“Plastic Surging” received an Honorable Mention in the University of Pittsburgh’s 2005/06 Composition Program Writing Contest

“Plastic Surging” was written in response to a particularly complex Seminar in Composition assignment that asked students to synthesize different kinds of writing and reading in a paper containing analysis of at least one text and allusions to three others, critique of a cultural phenomenon, personal involvement, seven footnotes, a metaphor, and some experimenting with style. Rather than meeting each listed requirement mechanically or being overwhelmed by the list, Rachel Nagelberg works to make the assignment her own. With inventive description, she compares her experience on a luxury cruise ship to that described by David Foster Wallace in “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again.”

Like David Foster Wallace, I once boarded a Luxury Cruise: a ‘Megaship,’ ambivalent as to what I’d find, and I too discovered a very strange aura that circulated throughout the gigantic, entropy-defying-white monstrosity - a sot-of-feeling of being entrapped in despair - where in order to escape the intense hopelessness of life, the overwhelming consciousness of death ... I would have to jump overboard. It is this yearning, I think, to remove ourselves of the reality-based restraints that we, as members of a society, are born into that provoke our internal desire to escape, to delve into the sheer notion of fantasy: the unconscious. And if by escaping this death and defeating this inner restraint, you are attending a Megaship, an unnatural, technologically-created womb constructed on the base idea that a pure relaxation and a
stress-free environment will bring you back to however many years it was that you still had an umbilical cord fastened to your navel, then you’ve purposefully been mislead by the Cruiseline’s brochures: they are selling you fantasy, yes, but by screwing with your superego, the brochures’ promises to free you from restraint, to bring you back to the id, to the real, continue on a perpetual pathway to a real so Real that it is void. 

The writer’s choice of Wallace’s essay as her central text for analysis is apt not only because of their common experiences on Megacruiseships, but also because of style. By emulating Wallace’s gaudy prose and extravagant use of footnotes, Nagelberg attempts to immerse readers in the confusing, glitzy fantastic reality of cruise ships while critiquing it.  

Through detailed observations of a culture of evasion, Nagelberg argues that we attempt to avoid reality, and more specifically mortality, by entering fantasy landscapes. But we see reality intrude into the cruise ship’s fantasy world through her depiction of a delay caused by a hurricane, a chat with a cruise ship employee, and a visit to the ship’s morgue. The essay thus implies that our attempts at evading reality and mortality are futile. However, the larger implication of the narrator’s experience is that fantasy worlds only exacerbate reality, and therefore mortality and despair, rather than ushering escape. 

As we approached the freezers on one of the lower floors, the tour director led us into a small room with two metal structures that resembled large, empty bookcases. 

‘This is the official Zuiderdam Morgue,’ she announced, smiling with her bleached pearly whites. ‘We store the dead bodies here when someone croaks.’ 

Everyone just stared. 

She added, ‘You’d never think it possible, but it’s just like real life here, everybody. It’s not like time just stops because we’re on a Luxury Cruise or anything!’
It's just like real life. Right. I glanced at all the elderly people in the frigid room; their skin matched the polished white floor tiles as they stood, hunched in the muted chill - the silent awareness of death.

As readers, we see that Nagelberg’s keen eye and critical response to this vessel that acts “as the ‘plastic surgery’ of reality” enables her to perceive complexities that others miss until the storm intrudes upon their fantasy. Similarly, we see her demonstrate insight as she constructs her argument. After comparing and elaborating upon the views - in reference to escape culture - of Wallace, Zizek, Baudrillard and others, she then moves beyond their reasoning and draws conclusions of her own.

It is hard to recognize the - how should I put it - reality of Cruiseships until after you’ve experienced one and then after you’ve thought back. And although I have basically denounced the American utopian society, I cannot say for myself that I am not part of it. I am as landlocked as the rest, except maybe realizing a little bit more than some: the truth is, though, I cannot nor do I think I want to live without some mirages, without some form of societal fantasy to keep me happy. In ‘ZIZEK!,’ Zizek casually states that he thinks that he either hates life or is indifferent to phenomena and biting off the heads of everything I believe to be false, I cannot condemn everything that I’ve ever known to oblivion. The moments that we spend absorbed inside of our self-created fantasy, our voluntary attempts to achieve the pure inner consistency of reality, are the moments when we can escape death. No matter how much many of us acknowledge the inevitability of the finale of our lives, no one can truly accept that we are not meant to go out ‘with a bang,’ such as hurdling with passion off of a one hundred and ten foot high Cruiseship. Or racing at gravity-defying speeds through the nighttime city streets with florescent lights creating
silhouettes of you and your chasing opponent’s cars, knowing that the end is nearing very, very soon but you’re rocketing so fast through the blurring avenues that nothing seems or feels real anymore ... you could die any minute but you would be so alive in the madness of it all.

In so doing, Nagelberg creates an essay about a journey that mirrors that construct by allowing us to hitch a ride as she deftly navigates her emerging point of view, a point of view that opens as cynic and closes as retrospective philosopher.

Although fantasy seems now horrific from the exterior, appears as if it represents the evil: the ultimate, macroscopic lie, it is necessary in that it allows many of us to subsist with hope that the minutes and seconds that we live out each day are not without meaning, are not just incongruent puzzle pieces with no planned and resulting image of deep and concentrated beauty.