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*Rhetoric, Authenticity, and Reception:
The Eighteenth-Century Landscape Garden,
the Modern Theme Park, and Their Audiences*

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In May 1995 I stood on the bank of the lake at Stourhead with a group of students (Fig. 1). We were going to see a number of landscape gardens during a three-week stay in England, but this was the first. None of them had seen anything quite like it before, and they tried to explain what was before them by connecting it with other places they knew. The first student to voice her reaction said, “It’s like Disneyland,” and there was general agreement with that parallel. This striking assertion of at least a visual similarity between Stourhead



1. *Stourhead: View across the lake toward the Pantheon*

and Disneyland can be reframed as the central concern of this essay. Are the cultural and formal worlds of the eighteenth-century landscape garden and the contemporary theme park linked? If so, are the links relevant to ways in which we might interpret theme parks, or do the differences between the two outweigh interpretatively useful parallels?

Upon further questioning, it emerged that not all of the students had been to one of the Disney complexes, although most had. Clearly, however, a conception of what is to be seen at Disneyland and of the Disney “experience” is so pervasive in late twentieth-century culture in the United States that the analogy was generally available and accessible. I am certain it is equally so to the readers of this essay. Nonetheless, it is worth pausing to ponder two characteristic examples of how the Disney Corporation has used advertising to direct the public’s perceptions of its theme parks in ways that subliminally link them with ideas associated with the grand tradition of landscape architecture. One of the most obvious instances of such efforts, and one that targets annually a unique, vast audience, is present in what has become the culminating advertisement at the end of each Super Bowl. The person who has just been named the game’s “most valuable player” is asked what his plans are, and, of course, he replies: “I’m going to Disney World!” This response is truly quite extraordinary if one pauses over it. After all, our “most valuable player” is a professional athlete. We are, therefore, already disposed to perceive him as leading an heroic, exciting, privileged, and well-remunerated life, a life in which we might assume he can have and do almost anything he wants. And yet, at the moment when he has reached the pinnacle of his professional goals and dreams, we are led to believe that there is only one possible road to the consummating apotheosis of desirable satisfaction and excitement. That road ends in Orlando, Fla. There and only there will he finally find the closure to the imaginative hedonism, i.e., our persistent creation of unfulfillable desires, that Colin Campbell has argued is the sustaining mechanism of modern consumption.¹

But that is not the only provocative aspect to this simple exchange. It is also appropriate to register here the presence of a central *topos* of garden history: the release from the public domain of work (*negotium*) into a private world of restorative relaxation (*otium*).² And further evidence would appear to confirm that this concept is a key ingredient in the Disney message. A second recent advertisement, this one on radio, makes this point in terms quite remarkably apropos my concerns in this essay. Here again we find an unmistakable effort to move our understanding of the Disney “experience” beyond the boundaries of a narrow conception of an amusement park. In this ad we hear two men. One is describing to the other a recent weekend “escape” he has had with his partner. The terms of his description are such that his listener (and, of course, we who are voyeuristic participants), assume that his escape has been out into nature. But when this assumption is voiced, the rather surprised response is that the “getaway” was to Disney World. The implication is

¹ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1987), esp. chaps. 1–5.

² This theme is discussed in David Coffin, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

clear that something akin to a relaxing “back to nature” retreat is not only possible at Disney World but is an essential part of the experience.³

These advertisements attest to the corporation’s efforts to mold its audience’s desires and to emphasize that audience’s ability to attain them. Their very brevity, however, reflects the assumption that the audience already possesses a conception of the Disneyland experience. The advertisements are modest interventions designed to highlight, and perhaps slightly reconfigure, existing realms of meaning.

My students at Stourhead, however, were not consciously pursuing such readings. What made the parallel work for them was the recognition that what they were seeing were theatrically contrived settings, the juxtaposition of which suggested an organized collection of opportunities for imaginative play.

Given the variety of issues raised even thus far, plotting the relationships between the eighteenth-century landscape garden and the modern theme park is clearly a complicated undertaking. It is certainly not possible to map its entire extent in a brief essay. Even a detailed chronological account of the transformation of the one into the other is surely outside its scope. I do believe, however, that such a narrative could be constructed, and I hope that critical moments within it will surface through the course of this essay. It is also possible to separate out a group of themes that may both be informative in and of itself and resonate profitably through the other chapters in this volume. That is my goal here.

What follows is divided into two large sections. The first focuses on issues, questions, and materials that will address and help to characterize certain similarities and differences between the respective audiences for landscape gardens and theme parks. I begin with a discussion of imaginative association as the source for the content of garden and theme park experience. I then turn to the subject of tourism and the changes in that arena over the past two hundred fifty years that must affect how we think about parallels between the eighteenth-century garden and the modern theme park. In the second section I briefly take up three intertwined topics that I believe are related to those similarities that struck my students: (1) the conceptual relationship between the objects and tableaux *re*-presented in the garden or theme park and their originals; (2) the types of meanings generated in these sites, and the expectations of how they will be received; and (3) scale and miniaturization. Taken together, I hope that they might illustrate not only the complexity of my particular subject but of our general concern in this symposium.

Association and Tourism

To move through Kew or Painshill, Belton or Badminton in the eighteenth century, and to see the rotundas and inscribed obelisks, the pagodas and Turkish tents, the ruins and hermitages that populated such sites was to be carried back and forth across space, time,

³ I am grateful to Jessica Stewart for bringing both of these advertisements to my attention. As it turns out, Michael Sorkin also comments on the Super Bowl advertisement in “See You in Disneyland,” in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 205.

cultures, and ideas. To respond to them most effectively was to employ the dynamic mental mechanics of memory and association and to bring to bear upon them the learned, interpretative lineaments of taste. And it is certainly the case that memories and related ideas of association continue to lie at the core of our experiences in theme parks. And not only *in* them, for they also play an important role in our responses to those increasingly pervasive variants of theme parks: the historical recreation or time-capsuled experience. These latter constructions operate in many forms and on many scales today (from the region, to the town, to the street: New England, Sturbridge Village, South Street Seaport, respectively). What is more, they insinuate themselves into our lives with far greater regularity and more subliminal insistence than can the special outing to a theme park.

But although we may acknowledge the persistence of a role for memory and association, we must at the same time register a sharp division in at least one respect between the eighteenth-century associative experience in a landscape garden and our modern one in a theme park. The intellectual stimulation triggered by the garden scene was understood to be related to the breadth of one's formal education and range of cultural experiences. These correlated directly with the potential complexity of the visitor's response. Thus taste (which, following Susan Stewart, I take here to mean class-based patterns of consumption) and its reification through design and its appreciation, were clear markers of social position. Given those facts, it is not surprising that they were central to the concept and practice of eighteenth-century landscape gardening and garden "tourism."⁴ By contrast, the world of the contemporary theme park would appear to be committed to a leveled experience in which visitor preparation beyond a general awareness of mass entertainment culture has little or no role to play. As a result, there is a determined effort either to erase, or at least render unimportant, our awareness of class distinctions in the park. This expectation is quite clearly articulated through the dichotomy between the equality of experience within the park and the unmistakable economic stratification of the hotel accommodations supplied by the corporation. This intention is manifest in an advertisement that appeared in *USA Today*:

The best way to capture all of the magic of a Walt Disney World vacation is to stay in one of the 15 themed resorts across the Vacation Kingdom. Whatever your budget or style, every resort offers Disney's discerning standards. . . . In much the same way that Disney Theme Parks offer an escape, Disney Resort hotels offer a mix of adventures. . . . And the resorts match every pocketbook.⁵

Association, in other words, is still very much with us, but its class-based expectations and discriminations have been largely set aside. Tourism and tourists, too, have been significantly transformed since the middle of the eighteenth century.

In *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry has offered an illuminating account of the modern phenomenon of "de-differentiation" and its relationship to contemporary tourist experi-

⁴ My definition of *taste* here is that found in Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 35.

⁵ This copy comes from a 6-page advertising supplement in *USA Today*, 8 November 1996.



2. *Studley Royal: View across the Moon Ponds toward the Temple of Piety*

ences. His discussion helps our understanding of how modern tourist destinations develop and exploit a conception of leisure entertainment in which history and imaginative play exist symbiotically with aggressive marketing.⁶

The Studley Royal-Fountains Abbey complex (Figs. 2, 3) is both a National Trust and a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is one of the most visited tourist attractions in England, and the recent opening there of a multimillion-dollar visitor center and shop is an explicit reflection of its commodification as part of the heritage industry in Britain.⁷ Indeed, the intrusion of theme park commerce and theme park effects into English landscape gardens, whether they be in the form of safari parks (Longleat), miniature railways (Blenheim), or ever-expanding shops (everywhere!) is surely “de-differentiating” (that is, collapsing) the distance between the two in ways that are impossible to ignore. We expect to find evidences of theme park tourism everywhere and we do. The extension of “theme park” ideas into shopping malls—indeed, the identification of shopping malls as tourist attractions—is a further example of such de-differentiation among sites.⁸ The interpretative problem here,

⁶ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Newbury Park, 1990), esp. chap. 5.

⁷ See David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry* (London: Methuen, 1987); Urry, *Tourist Gaze*, chap. 6. The encouragement that such designations bring to the popularity of sites such as the Studley Royal-Fountains Abbey complex has the ironic dual effect of both guaranteeing interest in its preservation and enhancing its fragility.



3. *Studley Royal: Distant view from Anne Boleyn's Seat toward Fountains Abbey*

of course, is that in the inevitable conflation of experiences that arises from de-differentiation prior distinctions in form, audience, and use can be obscured unless we specifically highlight them.

I believe that one can track a clear line of formal descent from eighteenth-century (and earlier) landscaping practices to our present theme parks. We have already seen that one can identify some conceptual similarities across the centuries, but it is equally essential that we register critical moments of transformation. Three are of particular note:

1. The emergence in the mid-nineteenth century of the world's fair tradition, which developed the particular configuration of the interplay among the social and natural sciences, technology, consumption, nationalism, and fantasy that was consciously and creatively retooled by Disney in the early 1950s. This mix still dominates the theme park concept.⁹

2. The almost exactly contemporary emergence, again in the mid-nineteenth century, of new transportation possibilities, especially the railroad, which enabled significantly increased numbers of people to bridge hitherto unbridgeable distances quickly, easily, and relatively inexpensively. It also could be used to direct identifiable groups of consumers to

⁸ See Margaret Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," in Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park*.

⁹ See Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). See also Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland," and Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), esp. chaps. 1 and 8.

specific designated spots that could be developed to receive them.¹⁰

3. The gradual emergence, again during that same period, of a new benefit for workers in the industrial workplace: the paid vacation.¹¹

Expanded opportunities in transportation and leisure utterly transformed tourism during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the arrival of the automobile enhanced the possibilities for tourism and touristic destinations still further. It was only through the utilization of new transportation possibilities, for example, that an entire region, New England, began to emerge as a vast “theme park” during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Here were “collected” for nostalgic consumption particular character types, a way of life that was seen as the embodiment of a set of national values, a landscape that was also read as symbolic of the nation, a distinctive architecture, and even a distinctive cuisine. In late nineteenth-century journals such as *New England Magazine*, information and advice were offered to a readership composed of both potential tourists and those hoping to receive them. For example, one can read about not only what one might expect to find in a typical “Yankee” meal but also how to prepare it.¹²

The recognition to which these observations lead us is that in thinking about similarities and differences between landscape gardens and theme parks we must focus on the audience. How has its makeup changed over the years, and what impact might this have on questions of planned or programmed content and expectations of reception? In turn, how have expectations of reception affected design? The multinational and multicultural “it’s a small world after all” presentation of the Epcot Center might bear a superficial resemblance to the melange of architectural styles dotting Kew Gardens in the 1770s, but are the messages truly similar? Ironically, one might answer yes if one takes the position that both Epcot and Kew are subliminally presenting the idea of the world as a potential market for the Disney Corporation and Britain, respectively, but that is surely not the immediate text that visitors are, or were, supposed to read.

The great landscape gardens of the eighteenth century were, generally, developed on private estates. It is clear that the owner-creators of these gardens developed their estates with the intention and expectation that they would be visited by a “public.” An eighteenth-century landscape garden was cultural capital deployed in an elaborately nuanced game of social prestige.¹³ At Stowe and Stourhead, small inns were built to accommodate visitors, and a guidebook for Stowe was available by 1744. But who these visitors were and how

¹⁰ Two very focused accounts of the effects of railway transportation on tourism and leisure are to be found respectively in T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), chap. 3, and Paul Tucker, *Monet at Argenteuil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), chaps. 1–3. See also Urry, *Tourist Gaze*, chap. 2.

¹¹ Urry, *Tourist Gaze*, chap. 2. Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian University Press, 1995), esp. introduction, and chaps. 1 and 3.

¹² Dona Brown, *Inventing New England*, esp. chap. 5, for the emergence of New England as a tourist destination/theme park, and pp. 157–58 for sources of cooking advice in contemporary magazines.

¹³ I have written about this issue on 2 occasions. See “Personal Identity and the Eighteenth-Century English Landscape Garden,” *Journal of Garden History* 13, no. 1–2 (1993): esp. 40–42, and “Humphry Repton and the Idea of Association,” *Journal of Garden History* 16, no. 3 (July–September 1996): 192–214.

many there were are telling illustrations of the differences between then and now.

So far as we know, no eighteenth-century estate owner undertook a survey of his visitors from which we might develop a profile of who these “tourists” were and the array of reasons as to why they were doing what they were doing. But we can be quite certain about a set of defining criteria. In the first place, to visit a garden required leisure time, and there were no paid vacations during the eighteenth century. Thus the possession of leisure time meant that one possessed the money to permit it. Garden visiting also required travel, which, in turn, requires either the ownership of the means of travel or the wherewithal to hire it. Additional costs could mount alarmingly if one was on a limited budget. One had to pay for lodging, of course, and for food for oneself and, more expensively, one’s horse. Moreover, it would have been wrong not to tip the servant who showed one around, and when, as was the case at Blenheim, a number of servants involved themselves, if only marginally, in this task, the de facto “fee” for admission could be quite a hefty one. John Byng’s marvelous travel diaries from the 1780s and 1790s provide fascinating examples of someone confronting these issues and problems. He did not have the financial well-being to justify keeping a horse, for as a Londoner he would rarely need one.¹⁴ As a result, he generally relied on hired horses for his journeys, and he always had to keep a close watch on his expenditures. But he did have funds sufficient to guarantee himself a life largely unencumbered by the need to work. Thus there were few time constraints on his travels. Economic factors alone, therefore, sharply delimited the pool of visitors to a small, monied elite.

This elite, in turn, was largely congruent with either the social elite or those who might for economic or intellectual reasons (or both) be attempting to claim a place within it. For example, William Gilpin’s Polyphthon in his *Dialogue upon the Gardens of Stow* (1748) has attained a sufficient level of fiscal security that he can take time off to visit that most famous and widely visited of eighteenth-century gardens, and he recognizes that he must do so in order to develop his taste and its proper accoutrements. His companion and *cicerone*, Callophilus, recommends that people such as Polyphthon should make this pilgrimage annually. We must always bear in mind that improving one’s taste in the eighteenth century was inextricably intertwined with moral education and was thus a means of cementing ties among the social,

¹⁴ John Byng, *The Torrington Diaries*, ed. C. Bruyn Andrews, 4 vols. (London, 1936). Because by his own account his purpose in keeping these records of his travels was for the interest they might have for his descendants, Byng often notes practical matters, such as expenses, that rarely figure in other travelers’ descriptions. That the cost of feeding a horse for a night was generally almost twice the cost of feeding himself may surprise us today, but, as he notes on several occasions, hay for tourists’ horses was expensive because there were more substantive uses to which that hay could and should be put. It was, in other words, a kind of local luxury tax imposed on those who had the money to travel for pleasure. A typical bill from a night’s stay at an inn at Bala in northern Wales in 1784 shows us that the total for 3 meals (dinner, supper, and breakfast including all drinks) was 8 shillings and 7 pence, whereas the hay for his horse cost him 5 shillings and 9. See vol. 3, p. 145, entitled *On a Trip into the West in 1781*, where he writes: “We dined at the Bear Inn at Woodstock, and were wise enough not to dissipate the small remains of our purse in the purchase of steel, and leathern wares, (which are to be had as cheap in London) because the expense of seeing Blenheim is very great; the servants of the poor D_____ of M_____ being very attentive in gleaning money from the rich travellers,” vol 3: 53.

economic, and educated elites. The ability to appreciate landscape design and, where relevant, deploy what one knew of the nuances of good design in one's own landscaping was repeatedly used at this time as one of the determining signs of social acceptability and worth.¹⁵

We have recently been led, through the work of David Solkin, T. J. Clark, and others, to recognize that the mixing of classes brought a *frisson* of pleasure to certain leisure experiences such as the public pleasure gardens of eighteenth-century London (Ranelagh and Vauxhall, for example) or the mid-nineteenth-century Parisian *café-concerts*.¹⁶ But such experiences were completely antithetical to what the elite, eighteenth-century audience expected and sought in a visit to a private estate. Nor does this expectation change as we move into the nineteenth century. The young John Ruskin and his parents, traveling in their elegant private coach in the early 1830s, are the quite self-conscious and aspiring Polypthons of their immediately prerailroad age.¹⁷

It is, therefore, reasonably clear who made up the audience visiting gardens during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But that still begs the question of numbers: How many people should we visualize partaking of one of these landscape gardens during what was a visiting season largely confined to the summer months? Hard numbers for visitors are a rarity and have generally surfaced as a byproduct of other research concerns. In 1801, for example, Joseph Farington was informed by his guide at Hackfall that the site was visited by about two hundred parties a year.¹⁸ Though it is difficult to know how much absolute credence to bestow on such a figure, it is true that by that date a visit to Hackfall was a well-established stop on a much-praised day's excursion from Ripon that also included Studley Royal. We can assume that the number of visitors by 1801 was probably greater than forty years earlier if only because of the burgeoning popularity of touring in the last decades of the eighteenth century. We can also deduce that owners of often-visited estates assumed a consistent pattern in numbers because the person designated to serve as a guide generally received scant remuneration from the owner; there was an expectation that a lower-than-normal wage would be augmented by tips. Given what we know, in other words, Farington's figure appears reasonable.

A second possible source of information on this question of numbers is visual: paintings, drawings, and prints of gardens. We must acknowledge, however, that the evidence is slippery because we must assume that descriptions and depictions of gardens were them-

¹⁵ Observations to this effect—some extensive, others mere asides—are legion in the Byng diaries. There are a number of well-known literary examples of this connection between landscaping and character, but perhaps the 2 most often cited are Alexander Pope's Timon in "Epistle to Lord Burlington" and Francis Coventry's Squire Mushroom in his essay in *The World* in 1753. I have written at some length about Mushroom in "Personal Identity."

¹⁶ See David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Center for British Art, 1992), chap. 4, for the London pleasure gardens, and Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, chap. 4, for the café-concert.

¹⁷ John Ruskin, *Praeterita: The Autobiography of John Ruskin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 23–24. I am grateful to John Dixon Hunt for bringing the Ruskin example to my attention.

¹⁸ Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, vol. 5: *August 1801–March 1803*, ed. Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre (New Haven and London, 1979; original ed., 1612). For Hackfall, see my "William Aislabie's Garden at Hackfall," *Journal of Garden History* 7, no. 4 (1987): 307–411.



4. *Anthony Walker, engraving, View of Fountains Abbey and Tent Hill from the Gardens of Studley Royal, Yorkshire, 1758 (courtesy of a private collection)*

selves highly rhetorical communications designed to convey various messages, including, for instance, the idea that visiting Studley Royal was an exclusive experience that would not entail subjecting oneself to crowds of people.

Although not everyone could feel, as Joseph Parnell did at Painshill in 1763, that he was Adam in paradise, it is notable how rarely written accounts of garden visits mention the presence of others. And this is not inconsistent with what we can deduce from the visual evidence. As we see in a view of Studley Royal (Fig. 4), we are generally shown a space inhabited by small groups, couples, and individual wanderers. And indeed, these written and visual accounts do not contradict Farington's two hundred parties a year if one assumes a "season" of a hundred days. The famous series of engravings of Stowe by Jacques Rigaud from 1739 (Fig. 5), which show a relatively crowded landscape, would appear to contradict the foregoing argument, but we must keep several thoughts in mind when pondering them.¹⁹ First, Stowe, like Painshill, was readily accessible from London and thus might quite logically draw persistently larger numbers of visitors than more distant sites. Second, it quickly achieved fame as a destination and was aggressively "marketed" thereafter, viz., the guidebook and perhaps Rigaud's prints themselves. And, finally, we should ask what is it that these prints are depicting? Is this a normal day at Stowe, or are we witnessing a special

¹⁹ Peter Willis, "Jaques Rigau's Drawings of Stowe in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6 (1972): 85–98, provides a good introduction to these engravings.



5. Jacques Rigaud and Bernard Baron, engraving, View of the Queen's Temple from the Rotunda, Stowe, Buckinghamshire, 1734 (courtesy of a private collection)

event such as the grand garden party in which Horace Walpole took part in 1762? The presence of Lord Cobham himself in several of these prints might lead us to assume the latter. Whatever may be the specifics of the case, the crowds in Rigaud's prints are the exception rather than the rule in this world of garden imagery, and we are, I believe, justified in assuming that most garden visitors in the eighteenth century found themselves largely unencumbered by numbers of people.

I have dwelt upon the topic of estate visitors in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries at some length because, in whatever way one reads the evidence available, it is clear that we are dealing with the small coterie of "polite society." The contrast with the thirty million people who visit Disney World annually is little short of stupefying, but it is also very revealing. The target audience for the Disney complexes was quite explicitly defined from the outset as a middle class that possessed some expendable income and leisure time. The social elite was not expected to attend, and although entry to Disneyland itself was initially planned to be free of charge, entrance fees ultimately were imposed in order to create a social *cordon sanitaire* against the less well-to-do.²⁰

Indeed, entrance fees alone are a vivid signifier of target audiences and remind us that money is a central element in comprehending both the theme park and the landscape

²⁰ John Findlay, *Magic Lands: Western Cityscapes and American Culture after 1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992), chap. 2, and p. 81. One cannot help but register in this regard that the entrance fees required to have the complete Williamsburg experience are such that they too impose an inevitable glass ceiling on attendees.

garden. But the role it plays in each is strikingly different. One of the most impressive accomplishments of the Disney Worlds and Colonial Williamsburgs is the extent to which the fundamental goal of making money is successfully camouflaged by the corporation behind the articulated altruistic goal of catering to our imaginations, our need to escape, and our desire for knowledge. I am by no means questioning whether this altruistic goal is genuine, but it is nonetheless important to register that leisure consumption is the engine that drives these undertakings. An important component of this articulated goal (most obviously, perhaps, with the Disney Corporation) has been the careful presentation of an image of a wise, virtually parental corporation that functions as the guarantor of an enduring but threatened set of national values. These values relate not only to entertainment but also to social relationships and work ideals, and they serve as a last bastion against a threatening and chaotic world.

The Generation of Meanings

The landscape garden conspicuously mixed the representation of entertainment, education, and money, but the latter was a conspicuous presence rather than a discretely masked agenda. Because the garden in the eighteenth century was inevitably understood as the reflection of a private individual, the fact that it explicitly represented the ability and commitment to spending large sums of money was central to its meaning. That individuals must be seen in settings appropriate to their social position had been a fundamental rhetorical tenet since antiquity. It was a recurrent theme in British writings on architecture and gardens from at least the time of Henry Wotton in the 1620s. It remained the determining goal of landscape design for Humphry Repton into the nineteenth century.²¹ Because the estate visit offered perhaps the most focused opportunity in which a great landowner “appeared” to a “public,” however limited that “public” might be, it was deemed essential that an estate reveal the enduring and justifying qualities of its creator, including his possession of expendable wealth. Unquestionably, then, the makers of landscape gardens were as dedicated to the creation of a particular social representation as were those who created Disneyland. But the acknowledgment of the uses and meanings of capital differ in important ways.²²

From its earliest days, Disneyland quite pointedly presented its displays as the embodiments of sets of values, some universal and others quintessentially American, that is, the distillation of an authentic American character and way of life: “Disneyland will be based upon and dedicated to the ideals, the dreams, and the hard facts that have created America. And it will be uniquely equipped to dramatize these dreams and facts and send them forth as a source of courage and inspiration to all the world.”²³ Quite strikingly, this distillation

²¹ See Harwood, “Humphry Repton.” See also John Archer, “Character in English Architectural Design,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 12 (1979).

²² There is no similar human face in Disney World or Colonial Williamsburg. Michael Eisner is not presented as the embodiment of “Disney.” It is interesting to ponder, however, the extent to which the embrace of Disneyland in its early days was linked to the avuncular presence of Walt Disney himself. He did give the corporation a personal character.

was conceived as existing only in Disneyland, as if it had been lost outside it. Thus the Disney Worlds were not merely separate universes, palisaded off from the outside; they were quite determinedly alternate universes.

A striking assertion of this is said to have come from Walt Disney himself in a conversation with the Reverend Billy Graham. Disappointed when, after a recent visit to Disneyland, Graham merely noted that he had had “a nice fantasy” there. Disney is reported to have responded: “You know the fantasy isn’t here. This is very real. . . . The park is reality. The people are natural here; they’re having a good time; they’re communicating. This is what people really are. The fantasy is—out there, outside the gates of Disneyland, where people have hatreds and people have prejudices. It’s not really real!”²⁴

This assertion that Disneyland has co-opted reality is found not only coming from the mouth of Disney himself; it was a conscious litany and justification during the theme park’s early days. As Sharon Zukin has written, “Disney’s fantasy both restored and invented collective memory. ‘This is what the real Main Street should have been like,’ one of Disneyland’s planners or ‘imagineers’ says. ‘What we create,’ according to another, ‘is a “Disney realism,” sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all of the negative, unwanted elements, and program in the positive elements.’”²⁵

Although we do not tend to equate Disneyland with historical theme parks such as Plymouth Plantation and Williamsburg, one cannot help but register the extent to which the “imagineers” approach has been readily applied to them. At Williamsburg, as at Disneyland, moreover, there is an implicit and carefully nurtured assumption that we live in a postlapsarian America and are, as a result, consumed by a nostalgic longing to regain an authentic national culture from which we have grown increasingly distant. This lost but intensely desired culture was grounded in a life of simple patterns in which no labor was alienated and all social relationships were face-to-face: “In being transported to some not very well defined golden age—perhaps the period 1900–1910 as presented along Main Street U.S.A., or the pioneer era as suggested in Frontierland—and in touring ‘lands’ devoted to fantasy, adventure, and the future, visitors could escape their unnatural present-day cares, ‘drop their defenses,’ and become more *like themselves*.”²⁶ It has become a truism of recent writing on tourism that the nostalgia so frequently identified as central to certain of its common experiences reflects a desire to regain an enduring, authentic life to act as an apotropaic buffer against our contin-

²² There is no similar human face in Disney World or Williamsburg. Michael Eisner is not presented as the embodiment of “Disney.” It is interesting to ponder, however, the extent to which the embrace of Disneyland in its early days was linked to the avuncular presence of Walt Disney himself. He did give the corporation a personal character.

²³ Sorkin, “See You in Disneyland,” 206. This quotation comes from the early publicity produced by the Disney Corporation.

²⁴ Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 70. Findlay does note that this remarkable conversation may be apocryphal. It is unquestionably congruent with other remarks made about “Disney Realism.” Umberto Eco has pursued this idea in *Travels in Hyper-Reality* (London, 1986). “Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands . . . [and] tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can,” 44.

²⁵ Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, 222.

²⁶ Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 67.

gent, chaotic, and somehow inauthentic daily existence.²⁷ The creators of our modern theme parks appear to be driven at least in part by the belief in the need to provide arenas in which our nostalgic desire for an irretrievably lost world can be palliated.

The claim that what one finds in Disneyland is more “real” than the world outside its walls and that a lost authentic culture persists there is certainly a provocative one. Is there a parallel experience within the garden? Were landscape gardens sites of atavistic escapism to a past that was somehow more “real” than the present?

To be sure, a commitment to creating convincing visual cues in one’s garden structures was the *sine qua non* of successful design. Owners who did not acquiesce in this were routinely blasted by contemporary critics. But this demand for a convincing representation arose out of the tradition of rhetorical example. For landscape design, like the other fine arts, was committed to an ideal of rhetorical communication. Just as an implausible or inappropriate example could shatter a verbal argument by disrupting the listener’s associative responses, so too would an unconvincing building undermine a viewer’s disposition to employ it as a springboard to imaginative flights. Thus effective illusion was necessary to achieve the associative activity that was a key rhetorical goal of the landscape garden.²⁸ It was deployed not as a substitute and implicitly better reality, but rather as a tool analogous to Susan Stewart’s conception of the souvenir—as a metonymic trigger for narratives of authentic knowledge and experience.²⁹

If we cast our gaze back to the eighteenth century, however, we discover that a nostalgic belief in a past that was somehow better than the present was a notable *topos* then as well.³⁰ But here again, we must not assign it too large a presence in landscaping practices because it co-exists in the eighteenth century with other intellectual tendencies that impose other readings on apparently escapist forms.³¹

The British elite of the eighteenth century still operated vividly and certainly within a culture whose forms and meanings remained deeply rooted in the classical tradition. The garden, like the other major artistic media, was employed as a means for their rhetorical promulgation, and its audiences were prepared to receive them either as confirmations of an enduring set of values or as guideposts toward its attainment. The dispersal of classical and gothic forms and ideas through their landscapes was not fundamentally an effort to regain a world that was lost. The contrast with the theme parks’ originary but vanished values is a stark one. In other words, it is misleading to designate classical and gothic features

²⁷ See Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, and Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).

²⁸ Harwood, “Humphry Repton.”

²⁹ On the souvenir, see esp. pp. 132–39. Nostalgia is one of the basic themes of Stewart’s *On Longing*, and her insights are infused through my discussion.

³⁰ Raymond Williams has written about the virtual omnipresence of this past/present dichotomy in *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), esp. chaps. 2–4.

³¹ One might well note that the nostalgic escapism of the modern theme park is made possible only by persistent technological progress and that a belief in such progress remains a powerful tenet in late 20th-century Western industrialized countries, no matter how much we may appear to want to escape to a simpler, less technological past.



6. *View toward Rievaulx Abbey from Rievaulx Terrace*

in landscape gardens as escapist because they are not there primarily to remove us from the present to a better past; they are there to assert connections and continuities across time. An elite party dining in the elegant Ionic temple on Rievaulx Terrace, with its fine interior classical detailing and “Carracci-esque” ceiling painting, was celebrating the perpetuation and replanting of a culture, not mourning one that no longer existed. And, indeed, as they looked down from its portico onto the ruins of Rievaulx Abbey and out over the moors (Fig. 6), it was the fact of the integration of the classical and national pasts and presents that framed their associative flights.

And here we are led inevitably to question whether there are similarities between meanings that are planted in theme parks and landscape gardens. Do they differ one from another? How are they to be read?

One of the immediately striking aspects of wandering through an eighteenth-century landscape garden (then or now) is how limited the textual information with regard to the major structures with which one is presented truly is.³² The visitor to Hackfall’s Mowbray Castle (Fig. 7) or Badminton’s Hermitage (Fig. 8) was not told what to think. The structures

³² Certain gardens were, of course, saturated with inscriptions (e.g., William Shenstone’s Leasowes), and most gardens had inscriptions on plaques, obelisks, and other dedicatory monuments that directed the viewer’s response. My distinction here is between such features and the larger structures, such as hermitages, ruins, temples, etc.



7. *Hackfall: Mowbray Castle*



8. *Badminton: View of the Hermitage*



9. Engraving (detail) of the Hermitage at Richmond Gardens, 1738

themselves were merely cues—triggers to associative acts. The narrative generally had to come from the viewer, and the relative richness of the narrative was largely dependent upon the relative preparation of the viewer. Under such circumstances, it is clearly unlikely that any two viewers will share identical experiences and, in fact, rather more likely that experiences might differ considerably from one person to another.

This is, of course, not to say that there were not places where meanings were implanted by the owner with the expectation that they would be read. The hermitage built by William Kent for Queen Caroline's garden at Richmond is an example of this (Fig. 9).³³ But it is notable that we have clear evidence that even in the case of the Richmond hermitage, visitors had ample leeway and encouragement to add their own readings to the predetermined discourse on natural philosophy and took advantage of it. Visitors were always challenged to bring their individual interpretation and to remodel it into a personal experience that still dovetailed with the more generally held values of elite culture. Response was, in this way, both private and yet affirming of a public class unity.

The developers of Disneyland have always argued for the individuality of the Disney experience. "*You are an active participant in the fun, the imagination, the adventure and entertainment of Disneyland*" [italics in original].³⁴ But at the same time, they have always

³³ The iconography of this structure was explicated by Judith Colton in "Kent's Hermitage for Queen Caroline at Richmond," *Architectura* 2 (1974): 181–91.

been equally committed to controlling the experience.³⁵ The insistent repetition of the defining “the” in the preceding quotation is striking in this regard. Ultimately, however, the experience of Disneyland or Williamsburg is so saturated by “texts” (which, it should be noted, have often been manufactured solely for the product), that, as Michael Sorkin has written, visitors are dancing “to routines of someone else’s imagining.”³⁶

In *The Book of Daniel*, E. L. Doctorow offers a darker reading of Sorkin’s observation: “What Disneyland proposes is a technique of abbreviated shorthand culture for the masses, a mindless thrill. . . . In a forthcoming time of highly governed masses in an overpopulated world, this technique may be extremely useful both as a substitute for education, and, eventually, as a substitute for experience. Disney’s symbols, in other words, determine the limits of consumers’ imagination.”³⁷

The troubling conclusion is that the space for imaginative play in the modern theme park has become so preconceived, textually sated, and institutionally self-referential (many of the areas of Disney World are recapitulations of Disney movies), that the experience has become strangely passive despite the apparent imaginative exuberance that attends it. By contrast, Stourhead was a site where, to be sure, potential meanings were gathered, blended, and juxtaposed by the owner, Henry Hoare. To this extent, Hoare was in control. But since meaning was largely generated in the act of reception by each unique viewer, that meaning was dynamic, fluid, and personal. The owner or creator was largely marginalized in terms of the way in which his garden was read in every respect except for his assertion of social preeminence. Indeed, the recognition of the inability to control all content other than social signs had become so pervasive by the end of the eighteenth century that Humphry Repton and those who followed him largely abandoned the articulation of associative meaning except in the realm of social status.³⁸

Let me close with one last example of the ways in which an apparent similarity can mask quite different intentions. One of the most striking apparent parallels between the architectural worlds of the theme park and the landscape garden is the extent to which they are both characterized by miniaturization. But here, too, the apparent similarity camouflages basic differences. To be sure, miniaturization is to some degree a necessity in both cases. The Disney Corporation could no more make a full-sized Matterhorn than Lord Cobham could dig Lake Avernus. But miniaturization in the land of Disney was consciously pursued as a means of providing a comforting, nonthreatening environment. As we have seen, Disney’s

³⁴ See Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 86.

³⁵ Findlay, *Magic Lands*, chap. 2. The logical Disney argument, outlined by Findlay, is that control is necessary, as it is, for example, in a restaurant to ensure a standardized quality in peoples’ experiences. Others have taken the more cynical view that the goal of control has been to maximize efficiency and thus potential consumption.

³⁶ Sorkin, “See You in Disneyland,” 224. In writing of an image or structure being saturated by texts, I am invoking Norman Bryson’s discussion of the discursive forms in his *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

³⁷ E. L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* (New York, 1971), 289, quoted in Zukin, *Landscapes of Power*, 229.

³⁸ See Harwood, “Humphry Repton.”

“imagineers” were determined to remove as much tension from their sites as they could, and miniaturization was explicitly identified as one of the tools for doing so.³⁹

There is no evidence that this modern goal of creating a comfort zone played any role in the minds of eighteenth-century designers, nor was there only the matter of practical limits. The purpose lies in another realm entirely. As he turned to address the subject of grottoes in gardens, John Evelyn wrote, “*Grotts* are invented to represent *Dens* and *Caves*, and they are also either *Naturall* or *Artificiall*.”⁴⁰ It is a simple assertion, but implicit within it is the understanding that a garden is an artful *re*-presentation of the world outside the garden. Thus features within gardens, whether they be buildings or lakes or grottoes, are signs of “actual” features without. They are significant, therefore, precisely in the way in which they establish a dialogue between the world of human art within the garden and a “Nature” outside the garden that was believed to be itself inherently artful. Indeed, this dialogue has been one of the defining *topoi* in the history of the garden, and it speaks to an important connection with a long-established theoretical conception of art: that is, that true art cannot merely mimic. It must translate and transform. There must be a liminal disruption. In the seventeenth century, Caravaggio was bitterly criticized by hostile contemporaries who reported that he simply brought his models off the street and into his studio and then painted them as they were. If this was his practice, then to these critics Caravaggio had no claim to being an artist.

We can, I believe, see that miniaturization can perform this liminal art-defining role in the garden. As Stewart has acutely observed, “The problem of scale appears only in relation to the physical world. . . . There are no miniatures in nature; the miniature is a cultural product, the product of an eye performing certain operations, manipulating, and attending in certain ways to, the physical world.” As such, she further argues, all miniatures have a theatrical character.⁴¹ They are staged *re*-presentations that, by their pointed difference, force a dialogue with the original. Is this not precisely Evelyn’s “grott”?

I have often wondered whether some of the hostility to William Aislaby’s incorporation of Fountains Abbey into his landscape at Studley Royal was not grounded at least in part in the abbey ruin’s obliteration of that liminal necessity. Fountains Abbey was (and is) unquestionably magnificent, but in what sense can it be thought of as garden art? By being unmistakably “real,” it disrupts the dialogue between within and without. Indeed, it discon-

³⁹ Findlay, *Magic Lands*, 69–70.

⁴⁰ John Evelyn, *Elysium Britannicum*, unpublished manuscript, 138.

⁴¹ Stewart, *On Longing*, 54–55. See also p. 60: “The amusement park and the historical reconstruction often promise to bring history to life, and it is here that we must pay particular attention once more to the relation between miniature and narrative. For the function here is to bring historical events ‘to life,’ to immediacy, and thereby erase their history, to lose us within their presentness. The transcendence presented by the miniature is a spatial transcendence, a transcendence which erases the productive possibilities of understanding through time. Its locus is thereby the nostalgic. The miniature here erases not only labor but causality and effect. Understanding is sacrificed to being in context. Hence the miniature is often a material allusion to a text that is no longer available to us, or which, because of its fictiveness, never was available to us except through a second-order fictive world.”

certainly destroys the boundary between the two. Aislabie, in fact, follows the dangerous path ascribed to Caravaggio, abandoning the pursuit of artistic re-creation in favor of simply importing a piece of the real world into his studio-garden. Or perhaps, even more provocatively, Fountains Abbey becomes a kind of Duchampian ready-made, necessarily but awkwardly transformed by its recontextualization, and strangely diminished in the process despite its vast scale. This is because it cannot fill both roles at once. It cannot be, at any given moment, both Fountains Abbey and a garden pavilion. It can only be one or the other. By defying the demand for miniaturization and *re*-presentation, it undermines the goal of the dialogue. In doing so, it underscores the latter's rhetorical importance to the question of how these gardens were to be received and read.

Conclusions

At the outset I acknowledged the complexity of the relationship between the landscape garden and the theme park, and I hope that this has clearly emerged. Each of the topics introduced here, from tourism, to the generation of meanings, to miniaturization could readily be the focus of far more extensive and probing consideration. Such consideration would, I have no doubt, not only transform our appreciation of these topics but reveal new configurations of the relationships among them.

My students' response at Stourhead was perhaps more provocative than "correct." And yet there are parallels, real and apparent, between the landscape garden and the theme park, and it is interpretatively useful to track them. I believe this is so even if the results are ultimately of greater assistance to us in registering differences than similarities. Certainly there is a line of descent that runs from the eighteenth-century landscape garden to our modern theme parks. But since gardens and theme parks are so richly expressive of the complexity of their cultural milieux, the line that we plot can be neither straight nor narrow. Like the visitor to Stourhead, Studley Royal, or any of the great eighteenth-century landscape designs, whatever path we might set out upon is constantly meeting up with other paths that prevail upon our interest and cause us to move off in other directions. At times we rejoin our original path farther along, but we do not always do so. At others, our new course offers surprising glimpses of the old, just as we might see a garden pavilion from a number of different viewpoints. Sometimes we find ourselves retracing our steps. But each of these movements contributes to a ceaselessly evolving perspective on the overall pattern. Interpretation is synthetic and inherently unstable. I hope, however, that the subjects I have touched upon here will prove profitable for those pursuing their own courses through the essays that follow.