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“The Real Real: building ontologies/building worlds”

The future is made as is the past but are they “made” in the same way? Perhaps it is better to offer a less passive construction: We make the future as we make the past but, do we “make” them in the same way? I want to offer a follow up question: What is the relation between the “making” of pasts and future to what we consider “real”? Is the future real? Is the past? I would say that historians, for the most part and present company excluded, take the latter to be so though they are more reticent about committing to the former. This is to say that while they are reasonably confident to assert the past is real, they are less so about the relation of that past to the future except insofar as they are committed to a speculative philosophy of history: Whiggish, Hegelian, Marxist. In these cases, the commitment to a real future is no less robust than to a real past even if the reality of that future is merely implied or presented *sotto voce*.

Umberto Eco was fascinated by the possibilities and precarity of “the real.” It is the focus of his work “Faith in Fakes” better known by its more popular title *Travels in Hyperreality*. I know this essay is low hanging fruit, but it is one I read in college and to

* This is a rough draft so please do not cite. I apologize for the rough nature of this version. The paper was written amidst a series of family issues. The most glaring omission is the lack of proper attribution to the source documents which I list at the end of the paper. Other deficiencies can be taken up in our discussion.

which I have longed to return. In what follows I want to combine Eco's interest in "the real" with my interest in the work it does constructing pasts and futures.

To revisit the assertion presented at the beginning of this paper, I believe histories are made and not found. This is not to say that the past never happened or certain events did not exist but instead to point out that ultimately it is more important **to convince others** that such events happened in such a way than to portray them as they really happened or even that they happened at all: to make them real. It is in this sense that Koselleck states in regard to issues of memory and experience: "The false testimony of a contemporary will always remain a more immediate source even if it is later unmasked" and also that "it is clear that there can be no pure *Zeitgeschichte* in the sense of a mere history of the present, and at the very least, it must refer to a past present and its past: first comes the history, then its narration (which does not rule out the existence of histories that consist only of their narration)."¹ The narration includes histories of events that happened, that did NOT happen, or for which we only have the narration but no corroborating evidence. This is the game of history and if one is successful then such a past is real. It exists for us appropriating all the ontological properties we commonly afford to any commensurate happening in the present. The question which follows is whether the future is likewise constructed? And are either of these constructions really real? Perhaps more important is the relation between these constructed pasts and constructed futures in regard to the ontologies and worlds we build. The place where I intend to do take up this relation and these questions is Walt Disney's Tomorrowland.

¹ Koselleck, "Constancy and Change of All Contemporary Histories: Conceptual-Historical Notes" in *Sediments of Time*, 105, 106.

As you likely know, Eco's essay ranges across a much broader territory than Disneyland in California and Disneyworld in Florida. Published in the early 1970s, it chronicles Eco's echoes encounters with American popular culture though it is decidedly written for a European audience. The idea is that Eco would read and interpret the cultural artifacts consumed by "real Americans" and by this he means people who are not living in the major cities, intellectuals, or members of the cultural elite. Rather than looking to museums or universities, Eco wants to explore popular sites, curiosities, and even advertisements. This, he tells us

"is the reason for this journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of 'fullness,' of *horror vacui*."²

The "real thing" to which Eco refers is evocative of the Coca-Cola company's advertising campaign from the late 1960s which positioned Coca-Cola as the original and thus authentic coal differentiating it from the more recent and modern looking Pepsi-Cola by referencing Coca-Cola's past and heritage. This past, even if invented, is meant to convey a thicker and more substantial sense of what is real. The real real. Throughout the essay, Eco explores the construction of pasts intended to convey realness even if that involves the incorporation of that which is accepted as fake. As noted above, I am more interested in the play between the 'real' and the 'fake' as it also relates to the future and what we can imagine as a potentially "real" future as opposed to that which we accept as a "fake future," fantasy, or science fiction. The stakes are different for each.

² Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace, (1986), p. 8.

To take up this relation between past and future in *Tomorrowland*, I think it worth rehearsing Eco's account of how such a past is made and what kind of past it turns out to be. This will also give us purchase on more recent constructions and understanding of the past. One example Eco gives us is *The Palace of Living Arts* in Buena Park, California where classic paintings are presented in 3-D and famous sculptures are enhanced by music, lighting, or the addition of other "characters."

"The Palace's philosophy is not, 'We are giving you the reproduction so that you will want the original,' but rather, 'We are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original.' But for the reproduction to be desired, the original has to be idolized, and hence the kitsch function of the inscriptions and the taped voices, which remind you of the greatness of the art of the past."³

This is a strange, even violent, relation to the past. It is a past you are told you need to see, that is important to you, but that then is presented in a way quite different from the artifact that is copied. Either the audience is brought around to the view that the fake is more real than the original or the audience acknowledges that the artifact isn't real but concludes that they do not care, that the old sense of realness does not really matter.⁴ I would say that at the time of Eco's essay the general sentiment was in the moment of the former but as of now we are in the moment of the latter which subsumes or sublimates the prior sentiment.

In his moment Eco detects a difference between the constructed past of The Palace as opposed to that of Disneyland:

"The Palace of Living Arts presents its Venus de Milo as almost real, whereas Disneyland can permit itself to present its reconstructions as masterpieces of falsification, for what it

³ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 19.

⁴ To my mind, this latter conclusion aligns with Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis in "The Culture Industry" though beyond the scope of this paper.

sells is, indeed, goods, but genuine merchandise, not reproductions. What is falsified is our will to buy, which we take as real, and in this sense Disneyland is the quintessence of consumer ideology.”⁵

Whereas The Palace is content to alter artifacts from the past to make them more real to their contemporary audience, Disney seeks to construct a past of their own creation replete with masterpieces of their own design. They have no incentive to offer reproductions no matter how much improved because they need to own the intellectual property outright. Thus, the confines in which they sell their product must likewise be owned and the past in which it occurs must be of their own making, acquired via purchase, or public domain. But in order for the “total fake” to be enjoyed it must also seem totally real. One sees this in Disney’s Adventureland, Main Street, New Orleans square. At the time of its opening, part of what was appreciated was the verisimilitude, the real like quality of the copy. Now, when one strolls through the real New Orleans, one realizes that it has been modified to coincide with Disney’s vision of it. The same can be said of Prague Castle. The ontology or world has been altered by what Eco considered the total fake with the result that fake has become the real real.

Accounts of the past are likewise bent to accommodate their audience and here I would like to mobilize an analogy between Eco’s account of the slippage between real and fake and one that takes place in accounts of the past. Eco states:

“When there is a fake-hippopotamus, dinosaur, sea serpent—it is not so much because it wouldn’t be possible to have the real equivalent but because the public is meant to admire the perfection of the fake and its obedience to the program. A real crocodile can be found

⁵ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 43.

in the zoo, and as a rule it is usually dozing or hiding, but Disneyland tells us that fake nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands.”⁶

Likewise, the past rarely conforms to what our daydreams demand and the preference is for a history that performs in the ways we would like.

We add a layer of complexity to this if we consider the relation to the future and here, we enter Tomorrowland. The difference between the Disney lands (Adventureland, Fantasyland, etc.) that Eco visited, and Tomorrowland is that the goal of Tomorrowland was quite different from the other lands in the park. It was not meant to be pure fantasy or reproduction but a site of inspiration and innovation to serve as a template for the future. More science than fiction, more invention than reproduction. Walt Disney was sincere in his convictions as a futurist though, to be sure, his was a particularly American (U.S.) vision of the future.

Tomorrowland as originally conceived was a place where technology and science would lead the way to an optimistic future of innovation. Opened in 1955 and set thirty years later in 1986, Walt’s vision of the future was real even if the Tomorrowland visitors experienced had been hastily cobbled together from the leftover sets of Disney’s “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea” movie and corporate-sponsored exhibits. Copious quantities of balloons were needed to fill in the empty spaces around the TWA “moonliner” rocket ship, the plastic “Monsanto House of the Future” with Jetsons-style interiors and a GE microwave oven to cook your meal, and the Kaiser Aluminum Hall of Fame.

⁶ Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 44.

From the beginning, the future that that Walt Disney imagined, and the Tomorrowland represented were difficult to align. This is to say that Walt Disney sincerely believed in the future he was selling, possibly even shaping, at Tomorrowland but making the future real is tricky business. In Walt Disney's "Tomorrowland dedication speech," displayed in the park to this day, he promised a:

'vista into a world of wondrous ideas, signifying man's achievements ... a step into the future, with predictions of constructive things to come. Tomorrow offers new frontiers in science, adventure and ideals: the Atomic Age ... the challenges of outer space ... and the hope for a peaceful and unified world.'

Despite or because of the limited future offered to guests in 1956, Tomorrowland relaunched in 1959 with a much more ambitious vision. Tomorrowland introduced the first working monorail to the US and the after another update in 1967 brought the PeopleMover, a mini electric train system intended to be the future of urban mass transport. Of course, neither the monorail nor the PeopleMover succeeded in transitioning out of the park. The California original of the PeopleMover closed in 1995 though the one in Florida is still in operation as are the Monorails. Nevertheless, Walt Disney's futurist credentials were such that he was asked to design attractions for the 1964 New York World's Fair, including the Carousel of Progress and It's a Small World, both of which he then brought back to Disneyland. Disney's vision for the future extended beyond Tomorrowland as the animatronics used for the rides and attractions were also cutting edge and Eco is particularly taken by those used in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Haunted House* ride.

By the 1960s, Disneyland had become a success, and after it was revealed that Disney had been secretly buying huge parcels of land in Florida there was great

anticipation that another park was in the making. But building another Disneyland was only part of Walt's plan and at a 1965 press conference in Florida, he expressed a sentiment that would seem quite out of place for the Disney corporation of today: "I would like to create new things," Walt Disney told reporters "You hate to repeat yourself. I don't like to make sequels to my pictures. I like to make a new thing and develop a new concept." What appealed to Disney about "the Florida project" was not the nostalgia of Main Street USA or New Orleans Square that had become so popular in the Disney parks, but the possibilities afforded by the workers' town next to it. In Tomorrowland, one would not only experience the future confined within the park but also the future Walt Disney was determined to make real. On the top floor of the Carousel of Progress visitors could view a large scale model of "Progress City", a town to be built for over 20,000 people, with lights, moving cars, and the glow of a nuclear power station in the distance.⁷ The primary means of getting around would be public transport taken from Tomorrowland, a monorail, a system of people movers. The Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (Epcot) was Disney's vision for the future made real.

Of course, the "reality" of the city that park goers came to see would also be permanently deferred. "It will always be in a state of becoming," Walt Disney explained in a promotional film, "It will never cease to be a living blueprint of the future, where people live a life they can't find anywhere else in the world." A life, it turns out, they were never able to live. Nevertheless, the future promised to visitors in the park was aligned with the

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/21/tomorrowland-disney-strange-utopia-shaped-world-tomorrow>

constructed past offered in the other lands such that the “novelty” of this future was never unexpected and always welcome. Walt Disney and his Imagineers kept Tomorrowland one step ahead of the ever encroaching real future through the 1950s and 1960s in part because of partnerships with the companies seeking to sell that future to the American consumer convincing them that the products they sought to sell were actually the real real. The Autopia ride is exemplary as this vision of a future dominated by the automobile soon became a reality even altering accounts of the city of Los Angeles’s past now dominated by the apocryphal and inaccurate belief that highways created its topography. Tomorrowland’s future became Los Angeles’s past.

Something changed with the death of Walt Disney and by the 1980s, Tomorrowland’s interest in producing a real future had waned which likely aligns with the park that Eco visited. The real future of tomorrow was replaced by the futuristic present in attractions such as Captain EO, the 3D Michael Jackson musical directed by Francis Ford Coppola or Star Tours, a Star Wars-themed simulator ride (which ironically does become the future of Tomorrowland but for none of the reasons espoused at the time), and the Space Mountain rollercoaster. Increasingly, Disney’s own intellectual property became the basis for the vision of the future so whereas the earlier version constructed a future that dictated the construction of the past, this iteration looked to the past to construct its future. This might be conceived as a fake future but as was the case with the fake reproductions from the past, for the “total fake” to be enjoyed it had to be presented as totally real.

This leads us to the 1990s when chief Imagineer Tony Baxter was given creative control over the design of Disneyland Paris. Confronted with the problem of constructing a future that visitors to the park could consider real, Baxter took the bold step of eliminating tomorrow. In its place he offered guests futures from the past. This avoided the possibility of controversy but perhaps more important the expenses associated with constantly update the future as it becomes the present and then the past. The added bonus was that the future on offer could be one owned by Disney or its subsidiaries. The construction of a future intended to convey realness even if that involves the incorporation of that which is accepted as fake. In Disneyland Paris, Tomorrowland was replaced by Discoveryland presented as an homage to futurists of the past especially Jules Verne and HG Welles. In a way, Tomorrowland had come full circle as the original had been built from the scraps of Disney's "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" movie based on the novel by Jules Verne.

Discoveryland presented the general concept of tomorrow, without imagining or constructing it. Here we come into alignment with Eco's assessment. This isn't a real vision of the future it is a replica of what past futurists thought the future would hold, but as such it holds the possibility of imagining a future that has been lost or never achieved. Instead of the sleek white Googie architecture of its predecessors, Discoveryland is an architectural expression of how various European futurists imagined what tomorrow would look like. Despite the reliance on old science fiction and abdication of the present, it is presented as a real envisioning of the future which occurred in the past and as such is meant to be better and more real in every way than whatever we could possibly imagine or believe the future to become now.

Redesigns of Tomorrowland in both Disneyland and Walt Disney World followed using both the old European futurism of Discoverlyand and the retro-futurism of America in the 1950s smuggling the sleek Googie look back into the park but now as an old future. The past future constructed in “New Tomorrowland” looked surprisingly like the imagined future of 1986 designed for the original park though now sprinkled with steampunk. When the New Tomorrowland opened in 1995 the New York Times wrote: “There is a place here where the future looks old. It is called Tomorrowland.”

The earlier nostalgic and idealized more real than the real past was connected to an optimistic vision of a more real than real future and thus preserved a stable connection between past, present and future. One could even say that it was able to make the future real whether for better or for worse. This relation collapses when the future toward which we are pointed is, in fact, from the past. Here, we should take a moment to reflect on the affinity between the move to construct a past more real than real, as in The Palace or New Orleans Square, and the construction of the future likewise now pulled from the past. The temporal anarchy of a past future more real than the future, culled from a past more real than the past is, or should be, vertiginous. If one can convince the public that this is the real real, visions of the future can only point back toward what has been. The ontologies and worlds that are made can only return back in a time loop.

Since about 2012, when Disney acquired Lucasfilm and the Star Wars franchise, Tomorrowland, Disney has given up on the real future (past or present) entirely. It has been suffused with and even taken over by intellectual property from Star Wars. Tomorrowland launched a *Star Wars*-themed “Season of the Force”, in connection with the release of the

movie *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* film in 2015. Other changes included the *Star Wars* Launch Bay, an exhibition showcasing artwork and other materials related to the franchise, a *Star Wars Rebels*-themed update of Jedi Training Academy known as *Jedi Training: Trials of the Temple*, the addition of *The Force Awakens*-related content to *Star Tours - The Adventures Continue*, and a *The Force Awakens*-themed Space Mountain overlay known as Hyperspace Mountain. If sites such as Disneyland are revelatory in the ways that Eco suggested, it would not be an overstatement to say that there has been an abdication of the future which I correlate to an abdication of the past. What I have elsewhere called a de-pasting and de-futuring. In the case of Tomorrowland, Walt's initial vision to make the future real gave way to the presentation of a future already made (1986), and then to a future that never was based on a film from a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away: *Star Wars*. This is a future devoid of future, a "total fake," which nevertheless can be enjoyed as totally real because of its fidelity to the franchise from upon which it is based. In one sense, both the past future of an imagined 1986 and the future offered by *Star Wars* are far more real than any future we can imagine because they can be adjudicated against the original. This should give us pause as it analogous to much conventional historical method. So long as verisimilitude is the marker the past and this future can be considered quite real. But is this the real real?

Tomorrowland sources used:

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