Disneyland and the American Frontiers:
A Timeless Utopia

Sierra Weston

Abstract:
In 1955, Disneyland opened its doors and the American public descended into the fantastical world of Walt Disney. While Disneyland corresponded to the company's growing brand as a movie-making empire, it also reflected the way that the original American colonies and the ever-developing Western frontier shaped the American mindset. Based on the arguments of Louis Marin in his 1984 book *Utopics: Spatial Play*, this essay builds upon his statement that Disneyland "is the representation realized in a geographical space of the imaginary relationship that the dominant groups of American society maintain with their real conditions of existence, with the real history of the United States, and with the space outside of its borders." Through an analysis of the park's layout and select relevant cultural case studies such as the Monsanto House of the Future (1957), John Turner's Frontier Thesis, and John F. Kennedy's rhetoric in the early sixties, this essay looks to understand how Disneyland visually manifests distinctly American narratives and how these mythologies contribute to the theatrical distortion of reality in the park.
“Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy.”

- Disneyland’s dedication plaque, 1955.

In 1955, the first visitors to Disneyland squinted against the harsh California sun to take in the inaugural views of Main Street USA, beginning their descents into fantasy. They walked into a park crafted through a mid-century American mindset, where one could comfortably move along the sliding scale of reality to fantasy, and past to future. Today, Disneyland and its off-branching parks can be analyzed and understood in a myriad of ways; as a bridge connecting Modern and Postmodern American societies, as an aid to the shaping of culture in the American public and domestic spheres, and even as a place of pilgrimage for many American citizens. Disneyland is a case study to understanding the American psyche, how the legacies of the settler-colonial mindset and Manifest Destiny still hold significance in the culture of America today, and how colonialism has remained deeply intertwined with our economics. Much of this paper was influenced by the arguments posed by Louis Marin in his 1984 work *Utopics: Spatial Play*, in which he argues that Disneyland “is the representation realized in a geographical space of the imaginary relationship that the dominant groups of American society maintain with their real conditions of existence, with the real history of the United States, and with the space outside of its borders.”¹ This essay will attempt to deconstruct the overarching and distinctly American narratives that connect each of the Lands within the Anaheim-based park, and the economic drivers behind these narratives. It will assess how these ideas contribute to the overall hyperreal, fantastical, and Utopic presentation of a “city” that Disneyland elicits.

Fig. 1 Diagram of Disneyland map by Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*

Fig. 2 Map of Disneyland. From disneyland.disney.go.com
The long Y-axis of Disneyland begins with the familiar tingles of a quasi-reality, a rural downtown strip of a classic Western town. Here, Main Street USA is famously modeled after Walt Disney’s hometown and meant to ease the visitor into Disneyland. The road (aided by both the ticket booth and tunnel entrance that precede it) acts as a slow entry and exit portal. It is entirely pedestrian, excepting the horse-drawn carriages that mosey along, thus extending the time that visitors spend taking in the sights. One can imagine this crawling entrance as not only a method to disperse crowds but also as an intentionally prolonged admittance into fantasy. The park’s magic flows over the visiting body in a slow, oozing trickle. It culminates at the center of the park and a Disney franchise icon: Sleeping Beauty’s castle. Main Street USA, despite its role as a portal between the real and imaginary worlds, is also a meticulously designed theatrical illusion. Karal Ann Marling argues, “the buildings at Disneyland often fool you into thinking that they are turn-of-the-century business blocks or Third World trading posts, but they are actually 1950s-style malls.”

What kind of public space is Main Street USA, if not a mall? There are no permanent residents, despite allusions to it. There is a barbershop quartet and a horse-drawn carriage, and along with the implication that the houses along Main Street USA are inhabited, there is an illusion of communal public life - yet no reality or life behind the buildings. According to Judit Bodnar, privately owned public spaces are seen as the future of downtown sectors, where the “commercialization of public space” is heralded as the solution to urban regeneration. She argues that these “privately owned public spaces” such as malls are “more interested in creating a ‘community’ rather than a ‘public’ with all the diversity and grittiness that the public entails.” Main Street USA is the ideal downtown sector, as there are no rentals, no garbage, and no “grittiness.” Despite this, there are the theatrical implications of community, and it seamlessly blends reality with fiction.

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4 Marling, Designing Disney’s Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance, 29.
5 One must also remember that visitors do not just spend money inside of the park, but they pay significant amounts for entry into the park. This creates a filter of who can and cannot enter, already
Not only does the overarching design of the park create an ease of transition between Lands, but its design is also based on real city planning. According to Chris Nichols, the expansion from a center point was directly inspired by the “radial street plan of Paris.”6 Beyond the intricate details and well-thought out aesthetic presentations in each of the Lands, a vital part of Marin’s argument is the position that Main Street USA and the extending Lands have in the planning of the park. He says:

“Main Street USA is a universal operator that articulates and builds up the text of Disneyland on all of its levels. We have discovered three functions of this operator:
(1) *phatic* -- it allows all the possible stories to be narrated;
(2) *referential* -- through it, reality becomes a fantasy and an image, a reality;
(3) *integrative* -- it is the space that divides Disneyland into two parts, left and right, and that relates these two parts to each other. It is at the same time a condition by which the space takes on meaning for the viewer and a condition by which the space can be narrated by the visitor (the actor).”7

Following Marin’s graph of Disneyland (Fig. 1), Main Street USA and Sleeping Beauty’s castle function as a center that also splits the park in half. From West to East, one can move across space and time: from the history of Frontierland and Adventureland to the future of Tomorrowland. From South to North, one can move from reality into fantasy; from the relative verisimilitude of Main Street USA to the aptly named Fantasyland and fun-house distortion of Mickey’s Toontown (Fig. 2). At the meeting of Marin’s axes, the spectrums of reality to fantasy and history to future, is what Walt Disney imagined as “the heart of Disneyland.”8 It is in this pulsating spirit of Disneyland that a plaque reads; “...Disneyland is your Land, here age relives fond memories of the past...And here youth

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6 Chris Nichols, *Walt Disney’s Disneyland*, (Cologne: Taschen, 2018), 47.
7 Marin, 281.
8 Nichols, 47.

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preventing the “city” or “public spaces” from being true ones. Additionally, this creates a “public space” that does not have unhoused people, who are common in the downtowns of California.
may savor the challenge and promise of the future,”⁹ and the illusions to history and future are thus stated explicitly.

Frontierland is the most visually connected to Main Street USA but is more precisely influenced by pop culture concepts of the American Wild West. This portion of the park is home to rides whose stories “involve...conquest or exploitation...the penetration into and victory over the lands of the first inhabitants...”¹⁰ One ride emblematic of this claim is *Big Thunder Mountain Railroad*, which touts mining aesthetics and whips riders around a red, rocky mountainous landscape in mining carts pulled by a locomotive. Here, the rider is seated within technology that allowed the expansion and acceleration of the extraction of ore, providing wealth to settlers and enacting irreversible destruction to the land. The rider is therefore placed in the role of the settler colonizer, a role that is not critically understood in the context of the park. The rides and attractions in this segment of the park all tell narratives from the perspectives of the settlers, and there is no consideration for displaced, abused and murdered Indigenous peoples.¹¹ This is understandable in the context of the grander utopic vision of the park; acknowledgement of such atrocities would be an admission of guilt, one that would pull the visitor (the customer) out of this fantasy of American history. Before recent additions, Frontierland was the largest Land on the left side of the park. This and Adventureland occupy the Past on the X-axis of Marin’s chart of the park. Adventureland is modelled on a vague tropical country, distinct from the North American continent. Rides here include a tropical River Safari, where visitors sit in boats to view exotic animatronic animals shriek and wail from a safe distance, and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride, which inspired the successful movie franchise and glorifies the life of sea-faring swashbucklers. Marin points to Frontierland as the signifier of “the temporal distance of the past history of the American nation,” whereas Adventureland represents

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¹⁰ Marin, 284.

¹¹ It should be noted that there was once an “Indian Village” in Frontierland that featured teepees, demonstrations of traditional art making and Indigenous actors in traditional dress. This is a direct legacy of the human zoos which were exhibited in 19th century World’s Exhibitions, such as the one in which Turner presented his Frontier Thesis.
the “spatial distance of the outside geographical world.”12 While Adventureland carries more explicit references to British colonialism (complete with Pith helmets sold in the “local trading posts”), these signifiers are still familiar to anyone with general knowledge of the history of American film and pop culture.

Tomorrowland is the major Land on the right side of the park from the entry. Here, on Marin’s graph, it is the Future on the X-axis spectrum of time. Tomorrowland, when it was originally constructed, was emblematic of the Post-War potential of a new American frontier: Space. In the sixties, America was enraptured by Outer Space, and Disneyland provided an environment that envisioned this futuristic lifestyle, dependent on the latest technologies and scientific advancements. As Marin states, this Land is “space as time, the universe captured by American science and technology of today.”13 In the same vein as Frontierland and Adventureland, Tomorrowland proposed an American frontier version of space. The future according to Disneyland will be full of the same familiar institutions and social standards, but instead it would look vaguely like a Jetsons episode or a PBS cartoon special. Yet Space in Tomorrowland, was treated with the same “strange, exotic primitivism” as Adventureland, both places to overtake, where “brutal savagery” is soon to be corralled by civilization.14

The future of Space in Tomorrowland, then, becomes the futuristic-in-between of the narratives that we see represented in Frontierland and Adventureland. Frontierland is the already tamed West, the true destiny of the American landscape realized. Notably, as there is never an acknowledgement of an Indigenous populations’ existence, this land is framed as empty and thus American claims to it as justified. Adventureland is still teaming with untamed flora and fauna, the possibilities of adventure and danger ever-present, yet there is industry and occupation which grounds visitors in the familiar territory of a frequently told false colonial history. Tomorrowland, then, is the combination of these two narratives, and it is the ultimate American frontier fantasy. It is resource rich, easily conquered and there are no pre-existing people. Tomorrowland is the fantasy future for the American history; it erases the bloody past, disintegrating even

12 Marin, 284.
13 Marin, 285.
14 Ibid.
the memory of those killed. In Tomorrowland there is the recognizable American-ness in the built environment and society, and there is also the unknown adventure; the new advancements, resources, and journeys yet to be discovered in the empty final frontier.

In 1893, at the Chicago World’s Fair, Frederic Jackson Turner presented his argument that would become known as the Frontier Thesis. He argued that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”\(^{15}\) In other words, the “national character” of the United States was shaped significantly by the ongoing growth of the nation’s false claim to land. The expansion of stolen territory and institutions that formed the American Democratic system through that expansion were continually shaped by the fluctuation of the frontier line. Disneyland, as previously mentioned, was originally opened in Anaheim, California. California has its own deep history that is deeply embedded with colonialism, one of the most notable instances of these actions being the Gold Rush that brought thousands of settlers into the region in search of economic success. The Gold Rush, as well as previous occupations that occurred even before the official founding of the United States, are all larger examples of what Disneyland is on a small scale; the act of settling on Indigenous land, erasing this violence through rewriting, and retelling historical narratives to advance American national mythology. Disneyland, and the country from which it emerged, benefit from rewriting history into a narrative which justifies ongoing settler colonialism. And these stories are maintained because they are the foundation of what America tells itself about its own actions as a means to achieve “progress.”

This idea is not one that sits secretly underneath the surface of the churning gears of American progress either, it is explicitly referenced. For example, at the 1960 Democratic National Convention, Senator John F. Kennedy proposed the existence of a New Frontier, one of progress through plastics and penetration into Outer Space: the frontier of the 1960s.\(^{16}\) Kennedy labeled this frontier as one “of unknown opportunities and perils - a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats” a collection of mysterious chances for progress to be achieved. He would again in 1962 allude to a choice that Americans


were to make, only this time it was not the choice to go to the moon, but a choice between “the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of “normalcy” - between determined dedication and creeping mediocrity.” 17 Kennedy frames progress as a choice in both of these speeches. The next frontier that he proposes is waiting to be conquered, all American citizens had to do was support its exploration.

While analyzing Disneyland’s intricate relationship with the frontier legacy of the United States, it is important to turn to the ways that the park and external corporate affiliates worked to shape the future that it was touting. The Monsanto House of the Future18 sat in Tomorrowland from 1957 to 1967 and was an attempt by the Monsanto company to try to integrate plastics into the domestic sphere (Fig. 3). At the time it was ground-breaking, but it was to quickly become “the house of the future that wasn’t.” 19 The floor plan was a large X, splitting the home into sections that all met in the center (Fig. 4). The master bedroom, two smaller children’s bedrooms, dining, family room, and living room each occupy a capsule in the ends of the X. The kitchen, main bath, and children’s bath sit in the center, breaking up an otherwise open floorplan. The future that the MHOF introduced did not attempt to radically change the way families lived together.20 This was not a future that envisioned alternative ways of living or cohabitating. Instead, it kept the Wife in the kitchen, constantly seeking out ways to make the chores easier and to better run her household. 21

18 Referred to from here on as MHOF.
19 The MHOF was named this in Lisa Scanlon’s MIT Technology Review article on an MIT museum exhibit about the house. [https://www.technologyreview.com/2005/01/01/231834/the-house-of-the-future-that-wasnt/](https://www.technologyreview.com/2005/01/01/231834/the-house-of-the-future-that-wasnt/).
21 This “battle of the sexes” thread ran through much of mainstream Post-War advertising. Monsanto pushed plastics as a way that men were able to succeed in the “conquest of air” during World War 2. Now, plastics would allow women to work more efficiently in the home, in the pursuit of the “conquest of man!” (As quoted in Phillips, 98).
Fig. 3, Monsanto House of the Future, From wired.com
The MHOF was designed not just with the ease of the inhabitants in mind, but also the constructors. It was meant to be easily assembled, possibly by the homeowners themselves. The MHOF was, in theory, able to be built “anywhere and expand infinitely,” allowing for endless additions to the capsulated way of living. This air of “anywhere” suits the influence of the American frontier and colonization in Disneyland. While it is easy to infer that the creators behind the MHOF did not envision it as a means of occupation in distant colonies, the sentiment is born from the seed of frontier and exploration. One could go anywhere with the MHOF and bring American comforts and plastic dishes. In fact, the interior holds elements connected to the seeds of colonization as well, especially when placed in Disneyland, which was the only space that the MHOF would ever be constructed. The movement of the house’s inhabitants mimics the movement of a visitor through Disneyland, up and down, left and right along the axes. Even if the visitor does not grasp the intricacies of the map, the movement is copied when examining the house. Maybe exploring is a more pertinent word, fitting with the narrative of the visitor, an explorer, and adventurer at Disneyland. All of this motion mimics the axis of the compass, which after all is an iconic tool of the colonial explorer. It moves from North to South, East to West, and in between, in search of all the “unfound” and “unclaimed” places. Plastic, in its own way, could be understood as the proposed new frontier of housing by MIT and Monsanto, a new way for Americans to succeed as the most efficient and clean nation.
After the extremely difficult removal of the MHOF in 1967 (turns out that convenient assembly does not include a seamless de-assembly), Disneyland did not exhibit another futuristic house until 2008, with the arrival of The Dream Home. This build was also backed by a corporate sponsor, this time HP and Microsoft. The corporations backing each exhibit were actively shaping the understanding and perception of the future home for millions of visitors. The goal, similar to the MHOF but with an early 21st Century update, was to highlight the latest technology assisting the efficiency of the domestic sphere, a presentation of “future living”. Here, we see the presence of a more contemporary frontier, that of the technology boom. In the MHOF, the frontier was plastic, in The Dream Home, it is electronics. The Dream Home had features such as a group of kitchen appliances that can talk to each other, seamless connections between personal tablets and mounted wall screens in nearly every room, and an excessive amount of touch screens. It is also interesting to note that the AI entity that runs the family cookbook is named Lillian, and assists “Mom” with the meal preparations. Again, a female presence is placed in the command central kitchen, however this time the one with the controls is not a human being.\(^\text{22}\) The implication of the benefits of a self-contained home is at work in both the MHOF and the Dream Home, a sense that everything you need could be at your fingertips.\(^\text{23}\)

As in Marin’s axis diagram, History/Past to Tomorrow is the spectrum of the X-axis of Disneyland. This is the condensing of time within a small park. Part of the allure of Disneyland is the air of timelessness that ensnares the visitor, a feature that its creators actively sought to enhance.\(^\text{24}\) This same method of condensing time for

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22 Which raises the question, will Smart Homes and AI integration be as detrimental to our lived environments as plastics have been for our natural one?

23 A continuation of this research would benefit from the question of the success of the two presentations, the MHOF and The Dream Home respectively, in their goals to shape the way middle class Americans lived. Some questions to be discussed would be, are these two at the forefront of groundbreaking discussions of these ways of living? Or did they emerge from already existing ideas in the milieu of the creation of products that make living easier? It’s likely a combination of both, but I believe that further research could look closer at the reception and inception of both of these projects.

24 As quoted in Smith, one publicist claimed that “In Disneyland, clocks and watches lose all meaning, for there is no present. There is only yesterday, tomorrow and the timeless world of fantasy” (268).
narrative’s sake was used by John F. Kennedy in the opening lines of his speech at Rice Stadium in 1962. He said, of America, that “No Man can fully grasp how far and how fast we have come, but condense if you will, the 50,000 years of man’s recorded history in a time span of a half-century.”\textsuperscript{25} This measurement of the success and progress of the human race was, of course, measured in modern times by the improvements and headway done by the USA. This shrinkage of time meant to clarify the unprecedented times that America had carved out, similarly to the narrative created at Disneyland. Each of these methods of compressing time into an understandable metaphor, either 50,000 years into fifty or a turn left or right at Sleeping Beauty’s castle, allowed Americans to weave an understanding of history that appropriately matched their frontier-developed mindsets. By shrinking time, we can see how steadily and quickly America’s pursuits and accomplishments have happened. Through this miniaturization of time between the past and future, the narrator (i.e., the Visitor or the Listener) is able to live in each nearly simultaneously. ‘Look how far we’ve come so quickly,’ they are able to proudly state. “We choose to go to the moon,”\textsuperscript{26} said John F. Kennedy in 1962, choosing here being the operative action. The solar system is now ours for the taking, and we chose its exploration. Disneyland, in a way, laments the end of the settling of the American West and general colonialism abroad, and it displays a representation of this period with added charm, fantasy, and romanticism. Simultaneously it is nostalgic for a time of physical frontiers, but is also promoting the search of future frontiers. Kennedy claimed that “this country was conquered by those who moved forward -- and so will space.”\textsuperscript{27} Kennedy nods at the conqueror mindset in his quoting of George Mallory, who was one of the first to climb Mt. Everest and said he did it “because it was there.” In four words, the mentality of the colonizer is summed up: the world is for the taking.

Thus, Disneyland satisfies the American frontier and colonial mindset, allowing the visitor to own all of the representations of past and future. But Disneyland is clear that “it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced.”\textsuperscript{28} Because of the intensity of this fantasy

\textsuperscript{25} Kennedy, 1962.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Eco, 43.
and its ability to suspend the visitors' disbelief (even if just momentarily), Disneyland gives “the impression...of belonging to a fantastic past that we can grasp with our imagination.”29 Then, after leaving, the Disney hangover still lingers. Our visitors may find themselves “homesick for Disneyland,” and unsure where else they will find the satiation of the ownership that was once theirs.30 Therefore, the hyperreality aspects of Disneyland show how it has ushered in the postmodern image economy, where simulation and spectacle are often sought after as triggers of excitement and joy, as well as sources of capital.

Michael Sorkin argues that Disneyland is the “utopia of transience, a place where everyone is just passing through,” which lends strength to the atmosphere of harmony and tranquility.31 Because there are no true inhabitants, just tourists, consumers, and workers, there are no discernible issues in the “city” of Disneyland. And as Sorkin states, Disneyland is “physicalized yet conceptual”32 which is why it is such a strong contender for a true utopia, because it is not actually real. The representations and fictional narratives are what shape it into a utopia, and as Marin reminds us, only a utopia because “it’s harmony exists only on a stage.” As he says, it is a confluence of many aspects of the real world, “the past and future, time and space, the playfulness and serious determination to be found on the market, the real and imaginary - are all brought together.”33 The representation of, and the slight differences between or introduction of fantasy within, these “realities” in each of the Lands are what creates Disneyland’s utopic nature, the strength of its illusion. This illusion continues into the interior of the buildings that line the sparkling street, where visitors are brought into the fantasy world, but pay with reality’s money to take part in this vision. As Umberto Eco argues, Disneyland “blends the reality of trade with the play of fiction” where people are presented with toy houses and fictional downtown sectors, and then are enticed into the

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Marin, 282.
Mall “where you buy obsessively, believing that you are still playing.”34 The frontier does not just exist in the physical plane, it also finds its way into your pocketbook. The MHOF is a less subtle example of this, as I have attempted to use it as a means of seeing how American expansionism in Disneyland goes further than the use of glorified colonial narratives, it also works its way through economics. And yet, the economic elements of Disneyland, including the stark dichotomy between the appearance of economy and the actual treatment of its workers, has potential for another essay entirely.

Marin points out that each Land is home to its own frontier, either entirely fictional or loosely based on a singular perspective in a past reality. In the case of Adventureland, he says that it “represents the next possible fields of action, because adventure is also a frontier...”35 Adventure, which is the most satiated narrative in the entire Disney franchise, is usually present in stories as something that happens to the protagonist, whether they chose it or not. Journeys and adventures in films, like the ones Disney produces and models its parks after, come with real risks. Often protagonists lack power over their situation, and their character arc follows their eventual grandiose triumph where they had little agency before. One example of this is the newly minted Star Wars section of the park, which is an extension of the universe based on a story that follows a traditional Hero’s Journey. In the original trilogy, Luke is an outsider to the Jedi and is ignorant of their way of life. Through his arc, he faces trauma and many losses, including those of his guardians, his mentor, and even his hand. He did not pick his role as the “chosen one” and even when he comes to accept his destiny, there are still trials and tribulations that deeply affect him. This is the key to understanding the appeal of Disneyland, as it allows the visitor to be temporarily in the role of the protagonist at the peak of their adventure narrative without any real fear of loss. The visitors to Disneyland become the main characters of their narrative through the park and therefore have ownership over a part of this fiction. They have the power of choice and the distance from the emotional trauma that comes with “real” adventure. Disneyland, and the

35 Marin, 284.
subsequent parks modeled after it, is about “the ‘aestheticization’ of reality.”\textsuperscript{36} This aestheticization would grow and spread, aiding the domination of the Postmodern, because, in the end, it is all about ownership, individualized and intense experiences, and capital. The underlying goal of the park is to create a private fantasy of ownership for the individual. It does this through the classic touch stones of falsified American history; colonialism (ownership of the land), heroism (ownership of a narrative journey), and personal advancement through the purchasing of products (ownership of your life outside of the park).

To conclude, both the private and public representations in Disneyland join together to become a singular thing, something to be experienced, owned, and achieved. Through examining each of these spaces individually, we see that the true common thread between the Lands and the Homes (MHOF and The Dream Home respectively) is the American psyche, each one influenced by the frontier, colonial, and Postwar legacies. And it is not just in the USA, as Karal Ann Marling points out, as no longer is “Disneyland unique...a one-of-a-kind place.”\textsuperscript{37} There are parks across the globe, but each still has a Main Street USA to usher in the visitors and introduce them to their little slice of American Hometown living. The rewritten American history has expanded beyond the North American continent, which is after all, what America seems to do best. And as Marshall McLuhan proposed, the postmodern is a period of the global village, and Disney Parks are thriving in this globalization and image-driven era. This sort of fantastical theatre in environment building coined the term “Disney realism,” allowing anyone to escape and descend into a spectacular distortion of reality. Disneyland gives each visitor the condensed, false history and still colonial future of America, a projection of romanticism and possibilities unbounded and unchecked. It could all be yours, and it briefly is, for as long as you can afford the entrance fee.

\textbf{References}

\textsuperscript{36} Walter Benjamin as quoted in Frederic Jameson, “Introduction” in \textit{Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism}, 7\textsuperscript{th} printing (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1.
\textsuperscript{37} Marling, 29.


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