

Project 1:

Observation and Analysis

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Observational Notes

September 24, 2016 9:30-10:30 pm Frightfest Six Flags Great Adventure

It is a cool dark night, and the park is very crowded. I am sitting at an outdoor red picnic table with an umbrella. It is located outside a funnel cake shop across from the fountain. There is daunting music being played outside and thick smoke from a fog machine is setting the creepy mood for Frightfest. The fountain is surrounded by a graveyard scene, and various men and women have been transformed into characters resembling the Walking Dead through costumes and face make-up. There is a large creepy statue with a pumpkin head in the middle of the fountain, and the fountain water is blood red. Screams pierce the night.

My pen runs out of ink, and I had to go to a nearby gift shop to borrow a pen. In the gift shop, I observed young girls hiding in the doorway trying to watch for Walking Dead characters but staying far enough away as not to have to interact with them. I get my pen and go back to the same table. A family of four (Mom, Dad, Son & Daughter) is sitting there now but allow me to join them. They give me curious looks as I take out my notebook and pen.

I watch a very culturally diverse crowd pass by my table. Many of the people who walk by are dressed inappropriately for the weather which is cool and a bit windy. I see young men, women, and children dressed in shorts, tank tops and flip flops. They look cold.

Costumed creatures walk up behind unsuspecting people and yell, shake cans filled with something noisy, rev chainless chainsaws or scrape metal shovels on the ground. These acts causes people to jump and in most cases scream and run away. Especially the young girls whom the characters seem to target. Older adults, who are taken by surprise, usually laugh at themselves for being frightened. There is no physical contact between the characters and the

people. In fact, one young boy tapped a girl character on the shoulder and she turned around and screamed in this face “Don’t touch me!”

Although I did not see many people walking around with their noses in their cell phones, taking selfies with the characters was one of the actions that were observed at least every five minutes throughout the observation. Men and women of all ages made these requests. People also stopped in front of the graveyard scene for pictures.

I am surprised by the amount of couples who walk hand in hand. They are a diverse group and do not gender discriminate. I witnessed just as many male/male and female/female couples as I did male/female couples. Many older adults, perhaps parents waiting for their children, were sitting by me waiting and observing the crowds. The food stands have a long steady line of customers buying funnel cakes, pretzels, churros, popcorn, soda and even ice cream in this cool weather.

I observed two types of people while sitting at my post. Those who walk cautiously around looking to avoid the characters and those who actively seek out them out. People who make eye contact with the characters unwittingly invite them to follow or interact in some way. There is a great mixture of people who do not pay attention to what is going on around them and people who are hyper aware. Young children walk with their faces in their mother’s sides. Many of the fathers try to scare their children while moms try to protect them from being scared. Young boys try to taunt the characters and often yell back at them.

While the characters do not pass by the fountain as often as I would have liked, I observed a girl with a curly blond wig, ripped up white dress and a skeletal face. A young male character, dressed in an old tattered suit with white face make-up and black around eyes, had a crowd of people lining up for a photo op. He wore vampire contact lenses which gave his eyes a

very creepy look. He did a great job at widening his eyes for the pictures. Another girl character dressed in a pink dress with pigtails would go up to people from behind and scream. I cannot imagine that she does not go home with a sore throat every night. I observe a very creepy girl who appears to be dressed as Wednesday from the Adams Family. She is extremely serious and does not crack a smile. Great acting skills. I wonder who does their make-up each night and how much the characters get paid?

Some people in the crowd are also dressed in costume. Great Adventure is known for their superhero themed rides and there are a fair amount of people walking through the park wearing superhero capes. Vendors also walk around selling various items that light up. There seems to have been a high demand for light-up devil horns as I have seen about 25 pairs in the past hour. I have also seen about eight pairs of light up LED sneakers and a young boy in a wheelchair with front wheels that lit up as he rolled by. Another common theme is watching young men walk by bouncing basketballs that they have won playing various amusement-type games.

As I move to a table closer to the main path, a girl stops to ask Mr. Vampire eyes directions to a particular ride. He refuses to speak to her and just points in a general direction. She becomes quite frustrated so he beckons her to follow him and he takes her to a stand selling superhero paraphernalia. On his way past, he stops by my table to see what I am writing. He has glimpsed me a few times and mimics me writing. He takes a look at the notebook, give me a quizzical look, bears his teeth and widens his creepy vampire eyes and walks away.

Three teens come over to the table and politely ask if they can sit at the table to eat their funnel cake. They are basically ignoring me but were extremely polite and even thanked me for sharing my table when they were finished. I mentally applauded their parents for teaching them

good manners. Their funnel cake smelled great. It was covered with strawberries and cream. I must be hungry.

The crowd is starting to thin out. Many people are heading toward the exit and there is an increase of cranky crying children. I am amazed at the amount of young children who are still out at this time of night. One little girl screams “Look Ma! A Zombie!” I wonder to myself why people want to pay money to be frightened. My last observation is of a middle-aged woman wearing a short dress and high heels. All I can do is shake my head and wonder why?

Times up, getting cold.

Analytic Section

Why do people pay money to be scared? I believe it is not only a form of entertainment but a challenge. People enter the amusement park to see “if” they can be scared. Through this observation, I have identified three groups of participants:

The first group contains the younger participants. Mostly made up of young girls between the ages of 13-16, this group provides the dramatic aspect of the observation. They frequently scream and run away from the masked characters while at the same time being ever vigilant to their whereabouts. They are frequently targeted by the characters as they are easy to scare and provide maximal entertainment. They move in groups of at least 4 or 5 and are rarely accompanied by boys or adults, making them easy targets. Their behavior could be attributed to their maturity level and younger age group.

The second group contains those adults who have either accompanied their children to the park and are unaffected by the characters or those adults who are simply uninterested in the spooky atmosphere around them. They are not easily scared and usually walk around

uninterested or only mildly interested in the scene around them. The characters tend to ignore people who show them only mild interest. If participants in this group are somehow taken by surprise, they usually just laugh at themselves after reacting to the unexpected assault on their senses. They are usually couples or small groups and are found sitting on benches or at picnic tables eating and drinking coffee or are casually walking around the park. I would classify them as the mature parental units or those who are participating because they were fulfilling a family obligation.

The third group contains those people who are there for the full Halloween experience. They expect to be scared and are disappointed when an attraction is not as frightening as expected or promised. They are aware of all details, actively seek out characters and are opinionated about their appearance. They frequently ask characters for “selfies” and are appreciative or disapproving of the décor in their surroundings. This group can be classified as the thrill seekers.

Why would someone want to get paid to scare other people? I believe that this is a sense of empowerment. The character has the power to cause fright, evoke the element of surprise and control someone’s response (i.e. raising their heart rate or making them scream) just by using words or body language. They prey on the weak and have the ability to act in a way that may be very different from their natural personality. Perhaps we are seeing a college student who always wanted to be an actress or a civil servant who after being nice to people all day finds it satisfying to frighten people by night. Perhaps we are observing people who like to dress-up in costume and become someone else for the night.

Whatever the reason, the business of scaring people is very lucrative and Six Flags Great Adventure is capitalizing on it in a big way.