

## The Meanings of Coney Island

The reputation of Coney Island stems from its long history as an amusement destination. Though few may currently appreciate the historical significance of this resort, many remain sensitive to the numerous associations that its name evokes—associations that are colored by the various functions that Coney Island served during its different incarnations. To truly appreciate Coney Island’s semiotic richness, however, one must understand this past. The multiple meanings of Coney Island offer a sense of its historic and cultural value, and of the various narratives that frame discussions about the future of the area.

Some historians equate Coney Island’s early rise as a seaside resort with the emergence of a mass culture of public recreation. This culture may have grown partly as a response to the anxieties associated with the urban immigrant experience.<sup>1</sup> Uprooted from familiar surroundings and institutions, new urbanites sought reprieve from the anomie and feelings of estrangement associated with their relocation. Seaside resorts like Coney Island provided a quasi-democratic



Figure 4.6. Carefree revelry and abandon, 1897. (Museum of the City of New York)

venue where visitors could share a temporary sense of interconnectedness through their collective amusement.<sup>2</sup> These resorts cultivated an atmosphere of abandon and extravagance that facilitated the provisional relaxation of social norms and the suppression of class difference. This atmosphere allowed people to indulge in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantic notion that they could cast off artificial identities borne out of social conventions and “be themselves” or even try on different identities. Part of the excitement of Coney Island, then, derived from the challenge it presented to prevailing social boundaries. It undermined widely held values, such as sobriety, thrift, and utility; it loosened traditional restrictions; and it even provided the illusion of social mobility. During this period, Coney Island came to serve as a metaphor for carefree revelry and developed the reputation of a sort of egalitarian utopia.

The Coney Island experience may have been if not quite subversive then at least transformative.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sterngass, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Although writers at the time extolled Coney Island’s inclusiveness, the status benefits associated with visiting the resort depended on the exclusion of certain groups, namely Blacks and Jews (Sterngass, 2001. p.109).

Some argue, however, that because of the gradual privatization and commercialization of leisure, this transformative energy did not survive the Gilded Age.<sup>3</sup> According to this view, the marriage between profit and pleasure, so instrumental in the growth and democratization of resorts, eventually put an end to resorts' spontaneous and extravagant forms of entertainment, and transformed visitors from seekers of community and exhilaration to mere consumers of pleasure.<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, amusement parks, with their introduction of physical boundaries as a form of crowd control, represented a retreat from the area's chaotic energy and transformative possibilities, and a step towards the future of recreation resorts.

While amusement parks and commercial development may have arguably undermined the disorder and transgressive elements that characterized Coney Island in its early days, the resort still offered disorder enough. Moreover, it continued to serve as a common ground for recreation, promoting the development of a common culture, and suppressing, to a degree, social distinction.<sup>5</sup> Amusement parks may not have tolerated the bedlam that characterized many of the resort's public areas, but they were generally inclusive, and they did foster a sense of community among their visitors.<sup>6</sup> These quasi-public spaces also provided a relatively unregulated social venue, offering, for instance, a rare degree of privacy for young adults seeking contact with member of the opposite sex away from adult supervision.<sup>7</sup> Some historians go so far as to argue that parks not only tolerated a relaxation of social boundaries, but actively encouraged it through their attractions, many of which required collective participation, interaction, and occasionally, even physical contact.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the design of the parks, their freakish performers, and the exotic and topsy-turvy atmosphere they cultivated heightened the sense, already prevalent in the rest of Coney Island, that the resort operated in a world apart—an extravagant world that functioned according to its own morality and logic.

The rise of Coney Island's popularity coincided with the gradual erosion of Victorian values, the rise of a mass culture, and the reorganization of social life according to newly emerging patterns of production and consumption. Coney Island facilitated all three processes, and reveled in this societal transformation. As it came to epitomize this upheaval, the resort became the focus of a

---

<sup>3</sup> Sterngass, 2001. p.268.

<sup>4</sup> Sterngass, 2001. p.271.

<sup>5</sup> Nasaw, 1993. p.2.

<sup>6</sup> The price of admission to the parks was kept low, since the purpose of the gates was to exclude disruptive elements, not to exclude any well-behaved potential patron. (Ibid., 88.)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.42.

<sup>9</sup> Kasson, 1978.

heated cultural debate. Avant-garde writers and artists, such as Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Joseph Stieglitz, and Joseph Stella, flocked to the sidelines.<sup>10</sup> Proponents hailed Coney Island as an engine of cultural innovation and democratic inclusiveness. Critics, on the other hand, attacked it from various angles. While Marxists characterized it as a vehicle for the stupefaction of the working class, cultural reformers accused it of subverting genteel values and appealing to the vulgar pursuit of easy thrills, instead of cultivating refined sensibilities.<sup>11</sup> Although the Marxist critique would enjoy limited purchase, the reformers' opposition, which persisted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, would help define the perception of the Coney Island as its fortunes declined.

Even before reformers turned their attention to Coney Island, they had sought elevate public taste through a similar form of public spectacle: the world's fair. World's fairs were proto-modernist celebrations of progress—"demonstrations of how order and organization, high culture and art, science and technology, commerce and industry, all brought together under the wise administration of business and government, would lead inevitably to a brighter, more prosperous future."<sup>12</sup> In order to ensure a high attendance and to counterbalance the sterility of the fairs' main exhibits, organizers felt compelled to complement those exhibits with physically separate midways devoted to mass amusements. Thus, entertainment and education co-existed uneasily during these temporary events. Coney Island, though, to the dismay of reformers, became a large midway without an edifying main exhibit. Attempts at edification, such as arguably Dreamland, enjoyed little success. Reformers voiced their criticism even during Coney Island's heyday. Their attacks, however, would have little impact on the development of the area until the arrival of Robert Moses in 1937.

In its size and inclusiveness, Coney Island reached its apotheosis as a populist resort during the 1930s and 1940s. Each summer, enormous multi-ethnic crowds would overtake its beaches and streets. Despite its popularity, however, there was already a sense that Coney Island's days as a great amusement resort were behind it, and that it now operated on reputation borrowed from its past. Robert Moses, who adhered vehemently to this belief, deplored Coney Island's attractions as low forms of recreation. With a reformer's zeal, he waged battle against the resort's cheap amusements and its over-crowded and disorderly conditions. In a series of Olmsteadian gestures, Moses sought to elevate the tastes of the masses through development that encouraged peaceful

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.88; Immerso, 2002. p.122.

<sup>11</sup> Kasson, 1978. p.108.

<sup>12</sup> Nasaw, 1993. p.66.

contemplation. Since then, major development initiatives in Coney Island have often been framed in terms of dichotomies defined by reformers: the dichotomy between the “permanent” values associated with calm beaches and residential uses and the “temporary” values associated with the commercial exploitation of the pursuit of immediate gratification; the dichotomy between the Aquarium’s “culture,” and the mechanical rides’ “honky tonk.”

If Coney Island’s reputation suffered from the 1930s through the 1950s because of its physical deterioration and because of reformers’ attacks, it took a downright plunge during the 1960s and 1970s. Little harms the reputation of an amusement resort more than race riots, crime waves, and arson. During this period, Coney Island, a place once synonymous with urban amusement, came to symbolize urban decay. Throughout the first part of the century, movies had depicted Coney Island as a dazzling and magical place. They had documented its attractions, exploited its rides for comic effect, and used it as a setting for courtship scenes.<sup>13</sup> By the 1970s, however, movies depicted Coney Island, most charitably, as the long-forgotten neighborhood of Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* or, less charitably, as the gang-ridden wasteland of *The Warriors*.<sup>14</sup> Although these became the dominant images that Coney Island evoked during this period, memories of its past glories persisted in the popular imagination. These were the visions that lured artists to Coney Island during the 1980s, and that continue, even now, to inspire songs, novels, documentaries, and histories.<sup>15</sup>

Today, “Coney Island” remains a world famous brand. Numerous products, such as grills, hot dog spice mixes, chewing gum, and chilies have adopted its name hoping to capitalize on the resort’s fame. While the brand is undoubtedly associated with mechanical attractions, seaside resorts, and country fair food, it also connotes a wide range of other less obvious meanings. It carries, for instance, nostalgic connotations of lost innocence and glory that point to the extravagance of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It also suggests, however, the urban grittiness and multicultural flavor associated with New York City; and it invokes as well the aura of unpredictability, sensuality, and danger summoned by such honky-tonk images as that of slightly sinister-looking carnival workers.<sup>16</sup> All these associations have no doubt benefited from the decades of neglect that Coney Island has endured—from the fact that no new development

---

<sup>13</sup> Immerso, 2002. p.118.

<sup>14</sup> Baldock, 2003, p.159.

<sup>15</sup> Tom Waits’ song, “Coney Island Baby”, Kevin Baker’s novel, *Dreamland*, and Charles Denson and Michael Immerso’s histories of Coney Island, were all published within the past five years.

<sup>16</sup> Nasaw, 1993. p.254.

<sup>18</sup> Kasson, 1978. p.108.

has arisen to challenge the various meaning that Coney Island's history has handed down to current generations.

Despite this colorful legacy, Coney Island no longer finds itself at the cutting edge of a cultural transformation. The ascendancy of mass culture that marked the triumph of Coney Island's values also signaled the loss of the subversive energy that set it apart from other resorts around the turn of the last century.<sup>18</sup> The transgressive potential of Coney Island's amusement parks only made sense against a backdrop of 19<sup>th</sup> Century norms and social practices. During that period, impresarios' efforts to manipulate crowds represented a form of cultural innovation. Today, however, similar efforts come across as a repression of spontaneity and creativity. This contrast points to the vast array of differences that set Coney Island apart from its spiritual descendant, the Disney amusement park.

George Tilyou would have envied the consummate union between leisure and commerce that Walt Disney orchestrated. The Disney project, however, took place at a time when it no longer represented a threat to genteel values, which had by then yielded to the exigencies of mass-culture. Far from representing a threat, then, the world of Disney purveyed already dominant values. It marked the next step in the evolution of the world's fair—a Modernist symbiosis of main exhibit and midway. On the one hand, the Disney park constituted a timeless, monocultural, paean to technological progress, as well as an enshrinement of civic values associated with small-town pre-industrial America. On the other, it provided exoticism, escape, and amazement through its technological wizardry. Unlike Steeplechase's devil-grinned jester, Disney's cheerfully asexual mouse did not offer titillation; it invited you to a world of sanitized fantasy, adventure, and futuristic wonder.

In their decorative design, Disney's parks bear some resemblance to Coney Island's more family-oriented parks, Luna Park and Dreamland. In function and physical configuration, however, the difference between them is profound. Visitors flocked to Coney Island seeking public and collective amusement at a time when that itself carried the thrill of exploration and even of transgression. Once there, they found themselves part of an unruly, heterogeneous crowd in the middle of a chaotic carnival. This carnival featured a number of exuberant parks led by entrepreneurs who sought to outdo each other in providing the thrills that their patrons had come to expect. In contrast, by the time Disneyland first opened its gates, the habit of public amusement had been tempered by a preference for discrete consumption and domestic

recreation.<sup>19</sup> Disneyland catered to its patrons accordingly. Visitors to any Disney park arrive separately at enormous parking lots before being transported to the facility itself. The parks' price of admission and physical isolation insure a great degree of homogeneity among visitors, something that facilitates the provision of a highly predictable and non-threatening recreational event. Thus, Disney managed to avoid the urban qualities with which Coney Island has always been associated. Descriptions of Coney Island frequently contain words like "seedy," "weird," "interesting"—words seldom used to describe its corporate spiritual successor.

Most recently, Coney Island has been largely defined by a rhetoric of urban decline that is often deployed to promote development. This rhetoric tends to flatten Coney Island and frame discussions about the neighborhood in the bi-polar terms of investment and disinvestment—a dichotomy that, in the world of development, has long taken precedence over arguments about high and low cultural values. Narratives of decline, however, unfold across time. Consequently, these discussions summon historical meanings structured so as to illustrate Coney Island's downward trajectory. Development boosters still allude to Coney Island's past glory and popularity; but only in order to document its decline and promote plans for its revival.

---

<sup>19</sup> Nasaw, 1993. p.255.