

**SIGNATURE ATTRACTION**

*A documentary and exegesis seeking to find out  
why rollercoasters mean so much to those who love them.*

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## **Abstract**

Rollercoasters are enduring icons of Western popular culture and are a strong visual symbol of amusement and entertainment in many Western countries worldwide. Yet what drives so many paying patrons to make the journey to theme parks to spend substantial amounts of money, to wait sometimes two to three hours for a ninety second ride to nowhere? This research project investigates why rollercoasters mean so much to the people who love them by way of creative practice, interviews and reflective practice, and is then distilled to produce the documentary *Signature Attraction* and accompanying exegesis.

The study reveals that rollercoasters have a more complex impact on society than what may first appear. They are an important outlet for access to primal sensations, an economic drawcard for multibillion-dollar leisure industries, and a source of powerful memories of fun and childhood. Additionally they serve as a centrepiece to a dedicated community of rollercoaster enthusiasts, offer us a way to automatically focus our attention and allow us to safely experience extreme forces and unusual sensations that cannot be encountered safely elsewhere in everyday life.

This exegesis aims to conceptualise knowledge domains that frame the epistemological approach of a documentary that attempts to understand how rollercoasters are more than just screams for enthusiasts. This is achieved from the perspective of both a documentary practitioner and a lover of rollercoasters. It reflects on my practice in terms of challenges faced in completing the documentary and how the final product sits in relation to other contemporary documentaries exploring the subject of the rollercoaster, and those that ride them. Ultimately, the documentary created as part of this project provides a philosophical counterpart to existing rollercoaster documentaries, by filling the void between commercial, but generic, promotional broadcast documentaries and amateur non-broadcast productions designed to promote new rollercoasters, and productions that demonstrate the layout of a coaster, either on-board or off, with commentary.

**Keywords:** rollercoaster, thrill rides, theme parks, documentary, sensation-seeking, signature attraction

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**Statement of Original Authorship**

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signature:

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I would like to thank Dr Tanya Nitins for her gentle and patient insistence on excellence, Associate Professor Geoff Portmann for his regular one-on-one filmmaking masterclasses and his profound insight into story, Dr Mark Ryan for his impressive academic knowledge and patience, and my coaster buddy colleague Professor Dana Anderson, a distinguished and successful academic (and fellow rollercoaster philosopher) whom I admire greatly, and who has also managed to be captured in the single dorkiest onride photo of all eternity.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

You don't need a degree in engineering to design roller coasters.

You need a degree in psychology.

John Allen, legendary 20th-Century coaster designer (Cartmell, 1985)

### Background to the practice

This practice-led project is the culmination of both the development of my documentary practice and my lifelong passion for rollercoasters. I am a media producer with almost two decades of experience, producing television commercials, corporate films and media campaigns as part of the operation of my advertising agency, as well as two small television series (one drama, one documentary). My previous feature-length documentary *The Bedroom Commandments* (2012) was an exploration of sexuality vs. organised religion, and was screened at festivals around the world. This project, *Signature Attraction*, links my active documentary practice with my obsession with rollercoasters from a very early age.

I have fond memories from early childhood of being obsessed with these magnificent machines. Living in regional Australia, I rarely had the chance to actually get close to a rollercoaster. When the opportunity arose to visit a park, my cherished memories are of golden-hued summer days filled with excitement, forbidden foods and high emotions. Of course this included being scared witless actually boarding and riding the rollercoasters, these fantastic, alien devices with their sinuous curves, volcanic variations in speed and direction, and their deliciously thunderous, substantial roars.

I suffered bullying at school, thanks to being overweight and sexually confused, and theme parks were my safe place, where the real became gloriously surreal. I knew these visits were few and far between so I felt I needed to experience everything as vividly as possible, and as fully as I knew how, to imprint it on my mind for later reference.

As I grew older I was lucky to gain the freedom to explore many varied theme parks and rollercoasters all over the world. I visited gigantic, corporatised American parks where thrills were carefully manufactured and metered out like the mass-market product they were, and elaborate European parks which rivaled natural parks in their beauty, with coasters hidden around the corner from magnificent lakes and castles. Also I visited Asian parks that never found a small animal they could not anthropomorphise and slap on a ride as a mascot.

However, despite this dizzying wealth of worldwide amusement, I found my outlook on theme parks changing. They are ultimately crassly commercial, with some major US parks placing product advertisement stickers *directly onto* their rollercoasters and inside the ride stations, and their exhortations to challenge yourself and conquer your fears on what were in actuality incredibly safe machines fit into the broad marketing template of other forms of mass entertainment. My vision of parks and rollercoasters and their shiny expensive machines as a little piece of heaven on earth became one of concern. Were they just another symptom of the lazy, docile, complicit society we lived in, patting ourselves on the back for completing mass-marketed, easily-achievable *challenges*, that were nowhere near as profound or impressive as we thought them to be?

As I pondered this new stance, I became an avid consumer of fan-made video pieces about rollercoasters, found mostly online, as well as corporate projects touting the latest and greatest coasters in their respective parks and noticed something missing. While there was plenty of excitement about speed and loops and record-breaking, nobody stopped to ask why rollercoasters meant so much to those who loved them, and what they actually did for us as a society. Therefore, I decided this would be the topic for my film.

### **The research project**

Rollercoasters are icons of amusement and leisure, and even if people have little intention of ever riding one, they know what they are and the kinds of experiences they offer. They have become part of Western vernacular. Nobody questions the

inclusion of a thrill ride in an everyday phrase such as *It's been a rollercoaster year* or *The stock market has been on a rollercoaster* to give the sentence meaning.

Traditional commercial documentaries focused on rollercoasters have mostly been little more than public relations exercises, and have generally followed a very similar and superficial format, how many loops does the ride feature, will it be completed on time, will the weather clear in order for the deadlines to be met, will planning and regulation be approved, and always with a successful and upbeat ending. National Geographic's *Megastructures: The Ultimate Rollercoaster* (2005), details the conception and building of the 456-foot *Kindga Ka* launched coaster in New Jersey, Discovery Channel's *Expedition Everest: Building A Thrill Ride* (2006) does the same for Disney's 100 million dollar Everest / Yeti attack rollercoaster in Florida; and National Geographic's *World's Fastest Roller Coaster* (2011) covers the building of Abu Dhabi's *Formula Rossa* launched coaster. This type of program creates issues with longevity by focusing on record-breakers, the tallest, fastest, most inversions, because commercial forces dictate these records must be broken to claim the crown.

Conversely, fan-made documentaries are often presented in a travelogue-style, *Our day in the park* format. For example, *A Day At Six Flags* (SkateboardT508, 2012) is a self-recorded video diary by 'SkateboardT508' of all the rollercoasters and rides this user enjoyed during his day at Six Flags. This includes self-recorded on-ride footage with some elements of commentary before, during and after the ride. *Apocalypse: Last Stand Six Flags America HD Full Experience* (TheCoasterNinja, 2013) shows the entire ride experience of this standup coaster (from approaching the station, standing in the queue, watching the ride and then a POV of the entire ride). Finally, there are amateur *making-of* documentaries, for example Devin Olson's *Gatekeeper at Cedar Point Documentary: From Dreams to Screams* (Olson, 2013). This is an 18-minute project giving a short history of the Cedar Point amusement park and their plans to build the winged coaster *Gatekeeper*. These kinds of films often strive to emulate the higher-budget commercial projects in terms of detailing the dizzying statistics and the expected



opening date for a new ride, and the manufactured struggles that occur before this date, with little, if any introspection.

However, to date there are few documentaries, either independently produced or sponsored by large theme parks, that explore deeper, more philosophical territory. This project asks the question why rollercoasters mean so much to those who love them, and how can we seek to understand the human needs that led to their creation. Furthermore, there has been little attempt in the documentary form to understand what rollercoasters mean for the hardcore enthusiast or fanatic.

### **Research questions**

The central questions driving the documentary film are:

Why do rollercoasters mean so much to those who love them?

What are they actually doing for us as a society, and why do we seem to need them?

The research questions focussing the research enquiry in the exegesis, which respond to the final documentary and the process of making the film are,

What are the challenges inherent in producing a documentary focusing on a niche subgroup, when you identify as being part of this group?

How does the documentary created as part of this project contribute to the existing body of documentaries about rollercoasters and extend the possibilities of the rollercoaster documentary?

The documentary at the core of this project is entitled *Signature Attraction*. This title emerged because it is said that the rollercoaster is the *tentpole*, or the single most iconic attraction that both defines and leads visitors to a theme park. As Neil (1981) encapsulates “For recognizability and relevant associations, the rollercoaster is the best symbol of the relaxation, fun and adventure we seek at the amusement park.” (p. 115)

This exegesis aims to conceptualise knowledge domains that frame the epistemological approach of a documentary that attempts to understand how

rollercoasters are more than just screams for enthusiasts. It achieves this from the perspective of both a documentary practitioner and a lover of rollercoasters. What follows also reflects on my practice and explores the challenges faced in completing the documentary and how the final product sits in relation to other contemporary documentaries exploring the subject of the rollercoaster, and those that ride them.

## **Methodology**

This practice-led project comprises of a thirty-one minute documentary film and a written exegesis. The creative practice is weighted at 70% and the written exegesis 30%.

This research employs a practice-led mixed method methodology. Primary data generated from the study that inform the findings are extrapolated from semi-structured and structured interviews, as well as participant observation in the form of participatory documentary filmmaking.

The data-gathering for the project was driven by participatory and semi-structured interviews, because “participatory research methods are geared towards planning and conducting the research process with those people whose life-world and meaningful actions are under study.” (Bergold et.al, 2012, p. 12)

### *Research design: Action Research Cycles*

This study employed a practice-led approach that consisted of three major iterative cycles of practice, based broadly on Kemmis et. al’s (2002, p.130) four steps of action research, being Planning, Acting, Observing and Reflecting. The *Reflecting* phase is arguably the most critical of the steps, as it allows the data gathered and work undertaken thus far to be fully analysed. It allows the work that was previously performed intuitively to be deconstructed in a conscious and controlled manner. This enables new insights, which in turn inform the next cycle.

It is important to understand that the reflective practice cycle was an ongoing and iterative cycle that looped as many times as it needed to in order to keep the film moving ever forwards. It is also important to note that practitioners are often so focused on being *in* their practice, they do not reflect *on* their practice. The action research/reflective practice cycle in Figure 1 is designed to accommodate this.

The action research cycles took place broadly as follows.

#### *Action Research/ Reflective Practice Cycle 1*

In 2013, the data collection began with interviews with coaster enthusiasts, park management and academics in Hong Kong and the United States, interviews with the American Coaster Enthusiasts (ACE) group at their Annual *Coaster Con*, (including sharing all meals and volunteering at the Coaster Con shop). For reference, *Coaster Con* is a week-long event where a large number of ACE members descend on multiple pre-planned amusement parks and enjoy *Exclusive Ride Time*, or ERT, in which only ACE members are allowed on the rollercoasters for predetermined periods. This formed the largest single data-gathering cycle. The result of this was the first draft of the film.

#### *Action Research/ Reflective Practice Cycle 2*

Prior to heading back to the United States to film Cycle 2, multiple interviews with family and friends were filmed for the documentary, discussing my background in relation to coaster fandom and commenting on my upcoming fortieth birthday. These interviews also asked questions and explored what it meant to be a 40 year old man still obsessed with, what could be regarded by some, as kids rides. A discussion between a psychologist and myself was also filmed, in an attempt to uncover more about my childhood and my coaster obsession. The filming trip culminated in a visit to Disneyland for my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, which becomes one of the strongest elements in the personal story depicted in the film.

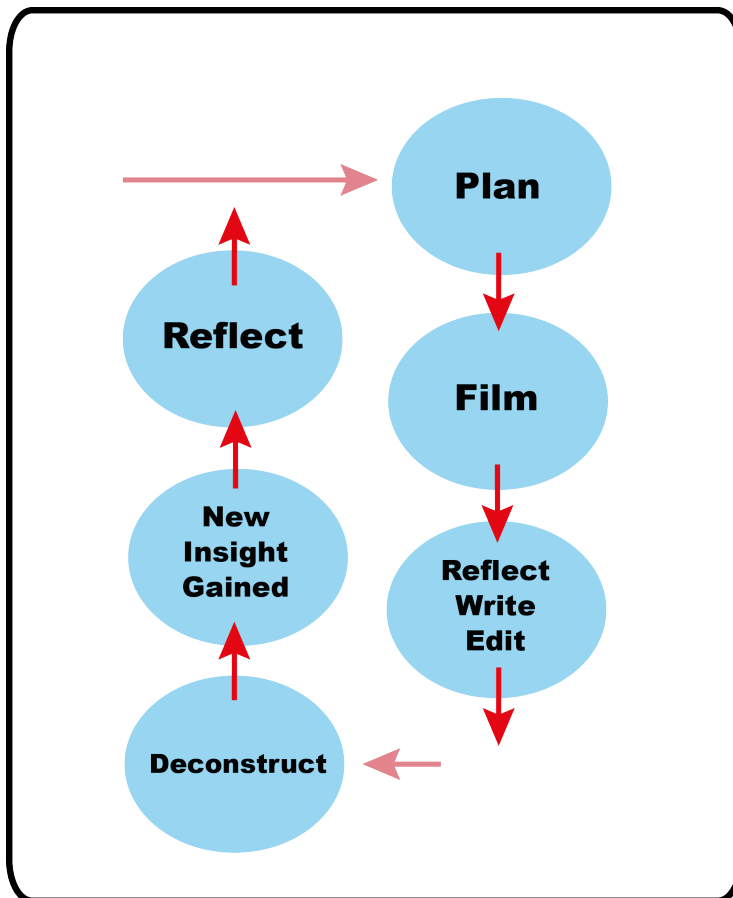
*Action Research/ Reflective Practice Cycle 3*

The final major phase saw another return to the United States, to present research at the American Culture Association *What Rollercoasters Teach Us About Being Human*, and to undertake and refine more of the previous interviews, as well as conduct new interviews with engineers in the ride industry, software designers for a rollercoaster simulator, and record an extensive interview with Prof. Nicholas Christenfeld, a professor of psychology from San Diego.

**Figure 1: Action Research / Reflective Practice cycle employed during the project**

As illustrated in Figure 1, the model I employed also reflects an iterative version of the form of reflective practice proposed by Tacchi et al. (2003) and they identify two phases of research “baseline research (before the project starts) and monitoring and evaluation research (to assess how the project has developed).”

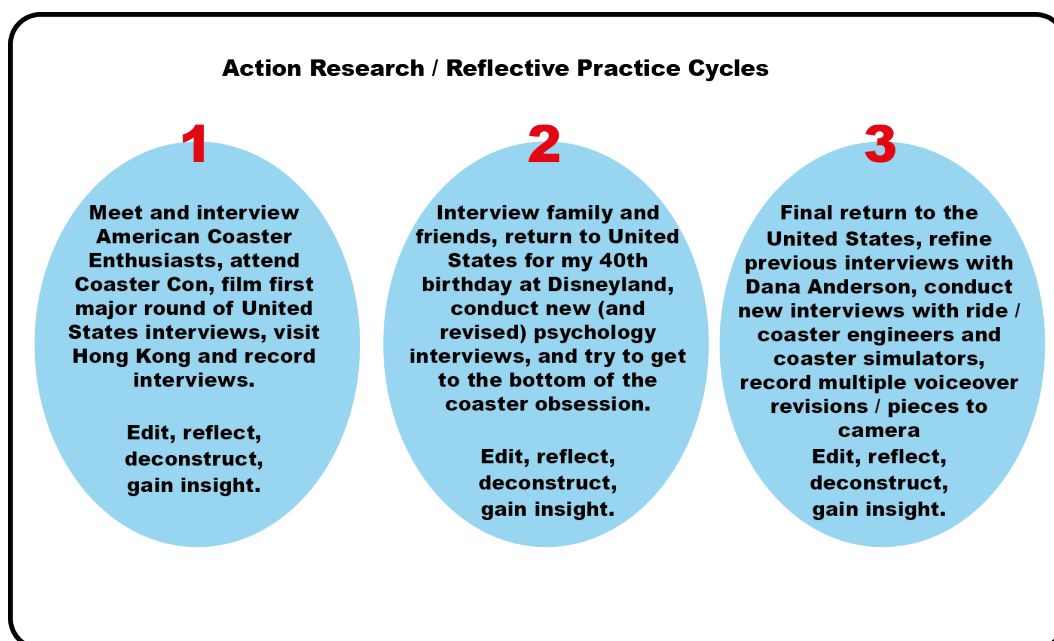
(p. 3)



**Source:** (Tacchi, et al., 2003, p. 4)

In between each of the major data gathering phases, the data analysis was an ongoing part of the research process. The video data was analysed directly, and transcripts were made of each of the major interviews to provide a secondary source of data analysis. This “reflexive account of video data” is required because “things become visible because of how we see them, rather than simply because they are observable.” (Jewitt, 2012, p. 12) As the practice cycles occurred, the thesis informed the data gathering by providing the information underpinning the research questions, the data gathering informed the thesis by highlighting areas of research still to be done and challenging preconceived notions, and it impacted the drafts and direction of the film. Figure 2 provides an overview of the Action Research / Reflective Practice cycles undertaken during this project.

**Figure 2: Action Research / Reflective Practice Cycles Overview**



*Reflective professional practice*

The documentarian always impacts his or her finished product with their own personal opinion, no matter how objective they attempt to be. In the book *The Art Of Record: A Critical Introduction to Documentary*, Corner (1996) states that

“Documentary is the loose and often highly contested label given, internationally, to certain kinds of film and television (and sometimes radio programmes) which reflect and report on ‘the real’ through the use of recorded images and sounds of actuality”. (p.2) He notes that the way the pieces of images and sounds are then combined into expositions and arguments are sources of great discussion.

Nichols (2010) outlines in his book *Introduction to Documentary* that there are multiple primary documentary forms, including: participatory, expository, and observational. The participatory documentary is where the “filmmaker interacts with his or her social actors, participates in shaping what happens before the camera: interviews are a prime example” (p.151). The expository documentary contains segments that “speak directly to viewer with voice over” (p.149). The observational documentary is where filmmakers “look on as social actors go about their lives as if the camera were not present” (p.151). *Signature Attraction* contains elements of all three.

As a practice-led research project, my film was not originally intended to break new ground in terms of the development of documentary form, however as discussed in Chapter 3 I suggest that ultimately it does. There are many forms of documentary, which makes it a challenge to rigidly define *any* documentary. This includes *Signature Attraction*. This is not the negative point that it might first appear. The loose definition of the form allows for endless flexibility, “We [filmmakers] can accept this fluidity as cause for celebration. It makes for a dynamic, evolving form.” (Nichols, 2010, p. 153). Smith et.al (2009) also underscore that this kind of research aims to “illuminate or bring about new knowledge and understanding”, (p. 47) in many and varied output formats.

The film was also a useful example of reflective practice for my development as a documentary practitioner. With the cyclical loops of planning, execution and critique previously mentioned, the reflective process gave myself (and potentially other film practitioners) a “coherent framework within which they can develop the methods and tools for deepening and documenting their emerging understandings of practice.” (Barrett et. al, 2014, p. 153)

The major challenges were the tensions between pursuing the answer to the first set of research questions, whilst at the same time creating an engaging film with a universal storyline. A film which simply analysed rollercoasters may have been far too niche to attract a wider audience, therefore the story that developed in the film expanded to reference the loss of innocence as people age, and my specific struggles in coming to terms with the reality that theme parks were not benign dream-factories, but rather capitalist institutions, and trying to still draw pleasure from them and be at peace with this fact.

### *Interviews*

The interviewees interviewed for this research project were initially drawn from existing connections within the rollercoaster community. Selections of participants who were interviewed on camera, with reference to the area they represent in the film, are outlined in Figure 3. Other participants, executives, various professionals and academics identified as relevant to the project included but not limited to ride designers, academics working in relevant related fields, enthusiasts, were sourced from the internet. However, the larger part of the interview group, at least in the earlier phases of the project, were self-identified members of the rollercoaster community, identified and contacted through social media and real-world networks. As I identify as a member of this community, the challenge was to engage and direct a project both from within the community, while also, to an extent, maintaining my critical distance as an observer. The process enabled a greater understanding of the coaster community and of my own preconceived notions of others in the same community.

Some of the participants' contributions to the film would have benefited from at least secondary interviews to further clarify points raised in the subsequent viewing of draft footage. Nevertheless, there seemed to be generally consistent responses between park management, academics and enthusiasts. A sample of the questions used for interviews with key informants is available in Appendix 1.

**Figure 3: A selection of interview participants**

PARTICIPANT	LOCATION	PROFESSION	AREA OF FILM
Paul Martin	Australia	Psychologist	Psychology
Dr Margee Kerr	USA	Sociologist	Sociology / Academic
Michael Stevens	New Zealand	Sociologist	Sociology / Academic
Margaret Mun Chee Yung	Hong Kong	Academic	Asian perspective / Academic)
Marina Guo	China	Academic	Asian perspective / Academic)
Tony Clark	USA	Cedar Point Park PR manager	Industry
Dick Knoebel	USA	Knoebels Theme park owner	Industry
Joe Muscato	USA	Knoebels theme park PR manager	Industry
Jerry Willard	USA	American Coaster Enthusiasts President	Enthusiasts
Dr John Gerard	USA	American Coaster Enthusiasts – ex PR President	Enthusiasts
John McGregor	USA	American Coaster Enthusiasts member	Enthusiasts
Pete Owens	USA	Dollywood PR director	Industry
Associate Professor Dana Anderson	USA	Academic	Sociology / Enthusiast / Academic
Cathy Magi	Australia	Artist	Friend
David Cobb	USA	Theme park ride designer	Industry
Professor Nicholas Christenfeld	USA	Academic	Psychology / Academic
Pat Koch	USA	Alabama Splash Adventure park owner	Industry
Jeremy Thompson	USA	RollercoasterPhilosphy.com owner	Industry / Philosophy
Tom Zelif	USA	No Limits – Rollercoaster simulator designer	Industry

*Documentary as a form of data collection*

The filmic form of documentary was chosen for being a popular and accepted narrative device and an effective means of exploring political and philosophical topics, as proven with box office hits such as *Super Size Me* (2004), *Fahrenheit 911* (2004), *20 Feet From Stardom* (2013), *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2012), and *Citizenfour* (2014) to name but a few. Documentary and digital video are widely considered to be an acceptable form of academic research data gathering, as Shrum et al. (2005) argue “in one sense, digital video is simply a variety of traditional ethnography, but it responds to new social conditions.” (p. 2)



Documentary relies primarily on video and audio recordings, “which are the staples of any qualitative study” (Ratcliff, 2003, p.113) However, in video recording, the researcher is making decisions and subtly enhancing their bias before the data-gathering has even commenced. Examples include the decision of where to place the camera, when to start the recording, and even what kind of microphone to use. For example, a closely-microphoned participant would result in different recording than that of a room-only microphone, which would allow other participants and room ambiance to be recorded. As Jewitt (2012) claims “at the centre of the debate of when video counts as data is the question of what meaning is and how it is captured in research processes.” (p. 11)

The relative obtrusiveness of the video and audio recording apparatus during my data gathering did not present an issue for the both the production and the study as all participants were familiar with the researcher, at least via email, before recording took place. Erickson (1992) has argued “when trust is developed and participants agree with the reasons for the research, a video camera is no more intrusive than taking field notes” (p. 201) However, attempts to ask the question in a different way in order to obtain a more considered response was met with substantially similar statements, even a sense of mild resentment that the author was trying to drain the fun out of the subject by overanalysing it. Upon returning from the first phase of research and presenting this for supervision, the decision was to not see this as a failure in interviewing or participant selection, but to view this as the communities’ general reluctance to answer.

## **Chapter breakdown**

The exegesis is structured as follows, the first chapter serves as a background to the project, both thesis and documentary, outlines research questions, data collection and research cycles, reflective professional practice, and a selection of the interviewees involved in the project.

The second chapter is the literature review, which reviews the knowledge domains that inform fundamental ideas in the documentary and the research in the exegesis. It defines the rollercoaster and contextualises the theme park in sociological, psychological and business/marketing knowledge domains. It also offers a contextual review of the varied forms of existing documentaries about rollercoasters, and where the documentary produced as part of this project sits in comparison.

The third and fourth chapters discuss the results and propose conclusions.

The documentary included on the attached flash drive is a half-hour international exploration of both the research topic and the author's personal journey, discovering his identity inside and outside the group of rollercoaster enthusiasts he interviews. The documentary features interviews with local and international academics, park operators, rollercoaster enthusiasts, and family members. The documentary should ideally be viewed first as it addresses the first two questions in the exegesis, followed by reading the exegesis itself, which frames the documentary and then expands on the challenges encountered in the second set of questions.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

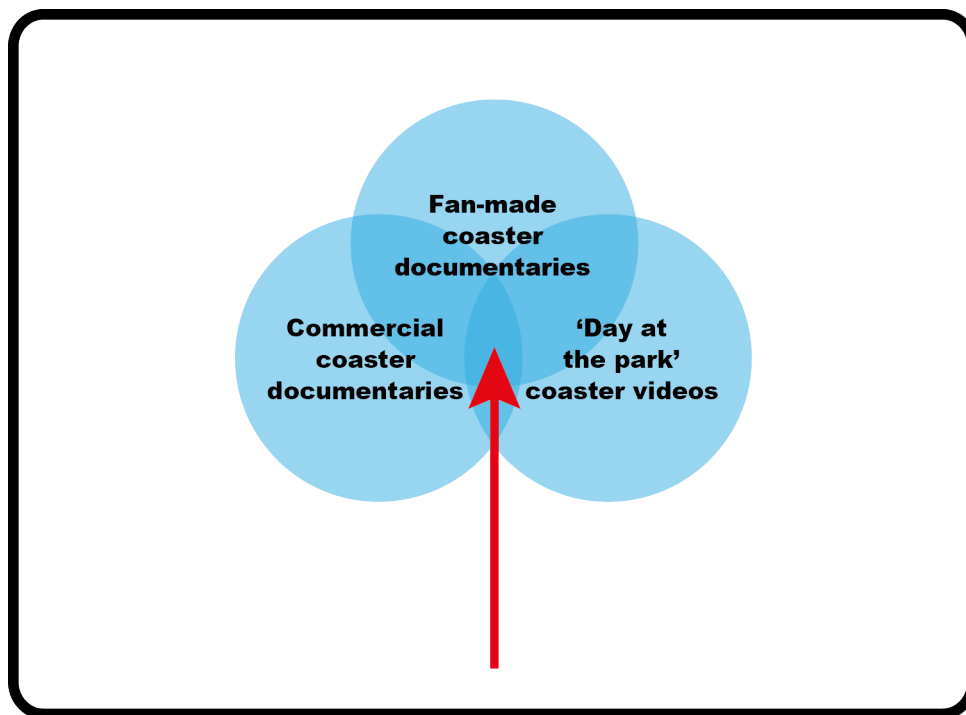
### Introduction

This chapter summarises key aspects of contemporary academic knowledge about rollercoasters from psychological, sociological, business and marketing perspectives. It also details the state of the rollercoaster documentary genre, providing examples of the various subtypes that exist within this genre.

The literature review for this study frames the insights that emerge from the documentary and the conceptual domains that underpin this practice-led project. It has two core objectives, and they are to examine issues in the literature that contextualise the rollercoaster in terms of psychological, business, leisure studies and theme parks standpoints. The second is to analyse commercially produced rollercoaster-focused documentaries and personally produced, or *fan-made* documentaries.

Due to the scope of this study, the literature review does not reference statistics, technical specifications or even name the vast majority of the coasters shown. Nor does it provide coverage of literature and perspectives on rollercoasters and safety issues, impacts of the ride on the body, or construction techniques used to create these machines.

**Figure 4: Placement of *Signature Attraction* within the existing rollercoaster documentary landscape**



### **Defining the roller coaster**

According to the online Oxford English Dictionary (2015) rollercoasters can be defined as “an attraction at an amusement park or fairground consisting of a light railway track with small, open cars, on which people ride at high speed through sharp turns, steep slopes, etc”. In addition, and perhaps more tellingly, a second alternative definition from the same source makes clear they have entered our vernacular, and speaks to rollercoasters as more of a psychological experience by defining them as “Something, [especially] an experience or event, characterized by repeated abrupt or unpredictable changes.”

Additionally, Anderson (1999) adds “The rollercoaster as an abstract notion is an icon of leisure, and the recognised sign of amusement.” (p. 1) At the same time, they are complex mechanical machines with a wealth of patents that attest to this complexity, from rotating tracks (Mares et. al 1998), to specialised wheels (Bradley et.al, 2002), among many other examples.

For the most part, rollercoasters do not exist in isolation and are one of a number of rides that feature in these parks. There are some coasters, like Tokyo's *Thunder Dolphin*, which is the last coaster left in a small park in the middle of the city, and Las Vegas' *Desperado*, which was built to promote a casino, that do exist as sole attractions unto themselves, yet these examples are exceptions. Unlike other rides typically found in theme parks, such as *Merry-Go-Rounds* or *Tilt-A-Whirls*, rollercoasters offer a very specific leisure experience. Due to their generally large size, it is easy to see major modern rollercoasters from afar, and as such they create, and in some instances dominate, the skylines of modern amusement parks. In a very simplistic sense, rollercoasters are designed to give riders a thrilling physiological experience. As such, the psychological torment they deliberately inflict on would-be riders and passive observers begins well before one enters the park.

The literature covering rollercoasters is often inextricably linked to theme parks, and can be broken into three broad categories: the psychological, sociological, and commercial.

### **Psychological**

Rollercoasters trade on primeval human fears, the loss of control being one of the most elemental (Minton, 1999) and ultimately “the most prosaic and universal of fears: impending death.” (Bourke, 2005, p. 388) Chambers (2004) asks in his research on fear, irrationality and risk perception what it is that makes us scared, what irrational thought processes can accompany fear and how fear can transform our view of the world, finding that what one person labels as an irrational fear will not be irrational to another. Moreover, for Chambers, these basic instincts can be handily exploited, and as he puts it “In carefully packaged forms, fear can be bought and sold like a commodity.” (p. 1047) Chambers also poses “It is unclear why a roller coaster should trigger fear. Surely it does not stem from the belief that the rider might be injured...If that were a real concern, few likely would ride.” (p. 1047)

Zolotow et al. (1945, p.3) believe the buttons that rollercoasters push reference emotions from childhood, their concept of “secure insecurity” refers to a child being thrown in the air when young, screaming in terror, then wanting to do it over. In this way, an adult riding a rollercoaster connects the perverse pleasure of riding to triggering a pattern of emotions that return the adult to this childlike state.

While rollercoasters use tricks like creating the sensations of sudden uncontrolled motion and / or freefalling, it is incorrect to refer to the experience they offer as simulations. Rollercoasters do not actually recreate the experience of flying in a jet fighter (*Flight Deck*, Canada’s Wonderland) or a race car (*Top Thrill Dragster*, Cedar Point, or *Formula Rossa*, Ferrari World). As Sorkin (1992) states,

Such simulations depend on the existence of some real, external referent, a referent which is ever elsewhere; the authenticity of the substitution always depends on the knowledge, however faded, of some absent ‘genuine’. (p. 216)

It could be said the experience of being on a rollercoaster is a unique experience, and one of the referents is our deep-seated fear of falling, of being out of control. Rollercoasters therefore force us to relive our primal fears and have us pay for the privilege. Authors such as Anderson (1999) even view the rollercoaster. “as a site of self-definition.” He has argued,

They [thrillseekers] purchase the bleary photographs of themselves from the cameras mounted at the first drop of the more popular coasters, preserving that liminal moment of fear and anticipation becoming jouissance. (p.19)

The experience of riding a rollercoaster also produces potent physiological effects. For riders, it appears that their bodies respond physically to the drops and sudden speeds encountered on thrill rides as if they were *actually* falling off a cliff or being launched from a cannon.” Tannenbaum (2012) states in an online article that an individuals “brain and body react as if they are experiencing the terror.

The fight or flight hormones are released, the result, you literally feel more alive. When it's over your body returns to a calmer state, relieved you have 'survived'.

However, perhaps it is not *on* the ride that riders are primarily challenged, but rather in the queue where they *commit* to ride, and actually go through with it, often as part of a group. Williams (2014) argues in his online article "Horror With Friends" that "Fear binds us . . . experiencing it together, even in this instance by experiencing it fictitiously, renews a sense of security in those around us, driving us away from those things that trouble us and towards those we trust." Though it is possible manufacturers and designers have moved past merely imitating real fears, as Anderson (1999) proposes, "These rides appear less concerned with approximating reality than with presenting an *enhanced* approximation that, more than merely simulating or duplicating the real, *surpasses* it." (p.3) Whether we think we are responding only to the obvious twists and turns of the ride, or reacting on a deep and primal level to a bodily threat, there is more going on beneath the surface than we give credit to.

## **Sociology**

The majority of the Western world has a paucity of paid vacation time. France leads the way with 30 legally mandated paid days off per year, with some workplaces in the United States having zero. (Ray et. al, 2013, p. 5) Living in a society that champions industrialisation, overworked Americans may agree with Rojek (1995) that beyond just extracting more work from individuals, industrialisation has also "polluted leisure with a constant time-consciousness and guilt about activity which was not directly productive" (p.184). At the same time, capitalism helped redefine leisure in the late eighteenth century "as a distinct non-work time." (Fulcher, 2015, p. 30) It was perhaps inevitable that this would lead to new forms of capitalism through the commercialisation of leisure, thus setting the stage for the arrival of the modern amusement park. Having a limited number of holidays also meant that the thrills and escape the public craved had to be packaged for quick consumption. Accordingly, the particular success of commercialised leisure spaces like Disneyland, where visitors can experience multiple themed worlds and thrilling, unusual sensations in the same place and on

the same day, dovetailed neatly with the limited vacation time and compressed experience-seeking desires of the public.

Bower (1996) demonstrates that the desire for high excitement and thrilling behaviour, whether legal or illegal, is influenced by our genetic makeup. In his online article about how inheritance shapes aspects of individual personality *Gene tied to excitable personality*, Bower questions that if thrill seeking is associated with criminality and an increased risk of death, why would the genes that generate this behavior survive? Roberts (1994) suggests in his online article *Risk* about the leisure pursuit of danger that it is because individuals willing to take risks would benefit an entire group by exploring new areas. Ultimately by testing the safety of food, and being the first to explore uncharted areas, these individuals may play the role of guinea pigs for the benefit of the wider group.

Nowadays it is no longer considered adequate for amusement and theme parks to simply build mammoth coasters. To truly captivate the public imagination, rides must become *genuine* monsters to be conquered. This trend is evidenced in the very naming conventions of coasters over the years. The innocently titled *Scenic Railway* (1898), *Gee Whiz Dip the Dips* (1902) and *Zippin Pippin* (1923) became the war-themed *Atom Smasher* (1938), *Screechin' Eagle* (1940), *Sky Blazer* (1946), *Rocket* (1948), then later the even more portentous *Abyss*, *Hades*, *Banshee*, *Goliath*, and what other fruition to reach, *Apocalypse*. (Roller Coaster Database, 2014; see also (Anderson, 1999)

However, within the economy of thrill seeking, an intriguing distinction exists between *earned* and *cheap* thrills, a distinction maintained most vehemently, as might be expected, by those who would claim that *their* thrill was the more righteous or deserved. An *earned* thrill, say, climbing a dangerous mountain, which requires training, finances, and dedication, is seen as somehow more virtuous than what might uncharitably be described as a *cheap* thrill, a *lesser* experience, like climbing aboard a rollercoaster, which may well require the same amount of mental willpower for some as mountain climbing. If we are all part of the same broad group “thrill-seeking personalities [who] are apparently drawn to



pursuits as varied as viewing scary movies, rollercoasters, gambling and extreme sports”, (Beck, 2011) then can we not all just get along?

However such distinctions may be defined and defended, that all thrill experiences ultimately have much in common, particularly from psychological and physiological perspectives. To continue the above comparison, climbers and coaster riders both engage in forms of critical analysis before deciding to embark on their respective treks. (Skeel et. al, 2007). Both climbers and coaster riders *think* they have some form of control over their experiences, which is essential to the production of thrill, as the “enjoyment of high arousal associated with taking risks,” as Trimpop et. al (1998) have examined, “is likely to take place under circumstances where [individuals] have a relatively high degree of subjectively perceived control.” (p. 240)

Is it possible the rise of adventure sports and theme parks with their record-breaking rollercoasters are because we need a substitute, a way to keep our hardwired instincts primed for the just out-of-sight threat in the dark part of the cave, even though it is no longer a rational fear? Svendsen (2008) discusses the positive aspects of fear in his book on the topic “A creature without the capacity for fear will have a worse chance of surviving” (p.21). It is said by Chambers that only in societies “When infectious diseases are eliminated can they indulge in exaggerated alarms...our fear is a byproduct of luxury, but it doesn’t make it less real.” (p.1050) So we are left to create new, modern fears like daunting rollercoasters, and horror movies. Williams (2014) is discussing horror movies in his online article, but the descriptions fit that of a rollercoaster experience just as aptly:

The pleasures of horror and comedy are often accentuated by awareness not only of the images on the screen but an awareness of one’s fellow audience members... Additionally, I suspect that there is some sense of safety that is created by knowing that others around you are sharing your fears.

The most profound shared aspect of these experiences, whether they represent a genuine or perceived risk, is that the end result they produce within the nervous system is essentially the same. Parks and coaster designers have so expertly engineered the ride experience that the physical reactions we feel when we return, giddily, to friends and family are virtually identical to those of a climber would experience who has just left his boot prints at 20,000 feet. Both experiences provoke the brain to “respond . . . by triggering the release of a potent cocktail of biochemicals to deal with the body's stress . . . which can suppress pain and boost the glow of euphoria that follows.” (Highfield, 2006) These processes underlie the high one naturally receives as a result of attaining a hard-won *peak experience*, a psychological term describing the feelings generated by great achievement or a personal triumph. This, Conley (2007) explains, is “comparable to being in the zone or in the flow,” such moments of achievement have the distinct feeling that “what ought to be just is. Peak experiences are transcendental moments when everything seems to fit together perfectly.” (p. 6)

Individuals can enjoy these moments of bliss in very similar ways regardless of their driving mechanisms. There seems little to be gained in comparatively judging the experiences that generated them as more or less worthy of merit, when the end result is the same. Quoted in Weir (2010), Eli Simon says of his successful conquest of Mount Fitz Roy, a southern peak in the Andes “I had never worked so hard at achieving one single goal in my entire life. Reaching the summit makes you feel like you're on top of the world.” (p. 4)

An alternative view of a personally profound achievement comes below from a sixth-grader recounting the experience of braving their first big coaster at Hersheypark, an amusement park with large rollercoasters in Pennsylvania, in the United States,

I was scared for my life as I looked at the size and speed of the coaster...I gulped and asked myself repeatedly why in the world I let myself on this insanely large ride...as the ride went on I found a smile creep its way across my face. I could not have been more proud of myself that night.  
(rollercoaster698, 2012)

It must be acknowledged that a challenge for average individuals and one for high-achieving and potentially well-connected and sponsored mountain climbers are two distinctly different issues, and what ultimately constitutes a thrill is an intensely personal experience. For some, stepping onto a daunting rollercoaster, a machine designed specifically to intimidate, is every bit as challenging as the mental requirements for an experienced cliff diver or rock climber to make their respective plunges or climbs. To conclude this point, as Dana Anderson observes in *Signature Attraction*:

One person's kiddie coaster might be another's Everest. If it thrills you, you know it thrills you — I don't think you start thinking about whether it's earned or cheap or you deserve it until you start thinking about the kinds of thrills other people have — and you compare it to somebody else's Everest. But in the moment of the thrill you're not thinking about somebody else's thrill...and that in and of itself is valuable. (Anderson, 2013)

## **Business and Marketing**

Theme parks are far more complex than simply places to whittle away a few hours. Young et al. (2002) have found they “are major pilgrimage sites within today's mass cultures, they create a haven away from the crisis — they are places where modern people can alleviate the anxieties of their lives.” They also discuss that theme parks need to be removed from everyday life, physically as well as hierarchically, “to create a space where everyone can be assumed to be equal.” (p.4) They also make the excellent point that while it is generally accepted theme parks originally began as actual displays of parklands in Europe, as displays of wealth and cultivation, they now exist to amass wealth through the manipulation of culture and leisure.

The Walt Disney Company brings in over \$25 billion dollars per year from their multiple holdings, including theme parks of course, and are identified as “the single most powerful force in the globalisation of western culture.” (Mayer, 2007, p.1) Rollercoasters are significant investments for theme parks, including Disney.

For example, their *Expedition Everest* coaster cost over \$US100 million dollars and the signature attraction of Cars Land at their recently revamped *California Adventure* theme park is a \$US200 million dollar launched family rollercoaster named *Radiator Springs Racers*. Theme park titans like Disney understand the ongoing and reliable appeal of the rollercoaster, or they simply would not be making these investments.

Rollercoasters are icons of the theme park, and in fact they are so well known they have become the very best way to market theme parks. Anderson (1999) notes, that rollercoasters are “the recognized sign of amusement” and that they “symbolize the amusement park”. He argues that even if the coasters are not all that impressive, or the primary drawcard of a park, their very presence “immediately communicates [this] in a way that no other single image can”. (p.102)

To further the point, Anderson (1999) continues to note “Parks depend heavily on marketing and repeat business, particularly among the 18-to 24-year-old set, and exit polls show that what brings them back are thrill rides, and no thrill ride is more marketable than a new roller coaster”. (p. 6)

Cartmell’s (1987) *The Incredible Scream Machine* is a rich and methodical history of where rollercoasters came from, beginning with early European ice sleds through to far more modern rollercoasters. He makes the point that “amusement rides are often parodies of extensions of outside technology including railroads, trolleys, autos, steam engines, rockets and bridge building” (p. 60). This is an extension of the simulation or referent argument discussed previously. The issue is that the book is confined to documenting only the facts. What is established though is that theme parks are big business. According to the 2014 report from Themed Entertainment Association, there were “more than 214 million visitors to the world’s top 25 theme parks in 2013.” (2015, p. 7) Research also suggests that attendance seems to be unaffected by terrorist attacks (in 2001) and economic downturns (in 2009). “When parks reinvest in a major new ride or show or zone, the increase in attendance tends to be in the high single digits, whereas a recession impacts in the low single digits.” (Geissler et.al, 2011, p. 128) In terms of their future, it seems theme parks will continue as long as capitalism does, because as

Lukas (2008, p.15) suggests “The theme park will continue to be a popular form that develops with the spread of Western-style consumer capitalism.”

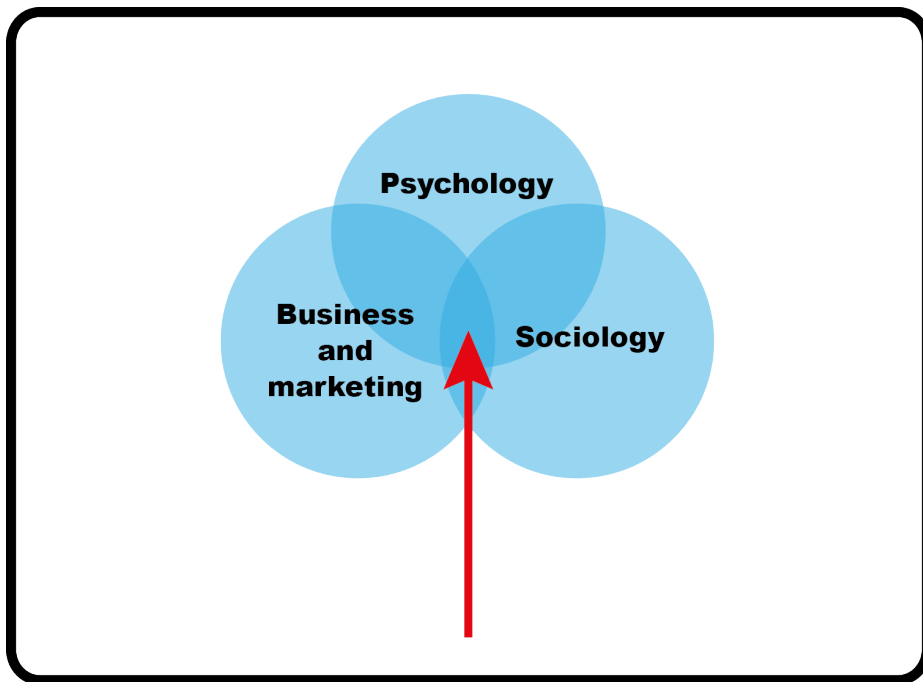
The rollercoaster also plays a part in the commodification of aggressive thrills, where coasters promote their namesake films: *Terminator: Salvation*, *Green Lantern* and *Batman: The Dark Knight* are three such rollercoasters that function essentially as ridden advertisements. Films also promote rides — Disney’s *Haunted Mansion* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* began life as theme park rides, then became films that somehow functioned as both commercial entities unto themselves *and* advertisements for the rides they sprang from. There are also video games that promote their parent films *and* rides (*Green Lantern*, *Harry Potter*, *Superman*) and theme parks that market films directly from within their grounds. Six Flags promoted films *The Smurfs* and *The Karate Kid* to waiting patrons on their *Six Flags Media Network*, which consists of screens blaring promotions at park-goers as they wait in line (PRNewsWire, 2011). Even the beloved Matterhorn Bobsleds at Disneyland, the world’s first tubular steel continuous track rollercoaster, were inspired by the 1959 Disney film *Third Man On The Mountain*. And in a circular marketing triumph<sup>1</sup>, Sony even promotes the Blu-Ray edition of the *Green Lantern* film as “an action-packed roller coaster ride that’s guaranteed to have you on the edge of your seat from start to finish.” In this new *Amusement-Industrial Complex*, where does the ride end and the film begin? Rather than attempt to answer this question, it is perhaps more useful to consider coasters as a modern addition to the transmedia experience of a particular film, game, or text. “We can only approach texts through paratexts” Gray (2010) notes in his article about paratexts, with paratexts being “texts that prepare us for other texts.” (p. 25) Like other paratexts, a coaster viewed as a paratext for a connected film or media experience, for example, *Batman* and *Green Lantern* are just two films which are also rollercoasters — may ultimately enhance the original texts that ground it, granting them “increased significance as they are fragmented and reworked.” (Jenkins et. al, 2013, p. 51) It may be that the original works are somehow lacking, and their subsequent expression as rides actually enhances

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<sup>1</sup> *Green Lantern* began life as a feature film, then it was a rollercoaster, then Sony promoted the film as a rollercoaster

them, because “It may be the limitations of these individual works that encourage collective forms of creativity less often found in response to works that seem more complete and satisfying in their own terms.” (p. 5)

**Figure 5: Placement of *Signature Attraction* in the existing rollercoaster research landscape**



*Existing rollercoaster documentaries*

Having examined the broader issues that contextualise the rollercoaster and the psychology of why people ride them, the discussion now turns towards how rollercoasters are depicted in existing documentaries. There are many documentaries about theme parks that feature rollercoasters. There are also a plethora of documentaries about the making of the latest and greatest rollercoasters, which serve mostly as theme park promotional pieces. For example, National Geographic’s *Megastructures: The Ultimate Rollercoaster* (2005) details the planning, development and opening of Six Flag’s record-breaking 456ft high, 206km / hr *Kingda Ka* launched rollercoaster, *launched* meaning the train is propelled from standing still to high speeds via hydraulics as opposed to a more traditional chain-lift hill. Another in the same series, *The World’s Fastest Rollercoaster* (2011) explores similar territory for Ferrari

World's new 240km/hr *Formula Rossa* rollercoaster. Discovery Channels' *Expedition Everest: Building a Thrill Ride* (2006) follows the development of Disney's \$US100 million dollar *Expedition Everest* rollercoaster. Again, this is mostly a promotional piece dealing with impressive statistics, mild challenges that present during development, and the delighted riders on opening day.

The Travel Channel's *Insane Coaster Wars* (2012) is a six-part television series pitting coasters of various types; launched, wood, suspended to name but a few, against similar coasters, with viewers deciding the winner. *Extreme Terror Rides*, which aired on The Travel Channel in 2008, follows a similar path. The documentary uses stock footage, both on-and-off ride, sourced from the theme parks themselves as well as point-of-view footage shot specifically for the series blended with comments from a series of experts to reinforce the theme park public-relations line in a glossy brochure-style package.

The footage for both is undoubtedly exhilarating and features commentary from many coaster enthusiasts and park managers, however it never veers from a strictly upbeat and predictable format. These projects are produced in direct collaboration with the parks and invariably require park approval for the finished product. In a critical light, these types of documentaries can be argued to function as an extension of the park's public relations activities, and the manufactured drama never deviates from the script or threatens to deliver any unpredictable outcomes. These documentaries follow a standard format focusing on the extraordinary expense of designing and manufacturing the rides, the engineering challenges, the predictable stresses as opening day looms. However they date quickly, as records are made to be broken after all, and these films never stray from predictably safe and populist lines of questioning into more philosophical queries.

*Thrill Ride — The Science of Fun* (1997) is an IMAX film which attempts to explain some of the science and psychology behind thrill rides, and while it features a brief history of rollercoasters and footage from a number of more modern rollercoasters, it is primarily focused on motion simulator rides, which are

rides where passengers are seated in a mostly-stationary fixed car and the action and experience is played out on video screens around them.

Discovery Channels' *Engineering Thrills* (2008) explores how cutting edge technology is built into today's theme park rides by going into greater detail about what theme park attendees want from rollercoasters, and how designers give it to them. The program features British academic Brendan Walker who researches how rides induce emotional experiences in riders. He tests the physiology of riders by wiring them up to sensors and monitors to compare their reactions during elements of rollercoasters predicted to produce the most dramatic reactions with the actual physiological responses of the riders to these events, in real time.

It is worth reflecting here on the definition of documentary itself. While there are many and varied interpretations, Saunders (2010) offers the a broad definition, that all documentaries attempt "To express basic truths" and the simple "the documentary response is one in which the image is perceived as signifying what it appears to record". (p.15) He discusses single-shot examples of famous footage such as the Zapruder JFK assassination footage, this being the grainy, hand-held footage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, and the recording of the Rodney King assault that led to the Los Angeles race riots as "unimpeachable evidence gathered with no prejudice" (p.25) but does not consider them to be documentary pieces. He suggests if the Zapruder film had been recorded and assembled from a hundred viewpoints, it may lead to a "less unconditional omniscient truth." (p.21) Ultimately he concludes that documentary is, in fact, a form that is hard to pin down "It persuades, expresses or elucidates by presenting us with formally organized indexes to actuality, yet at the same time frequently employs the grammar of dramaturgy." (p.31)

On the flip side to the slickly produced broadcast documentary formats, fan-made documentaries are presented as a travelogue-style *our day in the park* format. *A Day At Six Flags* (SkateboardT508, 2012) is a self-recorded video diary of all the rollercoasters and rides 'SkateboardT508' enjoyed during his day at Six Flags. Alternatively, self-recorded on-ride footage clips with some elements of commentary before, during and after such as *Apocalypse: Last Stand Six Flags*



*America HD Full Experience* (TheCoasterNinja, 2013) by ‘The Coaster Ninja’ show the ride experience of this standup coaster, from approaching the station, standing in the queue, watching the ride and then his POV of the entire ride. As this video features commentary, context and more importantly, editing, it appears to fit the definition of a documentary. This was a slightly longer example of the format of rollercoaster POVs, or *Point Of View* clips, where the main objective is to authentically depict the experience of the ride in question. As many of the 2.8 million videos which result from typing this term (“roller coaster POV”) into Google’s search engine (Google.com, June 2015) record generally only the segment between the lift hill / launch mechanism and the end of the ride. Partly this is due to the fact that unauthorised video recordings on rollercoasters is cause for ejection from the park, and the aspiring videographers need to conceal the means of production.

In addition, there are amateur *making-of the rollercoaster* documentaries, which generally strive to emulate the higher-budget commercial projects in terms of detailing the dizzying statistics and the expected opening date for a new ride, and then all the manufactured struggles that occur before this, with little, if any introspection. For example, Devin Olson’s *Gatekeeper at Cedar Point Documentary — From Dreams to Screams* (Olson, 2013) is an 18 minute project giving a short history of the Cedar Point amusement park and their plans and execution to build the winged coaster *Gatekeeper*, and is an excellent example of the form. These documentaries are either available online (YouTube), as DVDs for purchase from the associated parks, or both.

## **Conclusion**

Of the academic literature and documentaries examined here, the theme parks and rollercoasters have been portrayed as powerful and permanent elements of our cultural landscape. However, research to this point has not taken an analytical point of view when it comes to questioning why rollercoasters mean so much to those who love them. Therein exists the gap that this project will explore, by linking the business, marketing, psychology and sociological aspects, including the role of our own personal psychology and how that impacts on the business

commodification, by using a reflective documentary practice process to bring all these elements together. *Signature Attraction* breaks new ground as it is a novel film in that it combines elements of the fan-made rollercoaster documentary form with elements of the more commercial rollercoaster documentary form that has yet to be documented in documentary theory. The film itself also makes an original contribution in that it examines the subject of the rollercoaster in ways that go beyond what is typical of the rollercoaster documentary.



## Chapter 3: Discussion and Analysis

### Introduction

This chapter presents the outcomes from the research undertaken during three action research / reflective cycles. The results and analysis for the first two research questions are addressed by the documentary *Signature Attraction* that was produced as part of this project, however additional results and analysis are included here. The results and analysis for the second set of questions are addressed primarily in this document.

### Section 1: *Signature Attraction* and why rollercoasters mean so much to enthusiasts

This section details the findings in the documentary *Signature Attraction* that address the first two research questions, namely:

Why do rollercoasters mean so much to those who love them?

What are they actually doing for us as a society, and why do we seem to need them?

The message from the film and supported by the literature review in Chapter 2 suggest that rollercoasters exist to make money, and to address an apparent psychological need inherent in humans. Psychology Professor Nicholas Christenfeld offers this summary in *Signature Attraction*:

It's a way for people to flirt with death without actually having to die...you're slightly fascinated by traffic accidents and lots of people...when they stand on very tall places...cliffs or buildings, they look down and they just imagine without actually wanting to do it, What would it be like to take one more step? Rollercoasters are obviously a way of doing that without personal injury. (Christenfeld, 2015)

Dave Cobb, a Senior Vice President, Creative Development of theme park and ride design company *Thinkwell Group* in the United States continues, “I think rollercoasters give people an escape that is just this side of dangerous, right? It’s *not-dying*. Fear minus death equals thrills.” (Cobb, 2015)

Both of these comments point towards an inherent human need for release or, to a primal desire for limits to be pushed further than what current lived experience provides. This suggests that we are simply not challenged enough in the Western world anymore, either physically or psychologically. Also, it is perhaps unsurprising that a capitalist society has developed tools that we pay for in order to access this release. Sociologist Margee Kerr expands upon this idea in her interview for *Signature Attraction*,

The challenges we face today are just are not quite as risky and they’re not as immediate...the challenges we have today are so long term...they’re very much how can we maintain our health and beauty for as long as we can, how can we create some sort of financial stability...but for a majority of human history it’s been very present oriented, just how can I make it through this day? Of course it’s very much based on class and where you are in society...but for many Americans at least, we live a pretty comfortable life, and a life that is free from most of the challenges that we were facing.  
(Kerr, 2013)

An alternative view is that we are simply unable, either physically or financially, to manually undertake the sorts of activities that generate comparable thrills to today’s high-tech rollercoasters, and thus we use them as a proxy. Marie Ruby is an experienced Ride Operations Director at Kennywood Park in the United States who argues that rollercoasters democratise the pursuit of thrills in *Signature Attraction*,

Everyone’s looking for that adrenaline, but not everyone can be a marathon runner or mountain climber, so the average individual, that’s you and me, we can go on these roller coasters and get that same thrill and that same fear when you get on and accomplishment when you get off. (Ruby, 2013)

However, instead of using rollercoasters as an alternative to lofty physical pursuits, the simple, and mostly passive, act of riding can be seen as the accomplishment unto itself. Some dedicated coaster devotees have ridden Cedar Points' 310 ft. *Millennium Force* coaster over 1500 times, and the parks communications director Tony Clark compares this personal accomplishment in his interview to "Graduating from college, earning a degree, getting promoted at work...it's probably that sense of pride that you're able to conquer something." (Clark, 2013)

Rollercoasters act as both a challenge *and* a cop-out, in that they can be viewed as the substitute for a *real* thrill, *or* the real thrill itself. They are both an outlet for our fears, and a symbol of our pent-up need for release.

The findings from the documentary can be distilled into three main themes. First, we as humans clearly have a strong psychological need for the kind of release provided by rollercoasters and extreme thrill rides, and they make a lot of money. The world has changed enormously since the Industrial Revolution and we have not, we are not at immediate risk every day like we had been previously, meaning we are still hardwired to stay primed. Rollercoasters and thrill rides may be one way of maintaining that hands-on form of release. Second, rollercoasters democratise thrill-seeking. Most of us in the Western world are required to work, and the fact that most of the Western world has very limited amounts of paid leisure means we do not have the time, money or skills to obtain the kinds of peak experiences gained via genuinely dangerous pursuits such as climbing Mount Everest. However, we can easily head down to a park and scare ourselves senseless, as the biology of the thrill you obtain from a scary coaster and that of the peak experience when climbing a mountain is virtually identical.

Third, rollercoasters, extreme thrill rides, and the parks and studios that create and promote them in various forms create what could be described as an *Amusement-Industrial Complex*, in which you are driven to consume these thrills because that is what is *promoted* to you as a thrill. If you want a thrill, you obtain it by going to a theme park. In terms of advertising and media saturation, rollercoasters drown out other forms of potentially thrilling leisure.

## **Section 2: Challenges, research action cycles and placing the final film**

This section details the results and subsequent analysis of the second set of research questions, structured in the following order,

What are the challenges inherent in producing a documentary focusing on a niche subgroup, when you identify as being part of this group?

How does the documentary created as part of this project contribute to the existing body of documentaries about rollercoasters, and extend the possibilities of the rollercoaster documentary?

### **What are the challenges inherent in producing a documentary focusing on a niche subgroup, when you identify as being part of this group?**

At the very beginning of the film is a quote onscreen by the American children's entertainer Mister Rogers. This affable and popular television host said "Frankly, there isn't anyone you couldn't learn to love once you've heard their story." (Bruk, 2014) These words might seem unusual for the commencement of a film about rollercoasters, but they actually underscore the emotional core of the film, and also hint at the personal challenges encountered in creating it, as we will discover.

Initially the path for the film seemed simple. The plan was to create a straightforward documentary utilising participatory, expository and observational elements to engage in a cycle of asking questions to appropriate interviewees to tease an understanding of what rollercoasters brought to the world, and by doing so create a new piece of work which can contribute to the genre. I imagined the film would contain multiple attractive cutaways, some personal anecdotes, and address the question quite neatly, envisioned as a simple cycle of interviews and edits. This, however, was not the case.

Many of the subjects in the film identified as rollercoaster enthusiasts. As a result of the fact that I identify as a rollercoaster enthusiast myself, and that I attended Coaster Con with these participants, the filmmaking relationship between the producer and subjects was affected. My frequent interaction before, during and after the filming, and my discussions with the participants about the topics explored therein meant they

were not passive participants, but were contributing members to the project in what can be described as a “participatory mode”. According to documentary theorist Broderick Fox (Fox, 2015), participating in the documentary and being involved in private, post-filming discussions resulted in active participation in the filmmaking experience. This meant that the personal interplay between the enthusiast as director and the enthusiasts as participants in the film influenced the outcome, and created a hybrid film form that is not necessarily evidenced in standard fan-made or commercially made rollercoaster documentary films. It is acknowledged that a power imbalance between the producer and the participants can be identified as the producer is the entity with control over the final documentary product in terms of what footage is used, which participants are featured and how their interviews are framed, and thus, having the final say. To overcome this imbalance, member checking was employed where each participant was afforded the opportunity to review the footage that was to be used to ensure that his or her portrayal was representative. However, for the research the analysis of the representation was ultimately in the hands of the researcher.

For further evidence of how participatory culture shapes films, De Jong et al. state in their book *Creative Documentary: Theory and Practice* (2014) that “the interaction of fans and films are one area where we see interventions and transformations”. (p.166) They then refer to how this is evidence of “convergence culture” which references how audiences and “practices of participation come together”. (p.165) Thus it quickly became evident that it was not going to be possible to create an arm’s length, dispassionate documentary when I was the director and a member of one of the prominent groups featured in the film.

An effective way to outline the approach taken in terms of modifications made and lessons gained from this project would be to outline the action research and reflective cycles undertaken to reach the end product. It is important to note that far more than three cycles of action research and reflective practice took place. In fact it could be argued that mini-cycles of planning-filming-reflection-deconstruction occurred following the conclusion of each interview or with the revelation of each important piece of information. However, for the sake of brevity, only the broad cycles are outlined here.



*Action Research/ Reflective Practice Cycle 1* (Refer to Figure 2 in Chapter 1)

The first major cycle of interviews/data gathering occurred in 2013 during a round-the-world trip to multiple regions in the United States, Hong Kong and Shanghai. Armed with the questions outlined in Appendix 1. I began by targeting park management, as I felt they, along with the enthusiasts, might be the most bountiful sources of compelling commentary in relation to the research question. This was at least partly due to the fact that they were the ones who had to sign off on their extremely expensive rollercoaster purchases in the first place.

Interviews with senior park management on three continents were kindly granted, but ended up providing only a small amount of usable footage for the final documentary. The answers given seldom strayed from well-honed public relations-approved responses, and did not lend themselves to the deeper insights I was seeking. Regardless of the way the questions were posed or modified, park management responses were always pleasant, very broad, always included a subtle promotion of their parks, a statement about their commitment to safety, or how they are intent on delivering the very best thrills that families can enjoy together. While three park managers were interviewed, only Rob Decker, Corporate VP Planning and Design, Cedar Fair, presented what I perceived to be genuine and non public-relations approved responses. One such response revealed "... that the everyday world out there gets kinda hectic, so people come to parks and enjoy rollercoasters and thrilling rides just as a form of escapism." (Decker, 2013)

Initially I was frustrated with the responses I had received and wondered how could these managers have risen so far in the industry in the first place without strong opinions on the topic? I wondered if perhaps they were simply not permitted to speak beyond public-relations-friendly scripts. This style of response might have worked for a more standard *This is how the latest coaster was made* style of documentary, but ended up being difficult to incorporate in a more philosophical project like *Signature Attraction*, which demanded deeper responses and less obvious public-relations prose. The resolution to this issue was to accept the generous time and effort that had been given by management to that point, and focus more on interviewing sociologists, psychologists and academics for deeper introspection. The

next round of planned interviews was with the coaster enthusiasts, which I thought would be the most fruitful group to prompt rich commentary and insight into the questions driving my enquiry.

Rollercoaster enthusiasts can be defined along a continuum of involvement, from casual to extreme. In fact, several participants shared how they base their entire travel schedule around rollercoasters. In this study, I defined enthusiasts as any participants who have an above-average interest in seeking out new rollercoaster experiences, travelling extensively for these experiences, and attending, or being willing to attend rollercoaster-specific events, such as *Coaster Con* (<http://www.coastercon.com/>). Sourcing such participants was not difficult. The connection was made through my existing network in the rollercoaster enthusiast community, or friends and contacts of these existing contacts.

An interesting observation occurred during my first round of interviews with the *American Coaster Enthusiasts* (<http://www.aceonline.org/>) at their annual *Coaster Con* gathering, being a revelation of their coaster-fandom granting a sort of exclusivity. Some comments gathered suggested the general public simply were not able to appreciate and fully grasp the experience that certain coasters would offer. This elevated the coaster enthusiasts who did claim to have this enhanced appreciation to a self-professed connoisseur. I found this a bit disconcerting. My feelings were that regardless of how much someone in the general public knew about a particular coaster, or coasters in general, they could happily enjoy a ride, whichever way they chose to experience it. This coaster-supremacy was then at odds with the generally uncreative responses given by enthusiasts when asked why they thought were so important. One of the initial questions asked of all participants was “Why do you think rollercoasters exist?” It quickly became apparent that a standard response was the equivalent of *Because they’re fun*. Attempts to interrogate this further did not reveal much greater detail. Rather, on occasion it led to a kind of subtle aggression, *Why are you trying to take the fun away by overanalysing it?* Psychologist Paul Martin had the most succinct explanation for this “People just don’t want to overthink it. It’s like sex — the moment you start thinking about what you’re doing you’re starting to engage this prefrontal cortex, the moment you do that, it’s kind of all over.” (Martin, 2014)

Several interesting and varied participant life stories were sourced and used in the film. There was a couple who proposed on a rollercoaster, a baker who undertakes an annual bake-off to raise money for parks in difficulty, a doctor who needed coasters as a stress release. These life stories were used in the film to show the varied, colorful and committed nature of the enthusiasts.

The reflection and editing phase after this initial phase of data-gathering was protracted. While the rest of the edit proceeded as standard, I found I was creating mini-stories of all the participants I had interviewed. This led to a long, unfocused draft, and it became clear that I was doing so at the expense of telling my own story, or the avoidance of same. It became readily apparent that while the interviews and feedback were plentiful, the personal story, which forms the backbone of the film, would need to be developed further.

An additional observation was that while I formulated and subsequently asked specific and unique questions based on the interviewee, and the script created was observed, I also asked every participant an additional general set of questions<sup>2</sup> which included:

Why do you think rollercoasters are such a popular form of leisure?

Do you think rollercoasters serve an evolutionary purpose for humans?

This was not as effective as I had hoped and simply resulted in repetition. I realised that I might not find all the answers entirely from the interviews with park management or fans themselves.

An interesting event occurred at this point, which heavily impacted my story, and the film's underlying universal narrative. I had approached my home park<sup>3</sup> *Dreamworld* on the Gold Coast, Australia in order to film a small number of interviews with

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<sup>2</sup> These questions can be found in the second half of Appendix 1

<sup>3</sup> A home park is the theme park either nearest, or dearest, to an enthusiasts' heart

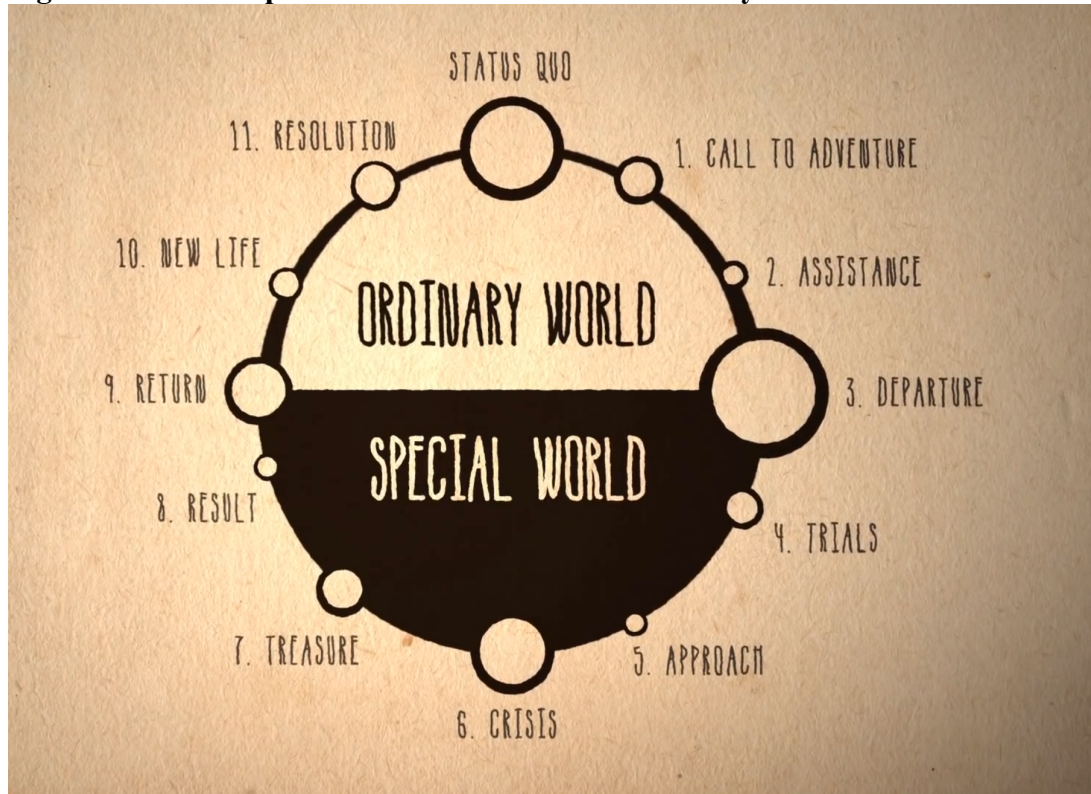
executives and some pieces to camera in front of the rollercoasters. Initially they were supportive, then without warning demanded that I pay \$AUS 4,000 or they would withdraw support. Thinking I was asking too much of the park, I attempted to negotiate, but was told it was *non-negotiable*. This set in train a major narrative plot point, which hinged on this development.

### ***Action Research/ Reflective Practice Cycle 2***

The second phase of data-gathering, reflecting, writing and editing began with a re-examination of my story. It felt as if I was battling my own film, I was trying to somehow have it tell my story without actually *requiring me to tell my story*. It became clear that the only way a film with the niche topic of rollercoasters was going to gain traction with a wider audience was to embed it inside a more universal story, my own. My personal narrative centres on the concerns of an overweight, socially-awkward child trying to find his place and his group in the world. This then meant I had to dispense with trying to conceal elements about myself during the process, and step up to create an intensely personal documentary, with an emotionally compelling story.

While I had previously been aware of the *Hero's Journey* (Campbell, 2008), a series of specific plot points evident in nearly all major films, I was encouraged to learn the formal steps of the *Hero's Journey*, and map the narrative structure of my film to it. In some ways this caused a retrofit of the film's existing structure, but as the narrative was not satisfying, it was required. It should be noted that while the documentary was scripted, the unpredictable nature of creating documentary, and the need to constantly revise the approach in the reflective cycles meant that not every point in the *Hero's Journey* could be referenced in the film.

**Figure 6: Visual representation of the “Hero’s Journey” model**



**Source:** (Winkler, 2012)

The challenge was that I could not quite settle on which aspect of my own personal story I wanted to reveal.

I interviewed my family, which included very frank discussions with my parents about my overweight adolescence years. They disagreed with my perceived weight issues, but were on the fence about the awkwardness, and my sister revealed how my childhood was spent longing for these parks, and that I did not really have anyone to share my obsession.

This cycle also featured the trip that was to be the resolution of the film, a return to Disneyland to celebrate my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. When this was decided to be a critical plot point, it meant that the underlying story of finding one’s own place in the world and losing and regaining innocence had not just risen to prominence, but had become the narrative of the film. This was now a film ostensibly about why rollercoasters meant so much to those who love them, and ended in triumph at a theme park that was not really known for having adventurous coasters at all.

The film appears to end on a note of resigned acceptance, *parks and rides use us, but we bring our experiences and beliefs to them in order to make this work*. This suggests a somewhat parasitic relationship needs to exist for the sake of a successful theme park visit, but this is in fact an upbeat way to end the film. If you can see through the cynicism, can accept that the magic and thrills are manufactured but are still valid, can sit comfortably with these facts and continue enjoying the thrill rides and parks you did as a younger person, then you will be satisfied. In this way, the film was clearly different from existing rollercoaster documentaries in that it was genuinely attempting to follow a dramatic narrative. At the end of this cycle, the film had a far stronger narrative; the interviews were becoming more focused, and the sentiment growing stronger.

### ***Action Research/ Reflective Practice Cycle 3***

The final major cycle in the production of the film came in 2015 and commenced with the simple plan of reducing repetition in the film by realising when a point had been made with sufficient clarity that it did not need to be repeated. As noted, the asking of a subset of identical questions to all interviewees during the interview phase likely brought on this repetition.

This also included deleting shots or sequences that may have been difficult to acquire or were being preserved because they were visually pleasing, in the harsh knowledge that their origin was irrelevant, and they did not serve to further the story. These needed to be eliminated.

The more complex challenge in producing the documentary was the requirement to reveal intensely personal information from my life on film. Initially I was of the thought to ensure that the film was not seen as, and dismissed as the *gay rollercoaster film* due to the fact that I reveal my same-sex partner in it, and also interview participants who identify as same-sex-attracted. This was not an issue of shame or concern about how this information would ultimately be represented, but more a concern as to whether people would find the revelations boring or self-centred. This pointed to a difficulty in my awareness that a documentary about such a niche topic would be very unlikely to be viewed outside the niche group of

rollercoaster enthusiasts, unless it addressed universal themes through a single *Hero's Journey* – mine. It took me till the third cycle to fully grasp this concept. This is also where I fully embraced a shift in the story from being driven by external conflict to one of internal conflict. Ultimately the finished film features a great deal of my personal information and backstory from myself and other members of my family and contributes to a stronger production as a result.

Presenting on camera, and creating and providing the voiceover for the film was also a challenge. While I am comfortable with the concept of being recorded, and do not think I am any more or less vain than anyone else, it quickly became clear that even the slightest change in tone between the different iterations of onscreen presentation and voiceover would change the tone of the film completely. I recorded at least 15 different versions of the voiceover before settling on the version that was used for the finished film.

As a documentary practitioner and also a member of the niche group I needed to be disciplined to follow the script while interviewing. Whilst scripts were devised and observed, after filming the required material needed for coverage, I had a tendency to let the interviews continue, to see where it went. This resulted in unnecessary footage and often strayed from the central story, regardless of how interesting the points were that arose. There could have been many more cycles, but a line has to be drawn in the sand, and for the topics and themes developed here to spawn new projects.

**How does the documentary created as part of this project contribute to the existing body of documentaries about rollercoasters, and extend the possibilities of the rollercoaster documentary?**

*Signature Attraction* is in many respects a contrast to the other documentaries discussed in Chapter 2. Documentaries have largely focussed on the rollercoaster ride experience from on or off-ride, the designing and construction of a new rollercoaster, *Our day in the park* travelogue-style documentaries, or the history of a theme park. While the film does contain some elements of these existing documentaries; on-ride and off-ride coaster footage, excitable comments from within a park after riding, some elements of history and preservation, it both complements and extends the boundaries of rollercoaster documentary filmmaking. This is achieved through the exploration of a philosophical line of questioning and interrogating the psychology of rollercoaster enthusiasts. As a result, the enquiry summates the reasons behind why rollercoasters mean so much to those who love them. It paves the way for broadening the scope of future rollercoaster documentaries to include more personal narrative and introspection on behalf of the documentary producers. Specifically, it explores the reasons why enthusiasts feel so strongly about these machines, and the lengths they will go to in order to access them, including tattooing their bodies, dedicating their entire travel schedules to them, forming and attending enthusiast groups associated with them and getting engaged on them. It also covers what the iconic status of rollercoasters means to a park, the importance of preserving rollercoasters, and what place they have in creating memories. Also explored are whether rollercoasters present a real or imagined challenge, and how this reflects back on a Western society, which seems to lack challenges. In doing so, the film merges the elements of fan-made documentaries with more commercial forms.

As referenced in Chapter 1, *Signature Attraction* could be seen as primarily a participatory documentary with elements of the expository, however it also includes observational elements. As also referenced in Chapter 1, Nichols (2010) defines the participatory documentary as where the filmmaker interacts directly with the participants, and by doing so helps shape what happens on camera. The expository element is where voiceover directly addresses the viewer, and the observational



includes elements where participants go about their lives as if the camera and interviewer were not there. It is ultimately a highly personal documentary that explores the psychological rationale behind rollercoaster obsession, directed and narrated by a documentary practitioner who also identifies as an enthusiast. In the context of rollercoaster documentary films, it is envisaged this project serves as an exemplar of a hybrid filmic form, allowing (where possible) for future practitioners to develop rollercoaster films that are commercial in nature, but with a personal focus.

In an additional comment about the hybrid documentary form that *Signature Attraction* attempts (hybrid being a meeting of the fan-made and commercial forms), it is worth revisiting Austin and Jong's theory in *Rethinking Documentary* that "What makes a film "documentary" is the way we look at it". (Austin et.al, 2008) They also suggest the response of the viewer can never be guaranteed, regardless of how a film may be presented or marketed. The film was designed and shot as a love letter to rollercoasters that attempted to answer some philosophical questions not usually attempted by commercial rollercoaster documentaries. It is still entirely possible it could be seen as a 'fanboy' film, or a ponderous academic exercise. The interpretation and reception of the film is ultimately out of the filmmakers' hands.

The blurring of the lines between fan-made and commercial rollercoaster documentaries is also changing with the continual upgrading of technology, putting access to high-end production in the hands of more people than ever. The ability for fans to create professional-looking and technically proficient documentaries means that more personal stories can be told, at the level of quality required for broadcast and theatrical screenings. However, Austin et al. (2008) observe that however well documentaries may play in cinemas and festivals, they are most at home on television, "a fickle medium currently besotted with fictionalised versions of the real." (p.4) Hence we reference again the narrative of scripted and overly dramatised 'Will they make it in time?' commercial rollercoaster documentaries, which are narratives clearly designed for a television format. *Signature Attraction* was created using the *Hero's Journey* as a guide (and as this is the backbone of most popular Western film narratives it can be seen as the *ultimate* dramatic construct). It also attempts to portray a level of honesty and philosophy lacking in prevalent

commercial rollercoaster documentary narratives. Though at the same time, the film had multiple elements which were reshot and interview storylines that were edited in such a way to promote drama or to keep the story moving, and thus in doing so was participating in similar kinds of narrative trickery. As such, it once again suggests that *Signature Attraction* is a hybrid of the commercial and fan-made documentary forms.

The essential questions and drive of the film attempt to move the film beyond the rides themselves and into broader social issues, whilst at the same time keeping it tied to my own personal experience. Where it differs from other documentaries in this genre is that it has a clear narrative and features sensitive confessions and admissions from myself and other coaster enthusiasts about how coasters and theme parks intersect critical moments in their private lives. *Signature Attraction*, oddly for a documentary focussing on rollercoasters, actually features a very small number of roller coasters onscreen. This was a deliberate decision due to the fact that the film is not about any one type of coaster, as other documentaries feature them prominently, and being too specific about the precise coasters you are depicting, especially ones that were new when the documentary was being produced will serve to age the documentary prematurely. Finally, the climax of the film is set at Disneyland, which is a park not known for the kinds of aggressive coasters that feature prominently in other coaster documentaries.

## Chapter 4 — Conclusion

This study set out to analyse rollercoasters from a perspective other than what has been seen before. It led to the creation of a documentary that added to the rollercoaster documentary genre, and has outlined what it means to create a documentary when you are both a documentary practitioner and a rollercoaster enthusiast.

While there is a large volume of literature that analyses the business and marketing of rollercoasters, there is limited literature that delves into the psychology of enthusiasts, especially in a documentary format. Existing rollercoaster documentaries are driven by public-relations agendas which seek only to underscore the message desired by the theme parks involved, cookie-cutter broadcast formats that rely on safe and manufactured drama about whether the coasters will debut on time, or enthusiast videos which feature the rides themselves and very limited introspection.

This research was guided by four research questions, two of which were addressed by the documentary,

Why do rollercoasters mean so much to those who love them?

What are they actually doing for us as a society, and why do we seem to need them?

And the two that were addressed by the exegesis,

How does the documentary created as part of this project contribute to the existing body of documentaries about rollercoasters and extend the possibilities of the rollercoaster documentary?

What are the challenges inherent in producing a documentary focusing on a niche subgroup, when you identify as being part of this group?

The study was approached through a series of major action research / reflective practice cycles, where interviews and reflective practice were the dominant methodologies. These were critical phases in producing the film, and developing as a

documentary practitioner during the process. Chapter One presented an introduction to the research questions, and elements of the author's background, a background to the practice and an outline of the major action research / reflective practice cycles. Chapter two examined the existing literature about rollercoasters, as well as examining existing rollercoaster documentaries, defined the rollercoaster itself and placed it in the context of the theme park and the sociological, psychological and business & marketing spheres in which rollercoasters appear. Chapter 3 provided the results of the three major action research / reflective practice cycles and subsequent analysis which led to the conclusions.

The study shows that rollercoasters bring a more complex impact to society than what may first appear. Far from being frivolous time-wasters, they are in fact an important outlet for us to access primal sensations, a way to prove our boldness, an important economic drawcard for multibillion-dollar leisure industries, and a source of powerful memories of fun and childhood. Additionally they serve as a centrepiece to a dedicated community of rollercoaster enthusiasts, offer us a way to automatically fully focus our attention, and to safely experience extreme forces and unusual sensations that cannot be safely encountered elsewhere in everyday life, for example while driving or using public transport.

In terms of the practice, in the end I believe I have created a unique film, both about rollercoasters and the universal struggle to be accepted and find your place in the world, and that this film provides a philosophical counterpart to existing rollercoaster documentaries. I feel the film fills the void between commercial, but generic, promotional broadcast documentaries and amateur non-broadcast productions designed to promote new rollercoasters, and productions that demonstrate the layout of a coaster, either on-board or off, with commentary.

### *Further research*

It is possible that some of the outcomes and discussions centred on rollercoasters could in fact apply to any commodified high-thrill ride, however some specific features of rollercoasters and their iconic status clearly differentiate them from other

high-thrill rides in the theme park mix. This study focuses in great detail on one iconic form of amusement ride, however it opens the door to research focussed on theme parks in general, with coasters being one of many rides that make up the park mix. There is potential for the documentary form to further examine what the *future* holds for rollercoasters and theme parks. Our approach to these rides has been well covered from a historical perspective, but to project forward will provide a fascinating window to reveal how humanity perceives their leisure time in the future.

## Appendix

### 1. Sample questions

Some of the sample questions sent to participants before the primary research gathering began in 2013 included:

- Why do you think rollercoasters are such a popular form of leisure?
- Do you think rollercoasters serve an evolutionary purpose for humans?
- What is it about rollercoasters that has attracted you so strongly?
- What sort of decision making leads to a park deciding to purchase and install a rollercoaster as opposed to another type of thrill ride?
- What psychology is at work on a rollercoasters?
- What does a record-breaking coaster mean to a park and its guests?
- Are rollercoasters the easiest way to market a park? Why?
- What so you think rollercoasters in the future will look like - what are the trends?
- Why and how do you think different countries and societies view rollercoasters and thrill rides differently?

However, as the project developed and the emphasis of the film changed to include far more of my own personal story, the questions expanded to include:

- What would your life be like if rollercoasters no longer existed or you were forbidden to ride?
- Do you think there's a certain kind of person attracted to becoming obsessed with rollercoasters?
- Why do you think rollercoasters are such a popular form of leisure?
- Do you think rollercoasters serve an evolutionary purpose for humans?
- What is it about rollercoasters that has attracted you so strongly?
- What sort of decision making leads to a park deciding to purchase and install a rollercoaster as opposed to another type of thrill ride?
- What psychology is at work on a rollercoasters?

What does a record breaking coaster mean to a park and its guests?

Are rollercoasters the easiest way to market a park? Why?

What do you think rollercoasters in the future will look like - what are the trends?

What would your life be like if rollercoasters no longer existed or you were forbidden to ride?

Why and how do you think different countries and societies view rollercoasters and thrill rides differently?

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