the park is also a large zoo, and its live cheetah display is located *near* the coaster. The physical proximity enhances the authenticity and the semiotic connection between technology and the 'real' (African) animal whose name is attached to the ride. Indeed, images of cheetahs are superimposed on all the pictures displayed and purchased (as seen in Figure 5). This further contributes to the mediation of the Serengeti/Africa, suggesting that the roller-coaster experience is equivalent to travelling to Africa, and that the riders in the images are authentic, embodied spectacles as are the live cheetahs nearby.

DISEMBARKING AND CONSUMING IMAGES OF ONESELF

I mentioned that the screens are positioned strategically, so that the adrenalised riders, who have just disembarked, are set up to become captive audiences to images of themselves on the ride. Figure 3 shows screens and riders at three roller-coaster locations in BG: The upper two images are from the Cheetah Hunt ride, and lower two images are from the Kumba (left) and the Sheikra (right) rides. In all cases, the screens are immobile and mounted conspicuously on walls at the exits. All roller-coaster structures include multiscreen installations, ranging from



FIGURE 3. (Collage) Screens displaying images of roller-coaster riders (photos by author).

the smaller arrangement of 4 screens to the larger arrangement of 16 and 20 screens. Other types of screens are located nearby as well, including touchscreens kiosks, where visitors can pick and purchase specific images after viewing them on the public screens. Many illustrative photos of the ride are also permanently on display, informing consumers of the 'visual packages' they can purchase, the price of which ranges between \$20 and \$80. The packages include different sized photos, keychain photos and DVDs. Together, these different surfaces (monitors, touchscreens, photos) shape a dense visual environment that visualises and commoditises the ride and its experience.

The Cheetah Hunt coaster includes two sets of eight screens each, which repeatedly display riders' images (visible in Figure 3, top two images). The display changes every 2 minutes to allow a new set of images for the next group of riders. The images are souvenir-teasers: they are not the 'thing itself' but provoke consumers to purchase souvenirs in the shape of printed and/or digital images and videos of themselves on the ride. The brief rhythm of shifting images creates a sense of ephemerality, and assists the park's management in preventing visitors from reproducing these images. Indeed, large words appear at the centre of each screen, stating: PLEASE VIEW YOUR PHOTO AT THE KIOSK. In addition, employees watch over the visitors, making sure that they do not use mobile cameras and smartphones to reproduce the images.

'LOOK AT ME! LOOK AT ME! OH LORD HAVE MERCY!': PUBLIC SELF-RECOGNITION

In the area near the screens, one of the consistent things I observed every time and in every roller coaster was a quality of *general excitement*. Immediately after disembarking, riders face the arrangement of screens with their images, and they respond with thrilled cries and animated bodily and facial gestures. Viewing the screens is an 'exciting' activity that amounts to an attraction in itself.

The first activity riders engage in is *noticing* the screens and acknowledging them as surfaces that are of *specific interest* to them. Indeed, it takes riders a second or so to realise that *these* screens display images of them. A semiotic transformation occurs as the riders are transformed into viewers, engaging in a particular type of reflexive tourist gaze that has them as its object (Urry and Larsen 2011). According to my observations, roughly 12% of the visitors leave the space at this point, but the majority lingers to scan the screens in search of their images. As they engage in this activity, visitors scan all the screens and all the images of riders.

The next activity that routinely takes place involves recognition when viewers identify an image as their own. This is essentially a *social act of recognition*, which is publicly performed by pointing hands excitedly in the direction of the screens and exclaiming something like 'there I am!', 'look at me!' and 'here we are!' (Figure 4).



FIGURE 4. Pointing out and pointing in: viewers publicly recognising/reclaiming their images (photos by author).



FIGURE 5. Iconic imagery: excited roller-coaster riders (photo bought by author).

Riders' reactions and gestures are performed enthusiastically and loudly, and it is hard to overstate how ritualistic, in the Goffmanian sense, these activities are, and how apparently overwhelmed and animated viewers become when they recognise their image on the screens. As I observed people eagerly searching for their images, I am reminded of the book *Where's Waldo?* In the book, readers are asked to find the figure of Waldo in different densely crowded spaces occupied by hundreds of similar figures. The task (or work) is to recognise and point out the familiar figure. Roller-coaster riders are here required to engage similarly: find images that seem familiar (their own image or their companions' image) and point to them as soon as they can.

Around me, riders' (re)actions possess a profoundly social nature because they engage the act of recognition *publicly and observably*, and everyone is seeing and hearing each other's vocal, facial and bodily gestures. Key here is not cognitive capacities for recognising oneself (though cognitive processes are surely at stake) but the public performance of self-recognition which indexically confirms correlation between spectator and spectacle. This is the audiences' work. These visible and vocal gestures announce the act of recognising oneself, and direct the gazes of friends and relatives to the relevant image/screen. Consider a few field notes from these locations:

I am standing near the screens as riders are disembarking and descending, through the stairs, into the hall. It's warm, humid, and when riders arrive it's also very noisy with their excited cries, and with the amazing sinusoidal roar of the coaster swooshing above us.

A mass of some thirty riders have just entered, including a large family who is looking at the screens. The mother (in her thirties, with a heavy Australian accent) cries out loudly: 'Look at me! Look at me! Oh Lord have mercy!' Her relatives immediately gather near her, direct their gazes at the screen displaying her image, and join in her excitement and laughter. Then they turn away and continue to talk about her image and her expression as they walk out of the hall.

With me at the empty hall, a mother in her thirties is looking at the screens and waiting to see an image of her young son (who is now on the ride. She said she's afraid to try). The mother then recognizes his image and turns to me, saying 'that's my son.' When the boy descends from the stairs leading from the ride she calls him, 'Oh my gosh, Ellie, look!' pointing her hand directly at his image on the screen right in front of her. The boy smiles and she hugs him and then they leave.

In the next 'round' of riders, a father and son are walking together near the screens. At one point the father stops, turns towards the screens and points at one of them and says to his son (surprised, but not laughing): 'Oh! There we are!'

A tall and skinny male teenager wearing sunglasses and a reversed cap points at one of the screens and turns to his father, saying (half-facing him and half-facing the screen, with a British accent): 'Right here, pops.' His father takes out his glasses, looks and confirms 'look at you!'

A group of older visitors in their sixties stand in front of the screens in search of their images. Suddenly, one of the women points at a screen (a rolled park pamphlet in her hand serves as a pointing device), where their images appear together: 'Here, here. Look.' Another woman in the group says, 'Oh, that's priceless!' Shortly after, the one holding the pamphlet points again at the screens, saying: 'Oh, here they are' (referring to other members of their group, who've left already).

A group of some ten teenagers are eagerly looking at the screens, competing over who'll be the first to call out a familiar image. It's a girl, who shouts: 'There we are!' and points her hand in the direction of one of the screens. Her friends congregate around her and examine the image and laugh.

Similar to the images in the book *Where's Waldo?*, the screens invite a social *work* from their viewers, asking them to find their image and to pursue this publicly. Whether these are hand-pointing gestures and/or verbal discourse, these screens demand that one recognise oneself in a public setting. The short utterances typically commence with the discourse maker 'oh', which discursively serves to show surprise or sudden realisation (Bolden 2006). Located in the beginning of utterances, 'oh' also serves to emphasise what is said (Fox and Schrock 1999, 281), and with the commotion taking place near the screens 'oh' might also serve to grab the recipient's attention.

The essential element in these performances of self-recognition concerns the use of *indexicals*, which are discursive devices that serve to point at someone or

something *in relation* to the physical location of the speaker. Indexicals include pronouns (*me, we, they* and *you*) and deictics (*here* and *there*), and as Silverstein (1976) has shown, they are performative in that they constitute that which they seemingly only point at: saying *I* or *we* not only points at us but also establishes us as a social category in a given (particular) interaction. The images, then, do not stand by themselves, and a performative action that establishes one's 'being there' or the association between spectator and spectacle, is required (as is commonly pursued by tourists, who use indexicals to performatively situate themselves at the destinations they are visiting (see Author 2009).

As tourists and visitors arrive in groups, and as the screens are public, acts of self-recognition are inevitably public. The structure of these interactions is that: multiple viewers are facing multiple screens wherein images of multiple riders (i.e. the viewers), are displayed (Figure 4). Most visitors are strangers to each other, and a notion of a *public* emerges as riders, their images and their viewers inhabit the same consumer spaces and are caught in the same images.

Acts of self-recognition are the beginning of a discursive interaction, which entails humorous or nervous accounts that address the value of the image (*Oh, that's priceless!* and *Oh Lord have mercy!*). Riders comment about their appearance, referring to particular qualities that are odd or funny. This is performed by a variety of gestures of imitation, excitement, parody and mockery, which correspond with the images on display.

A pre-teen girl walks by her image, recognises herself and turns and points at it with her hand and quite casually (disappointed?) tells her friend: 'My eyes were closed'.

As two college-age women wearing sportswear walk near the screens, one instantly points at one of them and says: 'Look at you smiling; look at me'. She then approaches the screens, stands on the tip of her toes and scrutinises her image.

A group is walking near the screens, at which point one member points at a screen and says loudly: 'Oh my god! You're smiling; and I'm going like that'. He then makes a facial expression of being terrified (eyes wide open), attempting to imitate his expression as displayed on the screen. His friends burst into laughter at the image and at the face he is making.

Two women in their twenties approach the screens frontally. The one who's closer points her finger straight forward and calls: 'Here we are', and then more quietly, 'You jus' smil'n, you jus' smil'n'. Her friend laughs and then they both leave.

A man and a woman emerge from the stairway leading from the ride: the woman, who is walking first, recognizes their image and stops in front of it. She points her hand in the screen's direction and bursts into laughter. Her boyfriend arrives, smiles, caresses her thigh, and nonchalantly says 'hilarious'. They both leave.

Two men and two women in their late twenties enter the hall and immediately orient themselves towards the screens. One of them, who has a large tattoo on the right side of his face and forehead, calls his friend: 'Matt, watch this!' He points his hand at his image. The image has him in the roller-coaster, clearly exhibiting the tattoo-side of his face to the camera. His friend nods and smiles conformingly (showing he got the point).

Viewers' comments and accounts are not so much descriptions as they are *judgments* about aesthetic qualities, which are part of the ensuing decision whether to purchase the images. 'My eyes were closed', 'You're smiling; and I'm going like that' and 'Look at you smiling; look at me', suggest that the images 'demand' some discursive work: evaluation or interpretation/explanation on behalf of the viewers who recognise their images. The last observation supplies a different illustration though, as the rider, who apparently knew that he was being photographed (and exactly where and when this would happen) posed for the park's cameras. He did so successfully and was able then to boast about it to his friend. While this observation represents a distinct category of *competent visitors*, who intently perform for the cameras and orchestrate the production of their image, most visitors are surprised when seeing their images. They, too, judge the images *aesthetically* as public performances (intended or unintended, i.e. authentic).

Beyond the cries of self-recognition, visitors take pleasure in discerning what is happening in the image and the special features of their bodies and facial expressions become topics of amusement and discursive action. This interaction is reminiscent of audiences seeing, and reacting to, the images of their bodies and faces in as viewed distorted mirrors in amusement parks. Only that with coasters it is speed and velocity that 'distorts' the body's image. In any case, the screens pose a task for their viewers, which is pursued via acts of self-recognition and of discerning the image with its specific characteristics. What 'you' did, how 'I' appear, and the ultimate speech acts: 'Here we are!' and 'Look at me!' *indexically confirm the correspondence between the images and the viewing subject*. Casetti (2013) articulates a triple screen-typology, where some screens are conceptualised as windows, allowing a view of elsewhere, while others function like mirrors or 'a device for self-regulation and self-recognition' (20). The point is that both functions are not the end of the process,

but its beginning: they are not accomplished by the screens themselves or by passively viewing them, but by viewers' (re)active discursive performances.

There are other occasions which further tell of the performative nature of these acts of recognition and evaluation. Occasionally, viewers' comments were directed at park employees, a point which initially surprised me. A 20-some-year-old woman visitor laughs as she sees her image, then turns to a (male) employee standing nearby and asks: 'Isn't this the funniest picture you've seen?' (the employee smiles and nods in agreement). This visitor is seeking the employee's validation of the special value of her image (*funniest picture*), and the employee is approached not so much as an audience, but as an expert. After all, who, if not the employees, who see thousands of images of riders daily, can better attest to the most notable ones?

Also, some visitors step up to the screens and actually engage in *tactile interactions with them* as part of the activity of viewing themselves. Usually, they touch the screens with their fingers in a 'zooming-in' motion, mistaking the monitors for touchscreens. Over and above the desire to visually examine and evaluate their image in greater detail, physically interacting with the screen is also an attempt to assert some degree of control over the monitors/images.

The value the images possess is also evident when the screens malfunction. I witnessed two occasions where visitors, who could not locate their images, exclaimed with concern: 'we're *not* here!' Displeased, they inquired with the employees as to the whereabouts of their images. In both cases, there were technical malfunctions and the visitors complained about the long lines and that they would have to wait in order to obtain new images while taking the ride again (it was clear that they would seek to obtain an image of themselves). The employees who were in charge let them cut in the line by giving them access through a back door so that they would not have to wait long. Employees in different locations consistently told me that 'when things like this happen they [visitors] freak out'.

Finally, every ethnography supplies a few observations that are so memorable that the ethnographer does not need the field notes to recall them. These observations stand out against the backdrop of familiar and routine activities. During my visits to BG, the three most memorable observations concerned visitors of colour. In one instance, two white women were standing near the screens and near them their two young African American girls. One of the girls looks at the screen and excitedly says to her mother: 'there's me, mom'. The girl, as is typical, points at the screen displaying her image,

yet it is *not* an image of herself she points to but the *image of the cheetah* (located at the bottom right side of the screen, as seen in Figure 5). I have never witnessed this before and I am shocked and instantly teary.

In another instance, three African American youth are looking at their images and talking and enjoying themselves. On their way out, one of the youth comments on the images' high resolution, saying: 'you can see my shoes. That's how bad this shit is', to which his friends nod in agreement. This is the only remark that I can recall hearing that addressed the awesome optic power of the ride's photographic equipment. The third and last instance emerged during an interaction with employees about their encounters with visitors. One employee, who is white, recalls a family of African tourists who complained about their image, a complaint that the employee did not fully understand or resolve. The family complained that they could not see themselves in the picture against the black seats and the dark background (Figure 5). The employee said he brightened the image as much as he could, but that the tourists were disappointed and did not purchase it.

All public representations are racialised, and amusement park imagery is no exception (there is a history of racial segregation in amusement parks in North America). The above observations are particularly telling because viewers point out things that are not explicitly mentioned or seen by other, predominantly white, visitors: the girl who points at the cheetah brings to the fore the iconic and animalistic 'African' framing of the park. For this young viewer, who knows the 'rules' of appropriate discourse at this location (*there's me, mom*), it is the African cheetah that she names as part of *her* public act of performing self-recognition. Even if performed playfully, this is a powerful moment, animating questions about reclaiming one's image and subjectivity, and opening up questions about how a little black girl performs agency, possibly subversively, against the semiotic background of the coaster's (white) imagery.

As for the second observation, it was the only case out of hundreds I observed, where viewers noted anything in regards to the quality and resolution of the photographic devices and products. This is a metacommunicative comment in that it does not concern the content of the image but the power of the medium, and I see it as relating to surveillance, highlighting the nuanced details (*my shoes*) that the park's visual technology displays. It calls to mind Andrejevic's (2004, 2) note about how 'surveillance had itself become a mediated form of spectacle', only that *these* visitors mention it explicitly, perhaps with

some anxiety. The third observation also brings to the fore something that is an issue for people with darker skin colour, and which white visitors do not mention. On a literal level, there is a real question of the dark colour of the engulfing coaster seats and the background, against which riders' images are displayed (Dyer 1997 shows how cinematic and cultural representations display whiteness most easily). On a symbolic level, there is an evocation of the whiteness of recreational spaces, and how 'things African' are represented and framed at BG. Recall that one of the park's earlier names was The Dark Continent, an adjective that takes here a truly visual and literal dimension.

Iconic Imagery

The field notes above point to how essential it is for viewers to perform self-recognition publicly, which they pursue with expressive enthusiasm. There are three types of explanations that I offer to account for this activity. The first rests on the notion of *authenticity*, and concerns the *content* of the images: what viewers see when they look at the screens is typically *unrehearsed* behaviour, performed and caught while undergoing a peak physical experience. Commenting on Disneyland's brand of entertainment, Eco (1986, 44) observes that it 'tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can', and with the roller coasters, technology simultaneously induces *and* records bodily experiences and activities. Coasters' technology translates into unique resources for performance, with the help of which spectators can view and purchase images of themselves 'acting extraordinarily' (mostly not even knowing that they are being photographed) – conveyed in a 'type of aesthetic which strives for ecstasy and pure fascination' (Strehovec 1997, 208). As I indicated, their bodies and faces are here 'unnatural' in a way reminiscent of self-images in distorted mirror; or conversely, they very natural but in a way not meant for public display.

The second explanation also concerns riders' images, yet I focus on the symbolic capital they possess. These images are *iconic* in the sense that they confirm the visual trope of 'riding a roller-coaster'. Figure 5 (below) presents such an image, which visually literate audiences readily recognise. This genre's grammar includes individual riders tucked deeply inside the metallic, colourful and powerful-looking coaster vehicle, expressing particularly animated expressions. These images' iconicity suggests that they enjoy a *schematic* quality, and the individuals captured therein are by definition anonymous – that is, until they publicly self-

recognise and ‘subjectify’ their images. When this occurs, the schematic–iconic image is personified, and the symbolic capital imbued in the spectacle of riding a roller coaster is confirmed and redeemed.

The third explanation does not concern the content of the image, but the context of its reception, which essentially is *public*. I noted that recreational spaces shape consumer publics, and that visitors are visually recorded and reconstituted as such. Since the screens are presented publicly, the activities of viewing, recognising, and commenting are pursued publicly as well. Figure 5 presents three riders inside the coaster’s vehicle, who are strangers to each other, and it is the ride, at one end, and the screens, at the other, that bring them together, momentarily reassembling them into a public. At this point, viewers’ work concerns naming-and-claiming themselves, that is publicly performing who they are outside the screen, as spectators and not spectacles.

OWNERSHIP AND VALUE

The mobile-cum-visual coaster machine is highly lucrative, and most visitors are eager to obtain printed

and digital images of themselves. These souvenirs will defy the brief display that the screens offer in situ. Purchasing the images is an expense in addition to the park’s entrance fee (approximately \$90), and different visitors proceed with this activity in one of the two ways: international and domestic tourists are more inclined to purchase the park’s ‘visual packages’, while the majority of local visitors attempt to take pictures and videos of their images with personal smartphones and cameras. The tourists follow the consumer route the site offers, and as one of the employees that sells images conveyed, ‘tourists don’t care what’s the price of the pictures, and when I try to tell them that these are expensive packages they don’t listen but insist “Can we order them? Can we order them?”’ As for local visitors, despite the instructions that prohibit picture-taking, one of the most popular activities in the vicinity of the screens is taking pictures of riders’ images. Figure 6 (collage) shows viewers taking pictures of their images – both still and video images (the woman on the bottom-left corner is recording a video of her ride’s video). Taking pictures of their images creates a semiotic transformation, whereby the transient and commercial images become durable and domestic (noncommercial) images. Moreover,



FIGURE 6. (Collage): Ripping images: visitors reclaiming/recapturing their images (photos by author).

visitors are not merely mechanically reproducing images but are also choosing what exactly to include: consider the image of the male viewer in the upper-right corner of Figure 6, which shows how he is capturing only a part of the public image displayed on the screen. This presents a way that viewers manifest some control (agency) over the content and circulation of their own images.

Research that explores the use of smartphones to capture one's images in museums, shows how, despite the fact that these institutions discourage and even prohibit photography, visitors often act as 'souvenir hunters' (Leighton 2007, 315). For these visitors, the pictures they see are photo-worthy so as to override the institution's restrictive policies. The difference between museums and amusement parks are worth noting: in amusement parks, the prohibition is against visitors taking pictures of their *own images*; while in museums, the concern is with art's authenticity (avowing reproduction) and preservation (camera flashes can damage the work). In essence, in the amusement parks, the concern is solely commercial, so visitors are forced to purchase the image.

The park's employees enforce the institution's policy, and one of their duties is to make sure visitors do not reproduce images. Often, one hears employees repeatedly instructing: 'Sir/Madam, no pictures please!' One employee told me that 'it's one of the hardest things we have to do in work. These are issues that we don't want to deal with', and another attested that, 'it's not rare that visitors come up to us to comment on how others take pictures with their phones. Sometimes people come to us and say how they detest this, and then, after telling us what bad behavior it is, they go on taking pictures of their images with their phones!' In the past, employees were instructed to ask visitors who took pictures to *delete* them from their mobile devices, but due to legal issues and the pervasiveness of this activity, the current policy is to try proactively to prevent the practice 'as much as we can'. It seems there is a tension between visitors' sense of satisfaction (at obtaining their images) and the park's desire to make a profit. During the years of doing this ethnography, the policies have shifted in the direction of allowing visitors more leverage.

CONCLUSIONS

I took the omnipresence of screens in contemporary leisure life as a point of departure for this study, suggesting, first, that we need to inquire into particular media-screen which fulfils different functions in designated locations, and that, second, the settings, images and operations do not supply us with the overall picture – we need to study how these

screens are actually actively viewed. I refer to the latter as the 'work' that screens elicit and that is required of visitors, who are performatively becoming viewers. Admittedly, the screens I study are not 'sexy'. They are 'low-tech' monitors: stationary, non-interactive, and display the same types of images repeatedly. Yet, it is precisely this mechanical quality that accounts for screens' nearly 'self-evident nature' (Berry, Harbord, and Moore 2013, 6). Despite their simple features, these screens elicit powerful and animated reactions, which their viewers perform publicly and observably by using discursive and bodily gestures. My observations suggest that looking at the screens indexes a complex set of social, cultural and consumer activities, engaging much more than the eyes alone. Viewers' reactions reveal diverse visual activities, including scanning, seeing, noticing, recognising and reproducing images, as well pointing gestures, co-orienting each other, mirroring facial and body expressions and evaluating images.

I see these activities as performances or as the work that viewers undertake when observing their images, in the sense that it is a social task concerning screen literacy, which audiences are required to undertake. At the heart of this work lies the performance of *self-recognition*, or how viewers actively associate their image with their selves (outside the commercial screens, yet within commercial spaces). At stake are discursive speech acts (*Here we are!*, *Look at me!*, etc.), which *indexically confirm the correspondence between images and the subjecthood of those viewing them*. Through acts of self-recognition visitors confirm their roles as participants in the attraction, and claim and collect their mediated selves in the various fleeting images of their displays. By the term 'collect', I refer to Baudrillard's (1988) notion of the 'fractal subject', addressing the multiple, mediated images of modern subjects. Acts of self-recognition publicly instantiate the fact that visitors are part of the attraction-action, and the aroused cries and animated gestures suggest that viewing oneself is an 'exciting' occasion in and of itself. Self-recognition leads to either reproducing one's image: via mobile cameras or via purchasing it.

In her work on images and performances in virtual spaces, Van House (2011) argues that 'making, showing, viewing and talking about images are not just how we represent ourselves, but contribute to the ways that we *enact* ourselves, individually and collectively, and reproduce social formations and norms' (131, italics in the original). This is true for media-space available at amusement and theme parks, where everyone sees everyone else occupying a variety of roles: riders, spectacles and spectators, which calls

attention to the fact that not only individual and group subjectivities are at stake but also the very notion of mediatised public.

Theme parks have received special attention in cultural studies as emblematic spaces of ‘fake reality’ or hyperreality (Eco 1986), and roller coasters are of particular interest: ‘More than a simple midway attraction or high-tech theme-park centerpiece’, Anderson (1999) observes, ‘the roller-coaster is a site meaning-making, a “provoker” of meaning in the innumerable contexts in which we locate and interpret it’ (19). The observations I made offer insights into how these meanings are publicly and observably accomplished by viewers, and suggest that their reactions and interactions are part of contemporary visual competencies and commerce. All this in a context, where the selfie is increasingly becoming a key mode of self-display, forefronting the importance of the cultural, social and commercial value of images of oneself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thorough and thoughtful comments on this paper, which supplied rich soil on which revisions were made. I am also very deeply indebted to Rachel Dubrofsky for her insightful comments, suggestions and discussions with regard to the pervasive capture and circulation of everyday imagery of people.

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