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Analysis of Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century; John F. Kasson

By: Carlos M. Contente

Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century by John F. Kasson uses the amusement park at Coney Island as a case study for a transformative period in American history when new economic and social conditions were leading to a new “mass culture.”¹ It was this new culture, composed of both upper and lower classes, native-born and immigrants alike, which stood in “growing revolt against the genteel standards of taste and conduct”² that were the norm of turn-of-the-century America.

The author, John F. Kasson, is currently Professor Emeritus of History and American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He received his AB from Harvard University in 1966 and his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1971.² He teaches courses in American Cultural History and in Popular Culture and American History, which coincides well with his authorship of his work. His other published works include: *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (2001) and, most recently, *The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America* (2014).³ All of Kasson’s published works, including *Amusing the Million*, follow a theme of using various forms of popular culture and entertainment to interpret American history.

Kasson’s study begins with a comparison of Coney Island to other architectural works of that era. The two works Kasson emphasizes are Central Park in New York City and the

¹ John F. Kasson. *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*. (Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1978), 3

² “John F. Kasson, Department of History,” University of North Carolina, accessed September 10, 2015, <http://history.unc.edu/people/emeriti-faculty/john-f-kasson/>

³ Ibid

Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.⁴ Unlike Coney Island, Kasson explains that these two creations enforced genteel social norms instead of loosening them. He then goes on to give a brief account of West Brighton's surly reputation prior to the fires of 1893 and 1895, which acted as a purifying agent and set the stage for the Coney Island that was to follow.⁵

When the book reaches Coney Island at the turn of the century, the author goes on to explain that it provided a get-away for the multitudes, both rich and poor, native and immigrant alike. In fact, for many immigrants, the experience of going to Coney Island was considered part of assimilating to their new home in the United States.⁶ He further explains that young couples would go there to avoid the omniscient eyes of their parents, and that the relaxation in postal regulations added to this "sexual revolution."⁷ In fact, the front cover features five women lifting their bathing skirts, in what would have been considered a risqué act for the time.

Kasson concludes the book with a brief discussion of the artists that flocked to Coney Island, as well as the social theorists that offered their various opinions on the matter. As for the artists, it was rejected by the mainstream, genteel contemporaries and instead frequented by photographers who intended for their works to be featured in mass circulation magazines, such as *Munsey's* and *Cosmopolitan*.⁸

The thesis of the book truly comes full circle with the discussion of the social reformers and their thoughts on the contemporary change in social attitudes due to the new socio-economic conditions. As Kasson explained earlier, Coney Island promised customers "nothing more than the pleasure of the event; Coney abstracted features from larger society and presented them in

⁴ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 15-17

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34

⁶ *Ibid.*, 39-40

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-7

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88

intensified form.”⁹ Therefore, according to the author, Coney “represented a cultural accommodation to the developing urban-industrial society in a tighter integration of work and leisure.”¹⁰ This seems to echo the sentiments of contemporaries of Coney Island who believed that “public parks and gymnasiums would replace city streets as playgrounds for the poor”¹⁰ and who saw Coney as an important instrument of “socialization in converting stragglers of industry into disciplined workers.”¹⁰

The sources that a historian chooses to utilize, or ignore for that matter, play an important role in the development of any academic work. Firstly, it is important to note that the author takes the name of his book from one of his sources: a magazine article originally written by Frederic Thompson and published in *Everybody's Magazine* in 1908.¹¹ The article, of course, is entitled “Amusing the Million.” In addition to this, Kasson draws heavily upon both written and visual source materials. He utilizes the collection of photographs from the Detroit Photographic Company at the Library of Congress,¹¹ as well as the Collection of Coney Island Postcards from the Long Island Historical Society.¹² As previously mentioned, contemporary magazine articles play a key role in Kasson’s research for this work. Besides the book’s namesake, some examples include “The Mechanical Joys of Coney Island”¹³ published in the August 15th, 1908 edition of *Scientific American* and “The Amusement Business”¹⁴ published in the July 21st, 1904 edition of the *Independent*.

⁹ Ibid., 73

¹⁰ Ibid., 105

¹¹ Ibid, 120

¹² Ibid, 116

¹³ Ibid., 117

¹⁴ Ibid., 116

Other primary sources cited by the author include the Olmsted Papers in the Library of Congress¹⁵ and letters from the architect of the famed White City at the Columbian Exposition, Daniel Burnham.¹⁶ However, these have very little to do with Coney Island itself and overall the work lacks primary documents, other than magazine articles from that time, which relate directly to Coney Island. There is hardly a mention of letters and diary entries from the millions who went there to be amused. Since Kasson writes that the amusement park was a haven from those all across the socio-economic spectrum, it should not be exceedingly difficult to track down letters or journal entries detailing trips there. This lack of primary evidence actually raises an important question: how does Kasson know what he claims? For example, he writes about couples escaping to Coney Island for romantic pleasures, but there is no primary evidence listed to support this. In a way, it looks like many of the key pieces of Kasson's book may be cobbled together from secondary sources; however, this does not necessarily make them any less accurate.

Due to the lack of primary sources and the fact that this book was originally published in 1978, Kasson could certainly update it with a second edition. In the years since its original publication, access to certain documents may have become easier. Kasson could approach this one by focusing on primary sources such as letters, diary entries, scrapbooks, and other forms of personal communication. This would give the second edition a more "popular" feel as it would still be able to use Coney Island as a case study but do a better job of presenting it through the eyes of those who actually experienced Coney Island and, for better or worse, lived through the social and economic transformations of their day.

¹⁵ Ibid., 115

¹⁶ Ibid., 115

As with any book, this one contains both strengths and weaknesses. One of the key strengths of this work is that the thesis is clearly expressed and emphasized throughout the book. Therefore, it is difficult for the reader to misunderstand Kasson's point of the rejection of genteel culture and the subsequent "cultural accommodation to the developing urban-industrial society in a tighter integration of work and leisure."¹⁷ Furthermore, the book is well-written, and it does not bog down at any point, nor is it dense or difficult to read. However, this book was likely targeted at an academic audience, since it lacks the style of writing popular among the casual readers of history.

With regards to weaknesses, *Amusing the Million* lacks an index, making quick reference to certain subjects within the book difficult, at best. It also lacks chapter headings and a table of contents, once again making it more difficult for those who wish to use this work for research purposes. The only consolation on these points is that it is a relatively short book and should not take one more than two days to read it in its entirety. Thankfully, both the written and visual sources are listed at the end of the work in a straight-forward fashion, which makes it easier for those who wish to use this work as a jumping off point for additional research.

Also important to note is the use of photographs throughout this book. Unlike many other books which group photographs together at a page break in the middle of the book, sometimes interrupting the narrative, *Amusing the Million* places them liberally throughout the book. It provides the reader with a quick reference and helps paint a picture in the reader's head, which enhances the experience and the value of the book. For example, when discussing the juxtaposition of amusement rides and everyday activities, the book features a photograph of "Miners descending for work"¹⁸ and "Thrill seekers descending for pleasure."¹⁹ Placing

¹⁷ Ibid., 109

¹⁸ Ibid., 73

photographs next to one another like this is also a helpful tool for increasing the reader's understanding of the material.

Not limiting the use of visual aids to photographs, Kasson includes several postcards when discussing the relaxing of postal regulations. The most prominent one is that of a "Couple Embracing on a Beach."²⁰ Furthermore, near the end of the book, when Kasson is discussing the various artists that came to Coney Island, he features their paintings. Prominent examples of this are "Beach at Coney Island" by George Bellows²¹ and "Battle of Lights, Mardi Gras, Coney Island."²²

Finally, the use of visuals in this work also has a "humanizing" effect on some of the subjects. One has a better idea of Maxim Gorky due to the photograph of him,²³ and the same can be said for Daniel H. Burnham.²⁴

Both the American West and Coney Island exhibited a rejection of the Victorian genteel notions of propriety that were the norms of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. There are, therefore, similarities among *Amusing the Million* and *The Myth of the West* and "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Kasson himself cites this correlation between the West and Coney Island when he uses *The Virginian* as an example of the "breaking of genteel code of delicacy."²⁵

There is, of course, the obvious correlation that both the Western frontier and Coney Island were used for entertainment. In *Myth of the West*, Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher mention "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," which toured America and featured re-enactments

¹⁹ Ibid., 73

²⁰ Ibid., 43

²¹ Ibid., 98

²² Ibid., 89

²³ Ibid., 108

²⁴ Ibid., 17

²⁵ Ibid., 7

of famous events, such as American forces in Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion and the charging of San Juan Hill.²⁶ This is similar to Luna Park at Coney Island, which featured the re-enactment of popular disasters, such as Pompeii and large, raging fires.²⁷

There is also the notion that, in many respects, this entertainment was both active and passive. That might sound like an oxymoron, but upon examination, it makes sense. Take *The Great Train Robbery* from 1908.²⁸ The viewers paid to see it and passively sat in their seats. However, at the end of the film George Barnes aims and shoots at the audience. This gives the audience the feeling of actively being part of the film experience. This same experience occurs at Coney Island with roller coasters. While the park visitors may have paid to ride on the “El Curve” and the “Flip-Flap,” in the end they just sat on the ride and passively went through the motions.²⁹ As mentioned earlier, Kasson explains that a lot of what Coney Island did was simply make everyday situations intense and fantastic.²⁹

Furthermore, there are similarities between the dime novels and the relaxing of postal restrictions on postcards. Both of them represented a physical manifestation of the relaxing of sexual constraints in society. The oft-mentioned postcard of a couple embracing on a beach can be compared with the frequent sex-scenes featured in dime novels such as *The Captives of the Frontier* (1860).³⁰ In fact, it can be said that the Coney Island postcards were just another step in a process of which the dime novels were just a nascent step.

²⁶ John Mack Farragher and Robert V. Hine. *The American West: A New Interpretive History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 725

²⁷ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 71

²⁸ Farragher and Hine, *The American West*, 727

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73

³⁰ Farragher and Hine, *The American West*, 714

Breaking women's role in society is also seen across both *Amusing the Million* and the works on the Western frontier. Kasson writes of women being able to go to the beach and interact intimately with men whom they might not see again- in essence, casual liaisons which lasted just the day³¹. Hine and Farragher mention women playing non-traditional roles in the novels set in the West, such as Calamity Jane.³² Building upon this notion is Annie Oakley, who dazzled audiences at Buffalo Bill's events with her shooting prowess.³³

In his famous "The Significance of the Frontier," Frederick Jackson Turner states that "in the crucible of the frontier, the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race."³⁴ This same sentiment is expressed by Kasson in his discussion of Coney Island. Kasson explains that Coney Island "lifted visitors beyond the confines of... foreign languages and folkways. For immigrants... notoriously eager to assimilate, Coney Island provided a means to participate in mainstream American culture."³⁵

In conclusion, while Kasson's work does an excellent job of utilizing Coney Island as a case study for the emerging urban-industrial society in America, its lack of primary sources raises significant questions about the strength behind its arguments. Furthermore, its lack of index and chapter headings makes it a bit unwieldy to use as a research tool. That being said, it does offer some valuable observations on American culture and an updated second edition, as mentioned before, would certainly be a valuable addition to the historiography of American cultural history.

³¹ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 44-7

³² Farragher and Hine, *The American West*, 716

³³ *Ibid.*, 723-4

³⁴ Jackson Turner, Fred. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Speech, Worlds Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893.

³⁵ Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, 39-40

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