Most observers view the contemporary era as a period governed by invisible yet powerful, homogenizing consumerist forces that pervade multiple dimensions of both individual and social life, producing significant changes—particularly as far as the perception of time, space, reality, and fiction are concerned. These changes contribute, they assert, to the emergence of a number of complex phenomena, such as the confusion between what one understands as “real” and the “virtual,” a development that upsets the human imagination and induces in people erroneous ideas concerning patterns of value worth striving for in everyday life, as Jean Baudrillard suggests. Zygmunt Bauman focuses on the increasing “spectacularization” characterizing culture, politics, and communication, distancing people and ideas; whereas Marc Augé identifies alienating relationships between individuals and places and between the self and the global. According to these views, instability, distortion of meaning, and volatile identities seem to be rapidly spreading in the wake of globalization throughout the world in a multitude of forms. In such a scenario, the concept of national identity becomes inevitably a most vulnerable notion, subject to reformulations of different nature.

As Eric J. Hobsbawm points out, national identity possesses a complex, temporary, and multifaceted character. Its “shape” is indeed determined by a combination of cultural factors, and historical and political processes, that may moreover alter in the course of time, in very short periods of time. Any approach to national identity should therefore include a number of different perspectives, cultural, political, economic, etc.; and focus on a given time span. This chapter attempts to offer an exploration of one of the many possible “faces” of national identity, its “leisure-face,” referring particularly to
the phenomenon of contemporary amusement theme parks in Europe and the United States.

**The Theme Park as Object of Study**

The choice of theme parks as object of study in the context of national identity may seem unusual. Not many studies have been done on the relationship between leisure and national identity. Works investigating this type of relationship are not only scarce, but also often denied the scholarly attention they deserve—although *Homo ludens* ("man the player," concerned with amusements, humor, and leisure) represents, as some scholars have observed, the protagonist of the postmodern era.3 *Homo ludens* has abandoned, according to Giampaolo Fabris, the rationality characterizing *Homo faber* (man the [tool-]maker, man the smith) in his or her approach to society, work, and consumption and taken up instead emotions and desires as key criteria to guide his or her choices in everyday life.4 This may be the main reason why leisure time is invested today with positive value and considered an essential "moment" in the construction of individual identity, as it allows self-realization and the expression of personal inclinations, as Alain Corbin suggests.5

If *Homo ludens* is the protagonist of contemporary society, then theme parks may be counted among the major theaters for his or her actions. Theme parks offer quick answers by constructing an invented, simulated reality, both to the most capricious desires for power and satisfaction and to the main fears and uncertainties of contemporary men and women.6

Theme parks are recent forms of entertainment which have, following Disneyland’s success in the United States,7 grown increasingly popular during the last decades, especially in Western countries. Their essence, shape, role, and impact on society, on culture and on the postmodern individual have been explored by numerous scholars from various disciplines, allowing a wide variety of interpretations focused on the contemporary era and on notions such as utopia, leisure, and consumption.8 In addition, authors such as Donna Morganstern and Jeff Greenberg, Nick Stanley, and Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes pinpoint the possible influence of theme parks on the perception of the past and on the shaping of cultural beliefs.9 Theme parks provide us today with one of the most important metaphors of the globalized world; thus, the idea of *nationhood* they convey needs to be examined.

Most academic descriptions and investigations on theme parks are concentrated on the model created by Walt Disney and do not consider other major theme parks (which, after all, imitate the Disney model and its main
principles). Here I intend to look at these other parks in order to examine the phenomenon within a wider scenario and advance arguments from a more comprehensive perspective.

“Theme parks” are those enclosed and controlled environments that are “commercial landscapes designed to amuse the public in a competitive market for leisure entertainment,” as Heath Schenker defines them. They are usually built around either a specific theme or multiple themes, derived from the world(s) of fantasy, fairy tales, cinema, history, nature, myths, or legends. Common manifestations of these themes are, for instance, park settings re-creating exotic adventures, pirate raids, medieval tournaments, magical encounters, “Old West” villages, cartoons, Hollywood movies, or famous monuments of the world. These are evoked through a coherent series of strategies and technologies applied to the various elements within that space, from attractions (that is, roller coasters, boat rides, shows, and so on) to shops and restaurants. Such strategies and technologies fall under the designation of *theming*, whose final raison d’être is “making believe” that everything that is unreal is “real” and has a place on earth. More specifically, as Augé notes, theme parks are often characterized not only by themed architecture and design, aimed at reproducing given features of the theme established, but also by fauna, flora, scents, sounds, and music suited to that theme, which also “affect” merchandise, costumes, and even the names of food and beverage items. The all-encompassing effect of theming is enhanced by the absence of elements that might interfere with the illusion and in some way remind the public of a “behind-the-scenes” world: power supplies, equipment, plumbing, pipelines, and electrical lines are often concealed or disguised; garbage is usually quickly removed; backstage rooms are hidden behind scenographic doors or hedges. This means that nothing within a particular themed area is left outside that theme, which, it may be argued, implicitly surrounds visitors involved in the theme. Theming resides at the heart of the philosophy behind most contemporary theme parks; it exerts, according to many commentators, a strong and effective impact on the visitors’ perception of the park experience and on their consequent beliefs and relationship to the world outside. What is the reason for this? Or rather, What happens exactly in a theme park? That is what I examine below.

The Theme Park Experience

The purchase of the admission ticket at the park entrance and then entry into the park seem to mark a sort of first crucial “border crossing”; in other
words, a passage from the realm of everyday life, with its conflicts and troubles, into an enclosed and safe area promising fun, joy, magical adventures, and dreamlike memories, that is, an “other” kind of life that can also be “believable.” This is the moment during which, according to Eco, the whole theme park, with its landscapes and streets, and reconstructions of buildings and fantastic settings, appears to the public in all its sensational and multifaceted form and exposes the senses to an overwhelming flood of stimuli. The “fullness” of details and the cacophony of lights, images, and sounds create a first disorientation in the viewers, who, in but a few steps, find themselves completely surrounded by strategic elements aimed at displacing them into an apparently authentic, but alternative, reality. Here the landscape appears as a proper “city,” featuring a structure consisting of bridges, straight and curvilinear walkways, fountains, trees, and gardens. This structure contains a number of areas presenting an impressive patchwork of reconstructions, settings, vehicles, and fabricated locales that may vary among parks but are conceived according to similar principles. In a time span of about two hours, visitors may ride through medieval castles, encounter mythical heroes, sit in spaceships, visit the villages of the characters of the fairy tales, and take pictures next to statues or robots representing/imitating the likes of Cleopatra or George Washington. The theme park visitors experience, in other words, a variegated assemblage of past, future, or fantastic landscapes, stories, or figures that are amalgamated by the power of theming into an entire “other” and “believable” world that, according to most commentators, overloads the senses and disorients critical discernment.

Celebrating Culture, History, and Nations

In a context characterized by such general traits, those replicas and reconstructions evoking cultural, historical, or national motifs deserve particular attention because of the implicit or explicit connections they establish with the idea of national identity. Analyses focusing on this aspect note that Western theme parks tend to offer representations that are idealized, generalizing, stereotypical, and simplistically celebrative. Terence Young suggests that most landscapes appear timeless; that is, they lack specific details that may refer to a precise time and place, and seem therefore set in a vague, distant, and frozen moment as if they were “beyond the influence of history.” It is not unusual to see, for instance, castles commingling French or German stylistic themes, conflating early or late Middle Ages architecture, just to convey some ideas of a past and to provide a spectacular background. It is
also common to pass through areas dedicated to a given country, for example, Italy, and see a brand-new Venice with shiny white buildings where gondoliers, all short, dark-haired and, of course, moustached, play mandolinos (although the instrument is typical of the southern regions of Italy and Venice is in the north) between one gondola ride and the other. Moreover, as David Lowenthal argues, whether they are employees of the park in disguise or robotized replicas, the various characters representing/imitating famous persons from either a distant or not so distant past, such as Julius Caesar or Ronald Reagan, appear surrounded by a mythical aura: they are presented as figures who are far more similar to half-gods than to the human beings they represent/imitate who have experienced alternate fortunes in the course of their lives, as historical documents report.16

This “product,” offered by most Western theme parks, reveals itself as a uniformized and uniformizing mixture of cultural, historical, and national themes from different countries and periods, or even from different traditions of the same country. What is noteworthy is that it draws on widely shared myths or stereotypes, and on crucial moments or personalities that played important roles throughout history in the development of given aspects of national identities.17 All these elements are eventually immersed in a peaceful and harmonious environment that, by means of the universally glorifying and celebratory approach adopted in the representation of places and people, not only frames the temporal and spatial indefiniteness identified by Colin Sorensen18 but also, I would suggest, absorbs and “flattens” the multiple human dimensions created by history and traditions. What results is an appealing world of “some” period; that is, a world apart that encourages optimism and averts potential associations with the actual world shaped by a far less appealing ensemble of forces, events, and people.

As can be seen, the main purpose of theme parks is, after all, selling a momentary escape from the real world, and they succeed in that. So why do most scholars (take them seriously and) criticize them? Probably because, as Eco argues, the “escape” that theme parks provide may, through the multiple and complex stimuli described above, influence powerfully the visitors’ imagination and their ideas about history, cultures, and nations.19 This is even more so, I would suggest, in those cases in which visitors are not “equipped” with sufficient knowledge of history, literature, or geography and are therefore more malleable (than the knowledgeable), lacking, as they do, “critical tools” that would help them in filtering images and flows of information. Morganstern and Greenberg offer interesting findings that may reinforce this view. In order to investigate how theme parks influence
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cultural beliefs, they developed a case study focusing on the perception of the Old West myth as represented in one theme park. By means of answers obtained in a questionnaire, randomly assigned to the park's visitors either before their entrance or after their exit, the two scholars measured the public's belief(s) in the Old West myth. The results demonstrated that this form of entertainment could significantly strengthen certain cultural beliefs in the promotion of values, myths, and role models.20

In the light of the views mentioned so far, I wish to offer, in what follows, a critical analysis of the type and frequency of themes, presented by theme parks, that may be considered as possible manifestations of the “leisure face” of national identity, in its historical and cultural elaboration in the Gramscian sense,21 through a research project I conducted.

The “Leisure Face” of National Identity in Europe and the United States

The main purpose of the research project was to compare American and European promotional literature through the study of a sample collection of brochures on U.S. and European theme parks. I had intended initially to examine the brochures I collected, all published in 2005, solely for the rhetorical styles and strategies employed in their texts—in other words, from a linguistic point of view—in order to identify possible common or contrasting elements. I quickly realized, however, that other aspects, such as historical, cultural, or national motifs, were also worth a close look for the significance of what they represented.22

The case that first captured my attention was the brochure of a U.S. theme park named “Busch Gardens Europe,” located at Williamsburg, Virginia. The first page of this brochure announces/claims that visitors will experience the “authenticity of a European journey.” Each of the remaining pages is dedicated to a specific “land” that constitutes one of the elements of the park—that is, England and Scotland, France, Germany, Ireland, and Italy—and provides a set of related information. What was surprising is that the characteristics listed do not only describe or promote (the attractions of) the area in question but also present aspects of the history and culture (language, arts, and traditions) of the country that has been reproduced. The page on “Italy,” for instance, besides mentioning the two main rides available in the park, “Apollo’s Chariot” and “Escape from Pompeii,” offers, as if the Italian language was part of the experience, a small list of Italian key expressions, for example, *buon giorno* (good morning) and *grazie* (thank
you), with translation into English. On the right side of the page is a brief paragraph titled “The Aroma of Roma,” in which traditional handicrafts and specialties from different parts of Italy (both northern and southern regions) are described, and where the promise that “you’re sure to find something to bring out the Italian in you” provides the conclusion. As far as imagery is concerned, the reader’s eye recognizes a variety of symbols characterizing Italian culture, such as a wine bottle, a Venetian carnival mask, and a Pompeian-style wall fresco. The immediate impression I received was that the uniformized and uniformizing mixture of these elements featured on the brochure could find in the theme park explicit materialization, both textual and visual, that would be disguised as authentic manifestation. My impression was further enhanced by a “panoramic” view of the whole brochure, displaying similar mixtures about the other countries involved.

Thus, although I did proceed with the linguistic analysis, I present in this chapter my findings on the historical and cultural motifs. The sample collection that composed the data consists of brochures selected according to the notion of theme park informing this chapter: twenty-nine brochures of European theme parks (of which six are British, six French, seven German, six Italian, and four Spanish) and twenty-nine brochures of U.S. theme parks. The descriptions and maps provided by the brochures were first examined to identify themed areas evoking historical or cultural motifs. The various themes thus determined were then grouped together, according to their features, within generic categories, in order to enable an easy recognition of the themes and avoid a complex list of hard-to-identify labels. (This may be seen as a purely artificial operation; it helped, however, in defining the object observed, at least in its main contours.) A further examination phase identified the various historical or cultural motifs as reflected in the imagery found in the brochures. I discuss these below.

**Themed Areas Evoking Historical or Cultural Motifs: The Textual**

*European theme park brochures*—It is interesting to note how much attention some European parks, especially the French and Spanish ones, dedicate to the history and culture of their own country. The French Parc Astérix celebrates the famous *Astérix* comics (published from 1959 onwards) and their satire of Caesar and the Roman Empire.²³ Puy du Fou (literally “Podium of Insanity”) promotes romantic visions of France from various historical periods.²⁴ Brochures of some Spanish parks indicate areas themed according to Miguel de Cervantes’s novel *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615),²⁵ whereas Isla
Mágica (Magical Island) is entirely focused on the sixteenth century and the discoveries made by Spanish navigators at the time, and on the adventures of Spanish pirates. The British and German parks seem to be less strongly connoted in this sense. Alton Towers in Great Britain dedicates an area to “Merrie England,” which suggests nostalgic themes related to old British traditions. The brochure of Hansa Park reports a reconstruction of a traditional German “Jahrmarkt” (annual fair that dates back to medieval times); whereas Europapark promotes “Deutsche Allee,” that is, a wide area evoking “typical” landscapes of Germany. The Italian brochures analyzed did not present any form of self-representations from either the cultural or the historical point of view.

Thirteen European brochures out of twenty-nine, however, suggested themes inspired by the (U.S.) Old West, by means of areas denominated, such as “Cowboy’s Guest Ranch” (in the brochure of the Italian park Cowboyland); or “El Western” (in the Spanish Mini Hollywood park). In this context, there are five indications referring to themes dedicated to Native Americans, such as settings called “Cheyenne River” (at the French park La Mer de Sable, Sand Sea) or “Indianerland” (at the German Hansa Park). Seven brochures report themes inspired by the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, evoking Hollywood and rock stars and Las Vegas–like scenarios, offering, for example, “Le village Rock and Roll” (in the French park Nigloland); or “Movieland” (at Canevaworld in Italy).

U.S. theme park brochures—In U.S. theme park brochures, Old West themes are mentioned in eleven cases out of twenty-nine: for example, the area “Pioneer Frontier” at Hersheypark or the Silver Dollar City, or “Frontierland” at Disneyland. Themes on Native Americans are rare. There are two cases, that is, “Indian Trails” at Knott’s Berry Farm and an area dedicated to Native American crafts, such as Navajo jewelry and Cherokee iron works, at Silver Dollar City. Themes referring to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, “materialized” in the forms described above, may be found in thirteen brochures, for example, that by Celebration City, promoting “Great American Moments” and evoking settings such as the famous Route 66, or that by Universal Studios Hollywood, recreating famous movie stars and settings.

**Themed Areas Evoking Historical or Cultural Motifs: The Imagery**

The data collected for imagery are in line with the general features noted in the course of the textual analysis summarized above, which may be because
most brochures tend to enhance written information by coupling it with relevant images.

*European theme park brochures*—There are images referred to in the European brochures of attractions related to the history and culture of their own country. In France, the brochures of Parc Astérix and Puy du Fou display a variety of pictures showing characters and scenes from the Astérix comics and *The Three Musketeers*, but also French villages, vehicles, and people from different centuries. Spain’s Isla Mágica offers pictures of the city of Seville and images of the famous Spanish caravels (small sailing vessels) of the sixteenth century or to muscular pirates. In the United Kingdom, the brochure promoting Legoland Windsor offers bright images of Big Ben and Tower Bridge, and in Camelot Theme Park we find colorful knights on white horses. Germany’s Europapark shows a village with architectural features evoking elements of the German tradition. “Phantasialand,” another German theme park, provides a picture of the Brandenburg Gate.

No self-representation of Italy from historical or cultural points of view were observed in the brochures examined.

*U.S. theme park brochures*—Old West motifs play a significant role of course among the several images characterizing brochures of the U.S. theme parks, in which they appear in thirteen cases out of twenty-nine examined. Many of them do not focus on cowboys only but also on traditional figures of craftsmen and musicians, or on pioneer villages. Native Americans appear in just one image in the Silver Dollar City brochure. Ten brochures picture U.S. cars, stars, or scenarios that refer to the 1950s and 1960s, and three show representations of the Statue of Liberty.

The Best of Symbols, Myths, and Heroes

Naturally, the brochures analyzed constitute just a small sample, and the information they deliver, summarized above very briefly, is not to be considered as proper “evidence” demonstrating specific facts. By virtue of their promotional function, brochures show only some details of the themed areas characterizing a park, however much those details may be representing the key elements a given park proposes in order to attract visitors. I wish to advance that the findings highlight nevertheless a number of general aspects. Drawing attention to these aspects adds new elements to the discussion and fosters a deeper insight; these aspects may moreover shed light on the nature...
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of the experience offered by theme parks in Europe and the United States. Pinpointing the devices used to catch visitors’ imagination may reveal anew and help understand better the “popular” state of mind.²⁸

European theme park brochures—As far as the European scenario is concerned, an emphasis on specific aspects of national history and culture is noted in some French and Spanish brochures. The selection and presentation of the themes inferred from the brochures suggests, however, that, among all the elements that constitute the rich cultural and historical heritage of Europe, only few have been chosen for “the show”; only those are picked that, by virtue of stereotypes, collective memories, or shared fantasies, are best suited to catalyze a sense of nostalgia, heroism, fascination, and national or cultural pride. This demonstrates that despite the diversity of themes offered, the principle, formulated in the United States and then “imported” by Europe, on which the thematic composition of a theme park is based is the same everywhere. This principle consists of the idea of establishing a “florilegium” of symbols, myths, or heroes that form a triumphal gallery of attractions, and then shape and convey a charming version of collective identity.

U.S. theme park brochures—U.S. theme park brochures devote much attention to myths of the Old West. This posture may be interpreted as self-celebration, that is, of celebration of roots. The rich references to the Old West may also be explained by the fact that, as Morganstern and Greenberg observe, within various entertainment forms in the United States, this theme represents one of the most popular topics, and plays a particularly important social and political role. They add,

Further, the myth of the Old West is important in modern American culture—providing role models and promoting values (such as courage) for children, as well as functioning at the national political level. President Reagan often invoked the pioneer spirit to justify policy or bolster national pride. Similarly, an argument against gun control has been “the West wasn’t won with a registered gun.”²⁹

Moreover, U.S. theme parks promote the myths of the 1950s and 1960s, such as American rock stars, Hollywood movie stars, or specific symbols, that is, legendary cars or places such as Route 66, all of which are associated with the value of freedom and promote the idea of “America” as the land of opportunity and the realization of the “American Dream.”
Conclusion: The National Identity Vertigo

As scholars have recorded and brochures attest, national identity emerges as fragmented in theme parks, owing to the kaleidoscopic carnival of stereotypes, celebration, nostalgia, and spectacularization characterizing the whole experience. As theme parks base their profits on what may be called the people’s desire for illusion,\(^\text{30}\) they tend to manipulate everything they draw their inspiration from, be it a place, people, or stories, in order to offer an appealing alternative reality. This has a cost in terms of cultural production and identity construction, as Susan Davis points out.\(^\text{31}\) In other words, the visitors of a theme park, while stimulated by their desire for illusion, are likely at the same time to experience confusion, as attractions conflate different epochs or contexts while contradictory values and myths are harmonized.\(^\text{32}\) The whole environment seems so promising and preferable (to the real world) that it encourages them to forget it is based on simulation.\(^\text{33}\) Such confusion may also affect national identity and its shaping.

Theme parks do not simply “present” certain themes; they emphasize given aspects of those themes in such a way as to invest each of them with new and positive values. For instance, when promoting Old West settings, U.S. parks tend to avoid any association with motifs referring to Native Americans. This may be because, as Rydell and Kroes point out, in American culture the “Old West” is often used to promote values such as courage or patriotism, and it functions at the national political level as well. Any proximity to Native American themes, therefore, might weaken the power of the Old West, and remind of less glorious aspects of the historical period it depicts.\(^\text{34}\) Similar considerations may drive, in Europe, the fairy-tale presentation of a conflict-free Middle Ages, the idealized representation of English knights and Spanish pirates, or on the absence of themes related to more recent periods of European history (except at the idyllic case of Puy du Fou).

What is offered in theme parks could be interpreted, in the terms defined by Hobsbawm, as an ensemble of adaptation, re-use, or “re-invention”\(^\text{35}\) of old traditions, symbols, and ancient elements in a new context and for a new purpose, which, in this case, unites all the visitors into a community, making them feel citizens of a special world: a world that looks like a safe and attractive continuum of heroes of all times and places, courageous and generous deeds, and marvels created by humankind around the earth. Such a reality, paralleling the actual one, encourages visitors to a lighthearted involvement and identification as they are given the chance to enjoy their
great past" and "great culture" and feel proud of their identity: feel proud of being sons or daughters of such a world with—why not, a touch of nostalgia, although they forget difficult truths of life and history and as they accept these visions as true. A confusion occurs (in the visitors’ minds), between desire and awareness, apt to lead to the blurring and distortion of (at least some of the) values that are at the base of the sense of national identity, especially values relating to community and historical and cultural heritage. The risk is that these values may as a result become vulnerable to manipulations and reshapings. The various alterations effected in the parks, for example, the refashioning of a nation’s myths or the propagation of stereotypes, are likely to “become naturalized” in park visitors’ minds, as Lowenthal points out,36 which may have negative consequences.

It may be argued therefore that the manifestation of the leisure face of national identity, as presented in the theme parks discussed above, reveals more than just a “stressed” and fragmented nature. Being inscribed within a revisionist scenario aimed at offering better alternatives to collective consciousness, such manifestation implies also a certain elaboration of the notions of authenticity and ideology. The perception of authenticity, which, according to Anthony J. Cascardi, is the individual’s relationship to what is known, is challenged by the power of attraction of what Eco calls “hyperreality,” that is, the theme park’s artificial reality, made credible through accuracy, that improves on the actual reality.37 Ideological articulations, intended to present particular views or conceptions of the world, could be conveyed through such a context, and, as happens in discursive practices, even win acceptance as nonideological “common sense.”38 It was because of such potential effects that the controversies concerning “Disney’s America”39 were so considerable.

Looked at from a larger perspective, the question is whether such systems may influence further “faces” of national identity, and whether they contribute to the shaping and reshaping of identities in the globalized contemporary society. Theme parks are increasing in popularity; new ones are being built in Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Some scholars, for example, Sorkin, suggest that the “theme park model,” together with its universe of strategies, is spreading beyond the boundaries of entertainment and invading sites where people live, work, or shop.40 This process undoubtedly exerts an impact on those entities: “those easily obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of peoples and oppositional analytic capacities may emerge—youth,
the everyday, nostalgia, new ‘ethnicities,’ new social movements,” Homi Bhabha calls them. Multiple forms of reaction and influence are therefore likely to develop on a more global level. These need to be analyzed and studied further, to foster discernment and critical awareness through which the multiple mechanisms of “social engineering” may be better identified and interpreted.