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The Fortresses of Solitude

Eco’s argument in this section is that there are things, like the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, that aim to be the thing they were constructed after. Unlike photorealism, these things do not brag about how real they look. These things are offered as the real thing. He posits that Americans demand “the real thing” and in order to get it, they must recreate it. These reproductions are perfect.

My 21st century example of this is DisneyWorld. Technically DisneyLand came first, but we all know that DisneyWorld, in Florida, is bigger and better. This is offered as the original, in my experience.

Satan’s Creches

Historical reality is democratized in places like wax museums. Figures of fiction mingle with historical and religious figures. Every figure must be real even if as Eco writes, “reality was fantasy.” These places do not advertise historical authenticity, but visual. If it looks real, it is real. Like the Palace of Living Arts, these types of places give you the reproduction so they will no longer want or need the original. The original may be far away or in ruins; it cannot give you what the copy can.

When Eco writes of making reality from fantasy I was instantly reminded of my time spent at the Harry Potter Warner Brothers Studio Tour. Of course Harry Potter isn’t real in the sense that the action actually took place, but nonetheless an entire museum was essentially set aside for all things relating to it. There is however visual authenticity. You can see all of the props used in the movies, the sets, the costumes and much, much more. In this case, because there is no original, it’s the copy can give you the best experience.

Enchanted Castles

Eco uses Hearst Castle, where I was only a few short weeks ago, as an example of an indiscriminate display of past, present, real and fake objects intermingling. To Eco, the Madonna Inn is a travesty that appeals to the “savage taste”. Both Hearst Castle and The Madonna Inn conjure up the image of the nouveau riche that knows not what to do with his money, but doesn’t allow that to stop him spending it. Eco writes that this kind of “eclectic frenzy and compulsive imitation” occur where wealth has no history. So, it is more common in West Coast American as opposed to East Coast, that was colonized early and where more history (where wealth is concerned) has occurred and survived. New Orleans on the other hand has a history and therefore doesn’t have to pursue one.

The Tower of London seems to fit this in the way that there is a mixture of past, present, real and fake. Of course, the structure itself is past and it has a lot of history that it can claim. Concerning the present, there is a gift shop where one can find all the contemporary amenities along with the standard London gift fare. In this gift shop, there are copies of the real crown jewels one has just ridden by on a conveyor belt, though it is unclear and possibly unrealistic to think that they would keep the real crown jewels in such a public and accessible place. The other bits and bobs that can be found in the Tower seem to be a mish-mash meant to tantalize foreigners. Anything that is ostentatious and shiny has been put on display regardless of its relation to the tower and the famous people throughout history that are tied to it.

The Monasteries of Salvation

Using the Getty Museum and Forest Lawn as examples, Eco highlights the New World’s interest in preserving the treasures that are disappearing in the Old World. In the Getty Museum they make changes to the pieces in an attempt to authenticate them and to make them more realistic to the period from which they came. However, they are honest about it. They do not try to hide if they have fakes, and which pieces they are. In some cases, the copy will do.

While I was in Hawaii over spring break I visited a botanical garden. All the plants were native to Hawaii and they were real living plants. However, they did not natural grow on that specific plot of land. They were planted there specifically for the purpose of being put on show for tourists. This garden wanted to preserve Hawaii’s natural species. Like the Getty they do not hide that this was indeed planted and created this way and they even do not hide that they remove and replace their orchids once a week because of their short life span.

The City of Robots

These are entirely fake cities; those that are created like DisneyWorld. The visitors participate in the scene. It is in places like these that we realize that imitation has reached near perfection and reality cannot compare. When we are there we agree to behave like robots, out actions strictly limited.

Colonial Williamsburg is an example of this. The entire city is fake, created for education and consumerism. We are asked to be a part of it as we watch the workers walk around in period dress and as we have the opportunity to buy fake musket ammunition.

Ecology 1984 and Coca-Cola Made Flesh

Eco explores zoos and marine shows and discussing the interplay of real and fake in these environments. Often the habitats are made as realistic as possible and in some cases in the scale that the animals need. However, the animals are not really dangerous or wild as they have gotten used to their enclosures and even can take orders and do tricks for humans. Their realness as wild animals is called into question.

Any kind of circus that involves animals can be an example of this. We are supposed to be afraid of the tiger or elephant, but we know that they are not really dangerous. They’ve been trained. Essentially they are fake wild animals though they are actual animals.

Going beyond Eco, I believe that a kind of hyperreality is the theatre. This might not seem like the most obvious example but I think that it follows a lot of Eco’s criteria. In the theatre there are actors that are playing a character that is not themselves. They are copies of other people sometimes real but often made up. In that case, they are copies without a real original. Depending on the play, the past can come into the present. We are asked to suspend our belief in reality and allow ourselves to believe that the actors are their characters, the stage is not a setting but an actual location, and that the doors lead to real places. We are emotionally affected by the action as if it were real.