

The Wild Wild West is an exciting world. Cowboys and Indians, gallivanting across a new frontier. Desperados. Heading each other off at the pass. One on one duels in the center of a dusty town. One, two, three, DRAW! It's not important why this is happening. The Civil War might play some significance from time to time, as well as the Gold Rush, but historical accuracy doesn't really matter. What matters is the romance of being a cowboy. Wearing cowboy boots, with cowboy spurs, and wearing those pants with the frills on the sides. What matters is wearing ten-gallon hats, red neckerchiefs, and leather vests with big sheriff's badges. What matters is not having enough room in this town for the two of us. What matters is the vision of tumbling tumbleweeds rolling past a twenty-foot tall cactus, and how someone can toss a silver dollar into the air and shoot a bullet hole through the center. Pow! All that excitement is good and fun, but what's most interesting is how this world doesn't exist. Yes, it's based on a point in history, but the over-glorified imagery and romanticized lifestyle wasn't a reality at any point in time; books, television, and other forms of media created this world. The Wild West is its own culturally propagated world, with no true existence in reality.

The Wild West is by no means the only culturally propagated world. They are everywhere. The worlds of pirates, samurais, and cavemen are like the Wild West because they existed historically, but have been warped into something new by culture. The wizarding world in the Harry Potter books and Middle Earth from Lord of the Rings trilogy are fictional domains with specific literary origins. The world of the future has no basis in history and doesn't have a specific origin. It's especially vague because of the contrasting sources, but there is still a fairly cohesive vision in pop culture of what the future looks like.

Disneyland is a place that takes all these universes and brings them back into reality, creating an immersive experience. It creates fake worlds. Fake worlds that are so much more fun than the real world. "Disneyland not only produces illusion, but-in confessing it- stimulates the desire for it: A real crocodile can be found in the zoo, and as a rule it is dozing or hiding, but Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands" (Congdon and Blandy qtd. in Eco, 269). Another relevant example is Frontierland, which takes the world of the west and brings it into reality in the form of a theme park. Thus the image of the Wild West has been transformed from reality (in 19th century America) into a culturally propagated world, and then turned back into a reality in the form of a safe, novelty theme park. As I become aware of these culturally propagated fantasies, I feel the need to explore the emotional implications of these phenomena—who is affected by them? And how do they influence my relationship with art?

In my experience, fantasy worlds can cause emotional confusion in children as well as adults that might get caught up in the magic. The world of Christmas is another example of a fantasy brought into our reality. In this world, Santa has his toy factory at the North Pole, and elves help him build toys to deliver to boys and girls worldwide. Parents tell this lie to try to create magic, a kind of magic that can only exist in a kid's heart—the inherent magic of Christmastime. Mall Santas perpetuate this strange lie, this lie that can be so confusing to a child who doesn't know what to believe.

High expectations set the stage for the whirlwind of emotions on Christmas. The whole month of December (and even a little of November) is dedicated to hyping up a

single four-hour period on December 25th. Every moment leading up to Christmas is just filler. It's just there to remind you how great Christmas will be. When I was a kid, I couldn't fully appreciate those moments for what they were by themselves. It was all about the end result. Everything was about the destination, not the journey. The month of December was filled with countdown clocks, advent calendars, and "I can't wait's." And then, on Christmas day, I couldn't help but feel a little bit disappointed. Sure, I got a lot of cool presents. Maybe more presents than ever. And there was a whole lot of love and family and stuff. But every time, all the commercials and TV specials leading up to that one morning tricked me that *this year* would be the perfect Christmas. Even the amount of snow on Christmas day would disappoint me. Not every year is a white Christmas, not even in Maine. One year my dad joked that we could go golfing on Christmas day. I didn't think that was very funny.

The pang of disappointment would be quickly followed by guilt. I was aware of what an ungrateful kid I was being. Unfortunately, that guilt wouldn't make me satisfied with my present load. Despite all of the cartoons featuring a protagonist finding the true meaning of Christmas in the warmth of others' hearts, I paid more attention to the messages in the commercial breaks of these programs: the meaning of Christmas was PRESENTS!

I rarely had specific gifts in mind that I wanted. I instead trusted Santa Claus (and to a lesser extent, my parents) to know exactly what I wanted. I figured that if Santa had been watching me all year to see if I had been naughty or nice, he must also have seen all sorts of things about my personality and interests, and would be able to know, better than I did, exactly what would make me happiest. Perhaps it was all the images of perfect Christmases in movies. The presents were all still wrapped (except for the toy train), and they would remain that way. My non-specific desires led to my disappointment. Something so vague couldn't exist in reality, only in my mind. The world of Christmas tricked me every year. I thought that this illusion was genuine and existed in my own reality, but it didn't and still doesn't. Now that I'm aware of this, I can appreciate Christmas for what it is. But as a child, it didn't make sense.

It appears that lots of people wish they could go back to their carefree childhood days. I say that's baloney! They think that only kids are able to tap into this world of make-believe. Pop culture seems to think that this fantastical thinking only occurs in the minds of children. This is up for debate. Both children and adults seek to escape their reality into another, whether it's by playing make-believe, reading books, or doing drugs. They wish they could go back to the days where magic was real and the line between fantasy and the real world was blurred. That world never existed. I didn't think that I was a pirate when I pretended to be one as a child, just like I don't think I'm a pirate when I read a novel about pirates or watch *Pirates of the Caribbean* now. I am entertained by the world, but still aware of its non-existence.

Whenever my quarter brother Patrick¹ would visit when I was younger, we played this game called "Danny Wannys." We would pretend that we were part of a CIA-esque top-secret agency who were in a constant battle against the evil Danny Wannys (I think the name was based on a school bully at Pat's school.) We would act out spy missions

¹ My half-brother's half-brother. No, I suppose we aren't related by blood, but that doesn't mean we aren't brothers!

and battles against the Danny Wanny forces, and sometimes even Danny Wanny himself. We would be in this world constantly, from the moment we picked Pat up at the New Hampshire rest station to the moment we dropped him back off again at the end of the weekend. We knew we weren't actually in this world. We were just having fun. It would have been fun to actually be secret agent action heroes, but it also would be really dangerous and scary. We were just fine pretending.

Are adults and adolescents incapable of having this sort of fun? Are their minds not cut into the right shape to do that? Is the area in our brain responsible for pretending zapped out during puberty? I don't think so. I think it has more to do with cultural norms. "Children and adults are equipped with the same cognitive apparatus... but that perceived differences in their thinking and behavior are entirely due to the subculture in which children are immersed... What if adults were encouraged by an authority figure to believe in something like Santa Claus?" (Wooley, 1005). One could argue that adherence to religion or faith in God is no different than belief in Santa Claus. Adults engage in magical thinking on other occasions too. For instance, leaning in the direction one wants the bowling ball to go if it starts veering off course. Although adults may not let themselves fall into fantastical worlds in public, they can subscribe to some illogical customs.

"Adults' interest in art, including visual, musical, and theater arts, is essentially the equivalent of the child's fascination with make-believe" (Wooley 998). I think this is a really profound statement. All forms of art are gateways into different worlds; into different manufactured scenes, whether they are literal, abstract, subjective, or objective. Some works of art translate a specific world, perhaps a landscape or a portrait. But it is still up to the viewer to decide what's beyond the edge of the canvas.

I think that this "art is pretending" idea was influential in my appreciation of art. When I was younger, I would look at most paintings and think they were boring. The ones that appealed to me most were by surrealist painters like Dali, who created an exciting and vivid world that was so different from the boring one I already lived in. I slowly started to appreciate more artists and the different worlds that they created. I started to appreciate the worlds and the emotions within them. I started to appreciate the different ways the worlds were constructed. And now I'm still learning to appreciate more art forms that would have bored me as a kid. The worlds inside paintings are really no different than the ones in books or movies. Visual art is able to leave much interpretation, which gives the potential to create a more personal and otherworldly experience in the mind of the viewer.

These fabricated worlds outside our own exist everywhere. And I'm glad they exist. They have and they still do confuse me. They might have distressed me, but now I can accept the romance as just make believe. I know that I'll never be an authentic cowboy, and I've come to terms with that. I'll never have the "perfect" Christmas, and that's just fine. I can appreciate it for all that it is, and nothing more. Kids and adults alike can get false expectations of reality, and it can bring them down. But the existence of these romantic worlds brings excitement into our own. Our real world would be even more mundane if we couldn't pretend. And the fake worlds are going to be there whether we like it or not, so we should appreciate them for what they are.

Works Cited

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Annotated Bibliography

Banes, Sally. "Will the Real... Please Stand Up?: An Introduction to the Issue." *The MIT Press* 34.4 (1990): 21-27. JSTOR. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146041>>.

Banes describes the phenomena of representations of representations, simulations, and how the hyper-real produces the real in modern society. It gave more examples of where it exists. It made the connection to postmodernism, which was one of the first topics I was studying. This source showed me that other people were thinking about these separate realities, and gave me guidance in my research and thought surrounding them.