"WE, ROBOT": THE ENCIRCLEMENT BY AMUSEMENT[1]

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Abstract

This paper argues that we are currently witnessing a techno-cultural strategy where amusement obscures ethical engagement and frames what I propose to call an "encirclement by amusement". The argument developed in this paper is twofold. First, it relies on a comparison between different kinds of movies or series-based amusement parks in LA/Hollywood to analyze how our fictional and real worlds are collapsing, resulting in our becoming "We, robot", to quote the title of Tesla's 2024 show located in Warner Bros. Studios Burbank. Second, it suggests that two complementary mechanisms are at stake in this process: it combines self-fulfilling prophecy – which is a common characteristic of NBIC (including AI) as a whole – with what Ellul describes as "encirclement by what is obvious". Last, a few directions towards a "leisure ethics" understood as a form of ethics of care are suggested to break this "encirclement by amusement".

Keywords

Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, Philosophy of leisure, Transhumanism, Encirclement by amusement

"We, robot", was the show hosted by Tesla on October 10, 2024, to unveil its new autonomous vehicles, *Cybercar* and *Robovan*, with the slogans "The Future is Autonomous" and "Autonomy for All." At the event filmed and shared on the company's website, Tesla founder, E. Musk was the guest star, but the presence of another character, the *Optimus* robot, was less conspicuous; yet it clearly stole the show from the driverless vehicles presented at the event, and it even outshone E. Musk himself.

What is *Optimus*? Touted in 2021 as Tesla's major project, *Optimus* is a two-legged humanoid robot developed for industrial, public, domestic and private uses. Its third version was presented in 2024. Its design is quite standard: it looks like a white mannequin with TESLA's logo on its chest. Musk had announced in 2022 that Optimus would, in time, be able to do anything that humans would not want to do, and that it would usher in an "age of abundance." *Optimus* was also expected to "transform the world … to a degree even greater" than the cars *Tesla* is famous for. "It's maybe hard to imagine it," he said.[2] Priced at between 10 and 20,000 dollars, *Optimus* is designed to do whatever humans do not want to do or will no longer want to do. A multipurpose robot, no less!

Prior to the event held at the Warner Bros. studios in Burbank, Tesla had already unveiled new solar panels[3] in 2019 at Universal Studio Hollywood, where they were used to power the lights of a house featured in several TV series (such as *Desperate Housewives*). The panels were also expected to revolutionize people's daily life, and yet, not much is heard about them today.

The choice of a movie-themed amusement park for the more recent event was far from accidental. It is particularly significant and contributes to a process of mythification of AI and robotics that relies on different mechanisms. This paper examines a certain number of these mechanisms and show how we are currently witnessing what I propose to call an "encirclement by amusement", a techno-cultural strategy where amusement obscures ethical engagement. It will also suggest a few means of escaping this trap and adopting an 'ethics of leisure'.

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[2] https://www.cnbc.com/2022/04/08/elon-musk-says-tesla-is-aiming-to-start-production-on-optimus-next-year.html
[3] https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/29/tesla-boss-elon-musk-unveils-solar-roof-tiles

1. The immersive logic

Universal Studios *Hollywood* and *Warner Bros Studios* are both movie studios in current operation, as well as theme parks, a sub-group of amusement parks. The Disneyland franchise parks are the most famous ones - but surprisingly (or not) they were not chosen for the "We, robot" event.

Theme parks are immersive cultural technologies very carefully designed. As explained by Jeremy Thompson,[4] while amusement parks are mostly known for their mechanical dimension, the first theme park created by Disney introduced a new dimension, storytelling. He writes: "Theme parks sell stories. Stories are their brand. They are places where an audience goes to experience a story in a living environment, where the forth wall is removed and patrons live completely within the diegetic construct of the storyteller's world." While the rides in amusement parks are an end in themselves, in theme parks, they belong to a story, and are even intended to support and extend the story, and draw visitors inside the story, using a variety of means. Thompson distinguishes three different ways of achieving this: "These forms of stories might be labeled variously as "environmental storytelling" (i.e. immersing the visitor in a rich, unfamiliar sense of place that acts as a stage for the patron's imagination to create their own back stories), "interactive storytelling" (i.e. the audience participates in creating their own narrative stories within a set of parameters provided by the author using methods typical of augmented reality games), or "forensic storytelling" (i.e. the visitor happens upon a scene and is forced to re-create the story based on information obtained from props and messages left behind by absent characters.")

While we can be amazed by these many possibilities, they nevertheless remain within boundaries. One of the characteristics of theme parks is to be a limited, coherent and therefore reassuring space. It is thus not surprising that repetition is one of the key elements of theme parks, where symbols refer to something outside the park, and not for their singular dimension, but their repeated dimension. The basic principle of a theme park works because visitors are placed in a symbolic world "in series", which is the principle of immersion. As Thompson points out:

> "What sets theme parks apart is the way that those physical symbols are placed in series, allowing them to control meaning and manipulate identity in a way that isolated symbols are unable to do. Series are what gives theme parks their distinctive "story" quality, in which the brain processes information in a sequential order that allows for the reveal of key emotional moments." So, "beyond the binge," what do we find? Series – and not only TV series – which rely on repetition to create a sense of familiarity.

Interestingly, Thompson shows that this emphasis on a series comes precisely from motion-picture techniques developed by Disney based on the Gestalt Theory.[5] He explains: "This themed design technique might be called a 'relational series,' in which the flow between different elements or areas is strategically controlled. McGuire (2012, p.4) goes a step further by showing that theme parks are designed to maximize the immersion experience by appealing to all the senses. The most important one is sight, where in addition to visual imagery, special care is given to the light to create "an aura of believability in themed spaces", but also sounds, which are considered "mood setters", and even smells. Each and every employee contributes to this phenomenon not only by their physical appearance, but also by their attitude. They must constantly impersonate a role that corresponds to the specific atmosphere of the very place where they are, and contributes to the general atmosphere of the place as a whole. She writes: "No longer are you watching others experience the fantastical and the phantasmagorical on the silver screen, no longer are you going through the motions of the banality of diurnal life: you are a participant in this fantasy land, and your senses tell you that this is true."

In other words, one of the strengths of these parks is their ability to blur the line between fiction and reality. Similarly to Woody Allen's "The Purple Rose of Cairo" or Michael Ende's "The Never-ending Story," we are literally swallowed up in the world of fantasy, with all the necessary stage props, which become natural. McGuire (2012, p.6) points it out: "The effective blurring of fantasy and reality can only be achieved when the total effect is strong and overpowering enough so that the visitor is able to forget that he or she is in a fabricated

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[4] https://www.rollercoasterphilosophy.com/philosophy/what-is-a-theme-park/

[5] John Hench, former senior vice president of Walt Disney Imagineering, articulated the concept of the series as it applies to theme parks in an interview with New West Magazine, reported in the essay "Disneyland is Good For You," in December 1978:
"[Disneyland] is easily understandable when you think of it like a film and how identity is controlled in a film. Identity is a figure-ground relationship: Scene five takes its identity from scenes one, two, three and four. If you put scene five against that background, you understand it, but if you just dropped it in the audience's laps they wouldn't know what was going on. […] One side of Main Street is aware of the other side. It was planned for this very effect, and who else but motion-picture people, who design sets, could do it? Walt understood the relation between scene one and scene two, he knew how to identify something and how to hold the identity due to something the Germans call gestalt. Nothing has an identity of its own until it's related to something else. If you can control that relation, you can control identity. You can use images in a literate way."

environment". This blurring can extend to the distinction between the living and the non-living,[6] where the non-living can seem more realistic than the living. In this fantasy world, norms are also blurred and even broken. Things that are otherwise forbidden are allowed in themed parks, such as splashing, shooting targets, bumping into cars and so on. To quote McGuire (2012, p.11), this mechanism is designed to "break Social Boundaries" and contributes to the "suspension of Norms".

In this sacred universe, in the truest sense of the word, boundaries are erased and categories overturned. But these spaces also help build a sense of belonging that can, in some respects, be compared to a form of quasi-magical communion, in a separate world, where everyone is happy and kind. So, when E. Musk asks participants to be "kind" to Optimus, obviously, the request is as formal as it is pointless.

2. Self-fulfilling prophecies

The "We, robot" show was held precisely in such a setting. The event was perfectly staged to fit into this universe but also relies on the techniques that are pivotal in theme parks. Optimus's performance serving drinks or handing out goodies, wearing a cowboy's hat playfully tilted on its head and playing "rock, paper, scissors" with amazed visitors contributed to this atmosphere. Optimus robots were also used as DJs, which is reminiscent of the bar in the Star Wars Village of Disneyland LA, where a robot, DJ R-3X, plays a similar role in creating a party atmosphere. Optimus performances directly taps into the immersive storytelling and the sensory manipulation techniques that are fundamental in the theme parks, thus contributing to blurring the distinction between fiction and reality.

Moreover, by choosing a theme park that is first and foremost a film studio, Tesla was also placing its products (and itself as a brand) in a Hollywood and superhero mythology, in the same way as Zuckerberg has previously compared himself (albeit with a touch of irony) to *Iron Man* [7]. The name *Optimus* echoes not only the transhumanist ideology of an 'optimized human' but also, in popculture the well-known transformer character. In this mythology, Optimus, also known (in Japanese) as Convoy, is the leader of autoboots, a 'Cybertronian' extraterrestrial sentient species, hybrids between biological evolution and technological engineering and self-configuring modular lifeforms. Reborn as Orion Pax, it fights against the evil 'decepticons' and bears moral values, endorsing the Moto: 'Till all are one'.

Coming back to E. Musk's announcements, we must point out the skepticism they raised. The solar panels that seemed so fantastic are hardly dominating the market today, and one of the Optimus robots inadvertently admitted that it was being "steered" by a human—unless it was the pilot himself who confessed.

Of course, these marketing events are common practice in the field of new technologies (*Apple*, for example, holds similar ones), but those organized by E. Musk are more particularly based on announcements intended to work as self-fulfilling prophecies, acting as if the future were already here and thus also preventing any possible alternative, using a strategy that belongs to anticipatory design (which sets a double lock, technological and ethical, since the future is certain and cannot be otherwise). This aspect is even more ironic given that the event's slogan "We, robot" is based on the idea of autonomy—which, philosophically speaking, presupposes being able to set our own standards. This autonomy is precisely what becomes impossible in this type of context that leaves no alternative. Moreover, given the past announcements on Solar Panels set in amusement Parks, it is pretty surprising that the same strategy is re-used without arising skepticism in the audience.

The choice of the theme park/studio as a venue reinforces this dimension of self-fulfilling prophecy. As I have examined in Nurock (2025), self-fulfilling prophecies are pivotal in certain ideological systems about new technologies and often reinforce the "encirclement by what is obvious", producing a powerful combination. A further observation is that some of the intrinsic characteristics of its leisure dimension can be reversed to produce what French philosopher, Jacques Ellul called "encirclement by what is obvious." This encirclement is based on four main characteristics that Ellul describes in *The Technological Bluff* ([1990] 1998), which correspond to what is explained above.

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[6] In this respect, Turkle's (2011, p. 4) anecdote is particularly revealing: "Rebecca's reaction as a seven-year-old during a boat ride in the postcard-blue Mediterranean. Already an expert in the world of simulated fish tanks, she saw something in the water, pointed to it excitedly, and said, "Look, Mommy, a jellyfish! It looks so realistic!" When I told this story to a vice president at the Disney Corporation, he said he was not surprised. When Animal Kingdom opened in Orlando, populated by "real"—that is, biological—animals, its first visitors complained that they were not as "realistic" as the animatronic creatures in other parts of Disneyworld. The robotic crocodiles slapped their tails and rolled their eyes—in sum, they displayed archetypal "crocodile" behavior. The biological crocodiles, like the Galápagos tortoises, pretty much kept to themselves. I believe that in our culture of simulation, the notion of authenticity is for us what sex was for the Victorians—threat and obsession, taboo and fascination.

[7] See for instance https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x55wbsv and https://www.ndtv.com/offbeat/zuckerberg-turns-iron-man-to-welcome-face-swap-app-on-facebook-1285908

1.   The absence of conflict: people go to theme parks to have fun in a peaceful atmosphere.
2.   This calmed climate allows "the force of things" (media, communication, imaging, and so on) to overflow or encircle the points of resistance, which dissolve and give way to self-evidence: in theme parks, everything is done to totally immerse visitors.
3.   This encirclement rests on deep foundations that include the suppression of moral judgment: social and moral norms are suspended, and thus forbidden actions such as splashing, shooting and bumping are allowed.
4.   Technology is presented as close, familiar, individualistic, and personal; this gives rise to a basic adherence to this banality that is both reassuring and innovative. It reinforces the absence of conflict and is in conformity with point 1. Technical services can be purchased to personalize the theme park experience. In the "We, robot" event, everyone is special and spoiled: *Optimus* hands out goodies to everybody. Technology is finally within the economic reach of almost everyone, even if, at a range price of 10 000-12 000, this accessibility claim is definitely a bit oversold.

These ideas are summarized in the figure below.

Ellul: Encirclement by what is obvious	Theme parks/"We, robot" show
No conflict	Fun, joy, everybody is happy
This calmed climate allows "the force of things" (media, communication, imaging, and so on) to overflow or encircle the points of resistance, which dissolve and give way to self-evidence:	Total immersion (senses, repetition etc.)
Deep foundations that include the suppression of moral judgment	Social and moral norms are suspended; splashing, shooting and bumping are allowed
Technology is presented as close, familiar, individualistic, and personal; this gives rise to a basic adherence to this banality that is both reassuring and innovative. This adherence reinforces the absence of conflict and is in conformity with point 1.	Technical services can be purchased to personalize the theme park experience. In the "We, robot" show, everyone is special and spoiled (Optimus hands out goodies). Technology is finally within the economic reach of almost everyone (among the wealthy people).

This leads to what could be called "the encirclement by amusement," in line with Ellul's encirclement by what is obvious and taking it a step further. Beyond the technological dimension, it is obvious that this encirclement by amusement also has a social, ethical and political dimension (as did the encirclement by what is obvious), which is even stronger in the current context of perpetual entanglement between reality and the (tele)visual and cinematic spectacle.[8]

3. Amusement with care

Coming back to the *Tesla* slogans at the "We, robot" show, we cannot fail to notice the insistence on the idea of autonomy, which seems far removed from the notion of encirclement by amusement. The latter can be compared to a large extent to "diversion" in the Pascalian sense, the type of blind escalation that Martine Pécharman (2001) describes as a stratagem that consists in diverting one's mind from the thought of death and allows man to adopt a false sense of immortality.

This reasoning seems, in a certain way, to be in full agreement with transhumanist thinking, which largely incorporates the denial of our mortal condition and rejection of concern and care. However, it seems to me that we could propose a way of escaping encirclement by amusement by drawing inspiration precisely from the logic of these theme parks jointly serving as film studios, and consider that this encirclement is not as systematic as it might seem at first glance.

What makes a visit to *Warner Bros. Studios Burbank* or *Universal Studios Hollywood* amusing? It might be suggested that there is a double appeal to these theme parks, which is, in a way, paradoxical. Firstly, when we visit the film studios and the sets of movie series, we can pretend to be our favorite character, and step out of reality into an imaginary world. But secondly, the experience can produce a certain demystification of the imaginary world when it is reduced to artificial props. When touring Universal Studios, we see the shark used in *Jaws* and other special effects. Until a few years ago, a guide would explain the special effects and what happens behind the scenes to the many families visiting. The appeal of these parks is thus based on both simulation and demystification. It allows us to exercise our imagination but also our critical thinking.

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[8] The confrontation between Trump and Zelensky, who both have professional experience in show business, is undoubtedly the best example of this entanglement.I fully endorse Piergiorgio Donatelli's analysis proposed during the Démoséries colloquium in February 2025 at the IEA in Paris and suggest that this entanglement is larger than it looks at first sight.

This means that it is possible to escape the encirclement by amusement, and that the cure can be found, in a certain way, in the purpose of the parks themselves. It is therefore our responsibility to rethink amusement in a non-Pascalian approach, as a certain "art de vivre" that combines imagination and critical thinking to achieve what Bouwer and van Leeuwen (2017, p.110) call "leisure ethics." They write: "The guiding philosophy behind a leisure ethic, then, could be seen as an art of life that revolves around self-care, self-development, self-perfection, self-realization, self-responsibility within the framework of an ethics and aesthetics of existence. The leisure ethic fundamentally concerns self-morality, wisdom and becoming fully human with eudaimonia as the beckoning horizon. Leisure as care, as a way to find the good things in life, to strive for self-development and a better future for others: that is the idea of leisure as art of life."This ethics of leisure, which includes critical thinking and even encourages it, is probably today, more than ever, necessary.

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