Yeats's High Modernism and Disney's Postmodernism: A Contrast in Ideal Worlds

RICHARD A. SCHWARTZ

Students often have difficulty understanding the significant differences between modernism and postmodernism, especially because neither of those terms has a fixed definition and because in many ways postmodernism carries out important aspects of the modernist agenda. However, a comparison/contrast between William Butler Yeats's Byzantium in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" and the Disney Corporation's Magic Kingdom at Disney World in the 1990s illustrates some of the most telling differences between the high modernism of the first three decades of the twentieth century and the postmodernism of the past ten to twenty-five years. Moreover, an analysis of the Magic Kingdom can speak directly to many students' personal experiences and provoke them to apply academic skills to their own lives. In this way both the literature and the academic analysis will become more relevant and compelling for students.

Inspired by Walt Disney, the Disney Corporation built the Magic Kingdom during the era of consumer capitalism in order to make a profit and to entertain its customers by recreating aspects of history, especially the American past, and by inciting wonder and stimulating imaginations.

Yeats was more personally and aesthetically motivated. Writing during the heyday of heavy industry, Yeats dealt with such characteristically modernist themes as alienation and the problems of integrating artistic expression and individual, spiritual fulfillment into what he perceived to be a highly materialistic, depersonalizing society in which the arts were marginalized from the mainstream of communal activity. Therefore, in his poetry he idealizes the Byzantine Empire under the Emperor Justinian, who flourished during the early sixth century A.D. Yeats wrote in his autobiographical work, A Vision,

I think that in early Byzantium . . . religious, aesthetic, and practical life were one, that architects and artificers . . . spoke to the multitude.

Richard A. Schwartz is an associate professor at Florida International University. His most recent articles have appeared in the Journal of Evolutionary Psychology, Mathematical Connections, Modern Fiction Studies, and The Nation.
in gold and silver. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books were almost impersonal, almost without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and the vision of a whole people.3

His two poems celebrating the Byzantine Empire therefore attempt to communicate his vision of a society in which pragmatic, aesthetic, and spiritual practices blended easily and harmoniously with one another.

In the first of these poems, "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats yearns to escape his own mortality. He declares that "an aged man is but a paltry thing/ A tattered coat upon a stick..." unless his soul sings out and celebrates itself and "every tatter in its mortal dress." He goes on to state his desire to have his soul leave his body, which is "a dying animal," and be gathered "Into the artifice of eternity." He wishes to be reincarnated as a mechanical singing bird, "...such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make/ Of hammered gold and gold enamelling/ To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;/ Or set upon a golden bough to sing/ To lords and ladies of Byzantium/ Of what is past, or passing, or to come."4

Yeats amplifies on the image of the golden bird in "Byzantium." Dismissing humanity as "All mere complexities,/ The fury and theuire of human veins," Yeats hails the bird as "superhuman;/ I call it death-in-life and life-in-death." It is a "miracle" that "Can like cocks of Hades crow,/ Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud/ In glory of changeless metal..."5

In the Byzantium poems we see how high modernism, fond of intricacy and ornate elaboration, celebrates human craftsmanship, idealizes nature even while replacing it with human artifacts, plays to an elite audience, and draws heavily upon classical culture. Looking backward to the past for its ideal vision, Yeats's high modernism is cerebral and reflective; it seeks to create wisdom, beauty, and refinement. Moreover, it experiences time as an interactive continuum of past, present, and future.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, celebrates technology, idealizes craftsmanship even while replacing it with computer-driven effects, plays to a mass audience, and draws primarily upon popular culture. It looks to the present and future for its ideal vision. It is visceral and sensate; and it seeks to generate sensual stimulation, not intellectual admiration, wisdom, or revelation. It experiences time in an on-going present.

Both ideal "kingdoms," Byzantium and the Magic Kingdom, create a highly structured, artificial world intended as a place of safe escape from our outside "real" world of unpredictable, chaotic nature. Both, in fact, require us to journey over water in order to make the transition from the chaotic, stressful outside world to a reassuringly predictable and efficient inside world that celebrates the wonders of its artificiality: Yeats wrote "Sailing to Byzantium" to effect the transition; Disney World requires us to pass over a lake by boat or monorail before we arrive at the Magic Kingdom. Moreover, both idealized worlds celebrate imagination and technical virtuosity. Both excel in designing intricate artifacts and successfully realizing their designs. They both seek to create novel effects.

However, Yeats's idealized world esteem great workmanship, while the Magic Kingdom esteems machine-made and computer-generated effects. In this respect the postmodern Magic Kingdom offers a "meta" version of modernist Byzantium, which is itself a "meta" version of nature. Whereas in Yeats's empire human skill supersedes natural phenomena, in the Magic Kingdom the skill of computers and machines replaces the craft of the artisan. Thus in the modernist vision we see the human, Grecian goldsmiths superseding nature (Yeats), while the postmodern vision goes a step farther: electronic machines replace the artisans (Disney).

Yeats's skilled Byzantine craftsmen work in their "real" outside world as they create an artificial, idealized inside world in their art. That idealized, artistic world highlights elements drawn from nature, the Emperor's mechanical singing bird, for example. Thus the Byzantine artisans celebrate and idealize nature as they simultaneously replace nature, relegating it to the realm of representation rather than actuality. In creating a bird that sings of past, present, and future human events, Yeats's Grecian goldsmiths excel over nature.

The Magic Kingdom takes the process to the next level, creating a "meta" haven where machines idealize people as they simultaneously replace them and perfect them. Machines do the work in the "real, outside world" of the Magic Kingdom, not craftsmen. People merely supervise. Skilled craftsmen do not exist in the Magic Kingdom, at least not in the outside "real world" of living employees whom the public sees working in the Magic Kingdom: the people who oversee the rides, the security personnel, the vendors, and so on.

Skilled craftsmen do, however, exist in the Magic Kingdom's "inside world," as part of Disney's artificially created, idealized safe haven from harsh reality. Fulfilling Yeats's dream in "Sailing to Byzantium" of being reincarnated as a well-wrought artifact, the skilled craftsmen in the Magic Kingdom have been reincarnated as computer-driven artifacts: characters within rides and attractions. Interestingly, they usually appear in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century settings as shoemakers, blacksmiths, and the like. They do not populate the futuristic realms of the Kingdom or such twentieth-century attractions as the Carousel of Progress.

Moreover, like Byzantium's representations of nature, the Magic Kingdom's representations of skilled craftsmen improve upon the originals. Disney's workers are always cheerful, well-skilled, honest, and helpful unless narrative considerations require them to behave otherwise. Likewise, human history in the Magic Kingdom also surpasses its model; in Disney's progressive and optimistic view life is always improving and history has moved toward greater fairness, equality, and justice. This process culminates in an idealized present, such as we find in "It's a Small World."
The idealization of the present is one of the significant ways the Magic Kingdom creates a haven from the chaos of the outside world.

In a similar fashion electronic devices at the Magic Kingdom idealize mechanically driven machines even as they replace them. The electronically driven river boat, for example, idealizes the nineteenth-century steamboat. Where artisans and mechanical devices may be said to possess a first-order level of reality in Yeats's modernist Byzantium, and nature a second-order level, the Magic Kingdom endows artisans and mechanical devices with a second-order of reality, and nature largely vanishes as a point of interest or attention.

Another significant difference between the two idealized kingdoms, one that underscores a major difference between high modernism and postmodernism, is that the Magic Kingdom accommodates the masses, while Yeats's Byzantium is designed for the pleasure of the emperor. Moreover, the Magic Kingdom takes its cues from popular culture and draws heavily upon a mythology of its own creation, that is, such Disney characters as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy. When the Magic Kingdom draws from the past, it typically picks up on elements of folk culture: fairy tales and such legendary frontier characters as Davy Crockett and Mike Fink. Most of these are also best known to modern audiences through earlier Disney treatments in film and on television. So we see postmodernist self-reference at work. Yeats's Byzantium, by contrast, draws from classical Western high culture.

Finally, both the Magic Kingdom and Byzantium sing of events past, present, and future. But in Yeats's high-modernist Byzantium the song strives to be beautiful and perhaps a source of wisdom, reflection, and inspiration. The purpose of the mechanical bird is "To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;/ Or set upon a golden bough to sing;/ To lords and ladies of Byzantium...." In the Magic Kingdom representations of past, present, and future events strive instead for visual and sensual stimulation and for euphoria. The experience is more visceral than cerebral, more concerned with motion than reflection, with sensation instead of inspiration. Ultimately Yeats's ideal kingdom is Platonic and not experiential, existing only in words and in the poet's and readers' imaginations, while the Magic Kingdom exists in Madonna's material world. Moreover, the Magic Kingdom looks happily forward to a future world driven by high technology and computers, while Yeats's vision looks longingly and admiringly to the preindustrial past.

Yeats's high-modernist ideal world clearly emanates from the vestiges of a preindustrial world that still remained while he was alive, one populated by skilled craftsmen and dependent upon mechanical principles and devices. This is the world that gave rise to Newton's Clockwork Universe. Yeats's high-modernist Byzantium, relying heavily upon classical Western culture, celebrates the conscious artist and the exquisite refinement of human virtuosity. It addresses itself to what Dan Quayle would call "the cultural elite."

The Magic Kingdom, by contrast, is a postmodern ideal world created in the late industrial and postindustrial electronic eras. It draws on popular rather than classical culture and appeals to a broader, more mainstream, middle-class audience. It relies more on spectacle and immediate sensations than on intellectual reflection. Its effects are immediate, not cumulative; even when events are set in a different era we experience them as part of the ongoing present that characterizes the postmodern experience of time.

While its ability to create spectacular effects impresses, the Magic Kingdom does not typically try to call attention to its own technical virtuosity. It does not beg to be studied and admired, only to be experienced. Appropriate to the capitalistic roots that have sustained it so successfully, the Magic Kingdom experience is Duchamp-like in that it emphasizes the audience/customer over the artist/entertainer. In fact Yeats's (and Joyce's) celebrated self-conscious individual artist yields to the capitalistic bureaucratic corporation. If the Emperor's palace comes alive only through the craft of Grecian goldsmiths or through Yeats's own poetic artistry, the Magic Kingdom exists as the result of efforts by and negotiations among architects, designers, engineers, financiers, real estate brokers, contractors and subcontractors, marketing and sales agents, commercial artists, computer personnel, payroll and accounting specialists, upper and middle management, support staff, and a labor force of skilled and unskilled workers, among others.

Thus the points of contrast between these two idealized kingdoms, these safe havens from the chaos of human existence, highlight several of the important distinctions between high modernism and postmodernism. These differences, in turn, encourage us to contemplate how "the means of production," to use a Marxist term in a post-Communist era, shape the ways we both experience and idealize reality. High modernism flourished before the dawn of the electronic era, when heavy industry was approaching its apex and when a large skilled or semiskilled labor force was required to operate the factories' machines. Powerful individuals still dominated big business, and many large companies were still privately owned. In this respect the individual entrepreneurs functioned somewhat like writers or artists, shaping the nature and direction of their companies through deliberate choices. Corporate culture was still in its infancy, and the private owners, like artists and writers, were largely accountable only to themselves; they maintained almost total artistic control over their companies. Thus even within the business environment creativity was still mainly an individual matter. A time of transition from rural to city culture (the 1924 census was the first to show more Americans living in urban areas than in small towns), the period of high modernism looked back nostalgically to a culture...
dependent upon individual virtuosity, even as early twentieth-century industrial culture was enmeshed in the process of replacing human craft with machines.

Postmodern culture, on the other hand, emanates from a postindustrial, corporate, computer-driven economy in which machines, not people, routinely operate other machines and in which we garner information instantaneously in visual images (on television or computer screens, for example) rather than in printed words that we read after the fact. Publicly owned corporations, accountable to their shareholders, dominate the economic landscape. Power and control in corporations tend to be diffuse and not concentrated within single, self-conscious artificers working in the business medium. Thus people who work in a corporate culture increasingly experience and accept creativity as a shared and negotiated activity filled with compromise, instead of as an individual act. In other ways, too, the values, aspirations, and modes of appearance and behavior associated with corporate culture shape the desires and expectations of postmodern society. Moreover, as an outgrowth of a consumer culture dependent on mass-produced goods and services, postmodernism brings a more tolerant, more celebratory attitude to mass culture and mass processing than did high modernism, whose era was only beginning to experience the world of products manufactured on the assembly line. Yeats’s modernist Byzantium rejects the mechanized, high-tech, corporate world of consumer culture; the postmodern Magic Kingdom embraces it.

NOTES

6. It stands to reason that a sensibility geared to spectacle and sensation would experience time as an ongoing present (much as I assume my cats do). It also stands to reason that the more cerebral and reflective sensibility of the high modernists would experience time with a greater awareness of past, present, and future. Of course, the fact that these two observations “stand to reason” would make them suspect in either a modernist or postmodernist framework.