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VISITOR ATTRACTIONS: SPACE AND DRAMATURGY

This paper attempts to delineate structural features of contemporary visitor attractions and define them in relation to dramatic and narrative forms of entertainment, for visitor attractions, it will be argued, employ elements of both storytelling and dramatic presentation. They constitute an important sector in popular culture, as the first part of this paper will demonstrate, and, given the use of new media and media technologies integral in them, may be seen as lying at the intersection of various forms of entertainment and infotainment, ranging from video, film and television to computer games and more sophisticated means of simulating worlds and constructing virtual realities. For the purpose of this paper, all venues that postmodern culture offers under the labels of ‘museum’ and ‘expo-museum’, ‘theme park’, ‘living museum’, ‘multi-media experience’, ‘... story’ ‘... land’ or ‘... world’, ‘heritage centre’ or ‘science centre’ – heterogeneous and volatile as these categories are – will be subsumed under the broad category *visitor attraction*. It is held to cover a wide range of institutions and activities connecting, in varying degrees, entertainment and information in a real space, even though “museumization” itself has moved into the virtual territory of the web, as Richard Humphrey has shown in his “historico-cultural” approach to British museum culture (Humphrey 2003: 111). Space, as we shall see, is a crucial category demarcating visitor attractions from purely visual or audiovisual cultural products as well as from other sites of simulation. The attraction is, first and foremost, spatial in the sense that space dominates all claims to authenticity, adventure, discovery and hands-on experience, and that all dramatic and narrative components are translated into spatial terms, i.e. into ways of visitor interaction and involvement.

What ‘visitor attraction’ denotes is above all an experiential approach, characteristic of contemporary museum culture and increasingly explored for its own sake. Experience may be of the vicarious type as in classical time-ride installations, where visitors are made to see, hear, smell, even taste and touch the culture of a different period or people, an example being *The Oxford Story* or Tussaut’s “Spirit of London”, or it may be of a purely sensational nature, where visitors can experience the thrill of an earthquake, a sinking ship, or a room turning upside

down within the safe confines of an attraction, as “Cassandra” in *Europapark Rust*. To produce the maximum sensation, the ultimate ‘kick’, has become the motto for many sites (or at least for individual stations), paradoxically delimiting again the target audience in terms of physical ability and mental prowess (entrance is often prohibited to children under a certain age, pregnant women, the elderly or disabled). Given this broad and ever changing spectrum of the experiential, the term visitor attraction almost functions like a mode, pervading the high and the low – avant-garde museums and popular theme or corporate parks –, progressively eroding the distinctions between what Richard Humphrey has called museums and “museum-like venues” (112).

In this respect, a visitor attraction may be seen as the merging, characteristic of the late twentieth century, of a trend pioneered in the United States with Walt Disney’s creation of Anaheim in 1955 and the development of older notions of learning and conservation integral in the concept of ‘museum’ in a climate of prospering leisure industries. The latter trend was spearheaded by postwar Britain, when museum institutions proliferated and increasingly became private businesses. Tracing the development of the British museum from 1600 until the 21st century, Humphrey’s “historico-cultural perspective” shows the disparate meanings which the word ‘museum’ acquired in the course of history due to economic, social, and cultural changes: from “a cabinet [...] to an elevating experience, to a temple of learning, to an exhibition hall, to an institution, to a purpose-built educator, to a web-site.” (114). As one looks beyond British culture, the terminological confusion is aggravated due to the multitude of indigenous terms (e.g. the German *Welten*, borrowed from department stores) and the different (and changing) connotations of the English borrowings. In Scandinavian countries, as in the British Isles, a *museum* or *Museet* is more than a collection of objects on display, and the term *theme* as in theme park, theme restaurant or theme hotel has none of the connotations of funfair or *Jahrmarkt* current in central-European countries.

Auto-labels and designations employed by the venues themselves have a limiting value for establishing generic distinctions in that they reflect marketing trends and consumer expectations rather than immanent criteria. In current usage, visitor attraction refers to actual sites, and when Humphrey argues that “the museum has become a central *locus* of the postmodern condition” (101), we would suggest that it is the visitor attraction with its explicit customer orientation that circumscribes this locus: visit denoting a temporary sojourn in a different environment, a kind of carnivalesque escape and total immersion, occasionally enhanced by a transformation of the self (like putting on helmets or protective gear in show mines); attraction signifying a pact between provider and consumer, a strategy or complex of strategies adopted by providers in order to achieve client satisfaction.

For a crucial prerequisite for any visitor attraction is the way in which it meets its visitors. A book that is not read will still linger on in some archive and may, at least potentially, be rediscovered; a privately funded visitor attraction that is not visited will vanish from the face of the earth and survive at best in documentary form. Visitor attractions are more ephemeral than other cultural products, even

when compared with other forms of popular culture. Here again lies a vital difference between what different cultures understand by ‘museum’ and how they devise and design, fund and maintain them. Shifts in funding from public to private and new levels of client orientation have been crucial in the development of visitor attractions and the transformation of ‘museums’ into what has been called ‘new museums’ or ‘expo-museums’. Where these museums / visitor attractions in the British or Scandinavian sense are radically client-oriented, *Museen* in the German-speaking world for example, still largely rely on public funding and defend their didactic and archaeological mission by defining it in opposition to broad public tastes. Museums in the German-speaking world have become ventures between public interest and private business, between didactic purpose and public appeal.

The debate, however, to what extent client orientation has infiltrated into all levels of museum culture and whether it constitutes a valid criterion for defining the popular, the trivial, or “the facilely consensual” (112), is not crucial for a structural analysis. What is crucial, though, is the interrelation of cultural product and consumer taste. For where critics like Humphrey complain about the “trivialization [that] can now be encountered in museums themselves” (112), perceiving today’s heritage centres as “extreme forms of the dominant trends of the age: the shifts from narrative to experience, from the univocal to the multivalent, from the enshrined object to the epistemically crowd-pulling exhibit, from the original to the replica, from presentation to re-presentation” (112), a closer look at the structure of these heritage centres or visitor attractions will reveal more about consumer tastes and behaviour and show how these interrelate with other consumer or leisure institutions. Gertrud Lehnert, for example, compared the layout of museums with that of department stores (Lehnert 1999: 63; Humphrey 2003: 107). What happens to layout and design when put into the service of ‘experience’? Our aim is precisely to show how visitor attractions apparently meet and, no doubt, also shape consumer expectations.

If client orientation in popular forms of entertainment has been hotly debated in cultural theory, it has never been disputed in the camps of both providers and consumers, and, what is more important, it has generated specific structures. Consumer culture is always a transaction between provider and client. A crucial task for the cultural critic is to define this transaction and to find out what its terms and conditions are. If the grand narratives in the sense of using artefacts to illustrate a story-line have disappeared, experience in the sense of thrill, tension, or relaxation and escape requires a different kind of spatial organisation and time scheduling. Visitor attractions are not only a barometer of the shift from information to experience but of the radical changes which the very notion of experience has undergone under the aegis of postmodernity. For these have produced their own formulas. Visitor attractions are formulaic in character, very much like formulaic forms of literature – such as popular romance, detective fiction, or adventure story. Not surprisingly, it is there that we have to look for parallels and seek to define what exactly constitutes the pact between visitor and visitor attraction. Two

elements stand out at this intersection of structure and client response – space and dramaturgy. Before we explore these two components, we should like to raise an issue commonly neglected in debates about popular culture: the issue of failure.

1. Visitor Attractions – a Success Story?

Without comprehensive statistical evidence, one may observe in the 1990s a common tendency all over Europe to merge the concepts of museum and attraction, one reason being the fact that museums and historical buildings and sites whose presentation was purely factual and targeted at educated visitors stayed empty. Museum designers were called upon to integrate considerations of entertainment, emotional appeal and the dreams of customers in planning exhibitions, so as to attract new and larger audiences (Scherrieb 2000: 79–81). A significant change came in 1994 with the enormous echo produced by the *Titanic*-exhibition in Hamburg. 600,000 visitors walked through the exhibition, experiencing in life-like stations the departure of the vessel, her collision with the iceberg and the fatal night in April 1912. Another milestone constructed at the intersection of museum, corporate park and theme park was Swarovsky's *Kristallwelten* – atmospheric wonder chambers ten miles east of Innsbruck, the capital of the Tyrol. It worked like a magnet, attracting 500,000 visitors per year.

Struggling to equal these results, many tourist regions in Central Europe built similar attractions – and failed: *Opel Live* in Rüsselsheim, *Futuruscope* in France, *Play Castle* in the Tyrol, the *Anderswelt* in Lower Austria or *Legoland* in Günzburg, to name only a few. When dealing with visitor attractions, especially since they are consumer-oriented, it is important to trace the history of failure and its possible causes, amongst others under-estimated budgets or false perceptions of visitor attractions as three-dimensional advertisements or monuments to architects' fame. The worst disaster came in 2000 in the shape of the *Expo* in Hannover, with visitor numbers lying far below the expected figures. In the meantime, Britain and the Scandinavian countries continued to build at an amazing pace and with unprecedented pomp, budgets reaching an enormous scale with the expenditure in individual cases doubled out of public lotteries income. The *Jorvik Viking Centre* saw a relaunch at a staggering 2.5 m GBP. In Stockholm, a visitor attraction (*Museet*) was built for the 17th-century vessel *Wasa*, which sank off the Swedish coast, attracting a peak of 800,000 tourists per year. In Norway the *Fjærland Glacier Museum* was built, with directors of world-renown commissioned for the films, and in Denmark, a manufacturer of heating installations commissioned *Danfoss*, a waterworld theme park covering an immense ground.¹

What all 'successful' attractions share is a clear composition, borrowed from narrative and dramatic forms of art as well as from film and television. Moving through a three-dimensional realm, visitors experience an alternative or simulated world constructed for their pleasure, which may mean thrill and excitement, relaxation, or meditative calm – often all of these together. Client ori-

entation, which accounts for the success of an attraction, requires a clear and consistent dramaturgy (Scherrieb 2001: 4–6). This is mirrored in slogans like *publikumswirksame Präsentation* (attractive presentation), *zeitgerechtes Erscheinungsbild* (high-end, state-of-the-art installations) or *Schaffung eines Gesamterlebnisses* (creation of a multi-media experience), which are common in bids and invitations to tender. What these terms convey is a way of calculating in figures, or rather in client numbers: the quality of a dramaturgy is measured solely in terms of its economic success, whether guaranteed by the number of visitors paying entrance fees or by the revenue from shops or restaurants connected with the attraction. What do these slogans mean in terms of a client-oriented dramaturgy, evolving around the spatial and temporal axis of an attraction – its layout/setting and theme/plot?

2. Layout and Setting

Just as length is a defining criterion of (many) literary genres, even though it tends to be relative rather than absolute, space is an important criterion for visitor attractions. Although there are no clear terminological distinctions among attractions of varying length, visitors have certain expectations as to the space they will cover and the time they will spend in an attraction (a ‘centre’, for example tends to be more comprehensive than a ‘time ride’ or ‘adventure’). In accordance with the categories of narrated time and narrating time, we may distinguish between experienced space and experiencing space, which are closely connected. Usually covering a minimum of approximately 1,000 square metres to offer sufficient room for constructing zones and for welcoming visitors, attractions are commonly divided into individual zones – rooms or stations – varying between five and fifteen, in each of which the visitor stays between ten and fifteen minutes. The scheduling of time is important for two reasons: it ensures maximum attention and guarantees a flowing stream of visitors. The arrangement of the zones or stations corresponds to the acts of a play or the chapters in a book: they are individual segments which cohere under the overarching theme of the attraction, whether arranged in sequential order reflecting an episodic narrative (like the *Alice in Wonderland* centre in Llandudno) or in a dramatic plot of rising and falling action with a clear climax, as suggested by the story of the Titanic, or the War of the Roses in *Warwick Castle*. The theme – a catastrophe or cultural event, a writer or a particular literary work, space, water, electricity, war, bank robbery, the bagpipe, whiskey, Sherlock Holmes, to give an idea of the wealth – runs like a red thread through the individual stations (cf. Prange 2003: 2–4). Hence the experienced space and the experiencing space overlap in the sense that the theme or subject of an attraction, together with the objects exhibited, form an entity, as Christian Mikunda has suggested when arguing that all great museums in this world are places we do not visit in order to see works of art, but to see works of art in a particular environment (Mikunda 2005: 2).

Visitor attractions follow a clear structure. Instead of the rigid alleys and avenues of older museum concepts, there are compressed areas, conglomerations and meeting points, (inter-)active and recreational zones, stations of varying size, centres and margins. This concentration on space as a vital means of creating atmosphere is what the current trend in museum culture owes to Walt Disney's first leisure park. The spatial layout of Anaheim has the shape of a star. The overall architecture provides for one entrance only with a main, lavishly designed artery that sucks visitors into the main body of the park, leading to a distribution centre to which the individual thematic zones are attached. Disney's secret of success was the thematic consistency of the individual complexes, each station pursuing a particular story-line, the overall park creating the impression of a main plot refracted in a number of sub-plots. In a modern attraction, the visitor is made to enter a different world, a three-dimensional simulacrum unified by an overarching theme. It is essentially a 'feeling world', either prompted by a semi-fictional story, as in *Warwick Castle*, by minimal narratives attempting to recreate everyday life, as in the *Jorvik Viking Centre*, by a legend, as in the *Hallstatt Saltmines* or by scintillating dreamscapes, as in Swarovski's *Kristallwelten*.

Space is the key to creating this feeling world. Even in more information-oriented attractions like science centres, knowledge is communicated not through facts and data, but becomes synonymous with experience, made possible by what Heinz Rico Scherrieb has described as an emotionalising process:

... dabei muss der Gast die Möglichkeit erhalten, seine eigene Phantasie, seinen Erfahrungsschatz, seine Träume und Vorstellungen einzubringen, als wäre es ein Märchen, das sich in seinem „geistigen Auge“ gestaltet. Seine Vorstellungskraft ist gefordert. Eine Überhäufung mit Daten, Fakten und Namen entspricht zwar der scientific correctness, eignet sich aber für die Inszenierung und Attraktivierung überhaupt nicht. Der Besucher muss sich in eine andere Stimmung und in eine stressfreie Welt versetzen ...

[The visitor must have the opportunity to bring into play his or her own fantasies, experience, dreams and mental images; as if a fairy-tale was taking shape before the inner eye. What is addressed is the visitor's imagination. Providing a mass of data, facts and names complies with scientific correctness, but is ill suited to the stage setting and to making it attractive. The visitor must enter into a different mood and into a stress-free world.] (Scherrieb 2000: 78; our translation).

To appeal to the visitor's emotions, setting, props and costumes will not do, however great their impact on the visitor as they trigger visual, auditory, tactile, even olfactory sensations. The layout of the space, its design and atmosphere reflect the dramaturgy of the attraction, just as the division into acts or chapters is more than a breaking down of the quantity of a text.

3. Theme and Plot

Thematic consistency is crucial in visitor attractions. Before entering the actual attraction, visitors are informed about its size, fee and duration. This orientation zone may be located either at the car park (commonly a manned booth or lodge) or outside the attraction in the form of information charts – comparable to the telling covers of popular romance, or the menu in a restaurant: what is announced outside must be offered indoors. This also applies to visitor attractions. The orientation zone is particularly inviting where it offers visitors a view of the main building or visitor centre, which is commonly a light and large room and shows exhibits, or photographs of exhibits, of spectacular rides or trips, scary sights, monsters or magically lit caves awaiting the visitor after he or she has passed through the turnstile. Such visual icons heralding pleasure are common in consumer culture: restaurants lure tourists with pictures of meals, and in popular magazines photographs of holiday resorts, dashing outfits and appetising meals vie for the reader's attention, just as fancy pools and luxurious lounges dominate the booking sites of hotels. Prior to paying, the visitor is lured by images that arouse his or her interest and predict pleasure in the familiar manner of the advertising industry. Visitor attractions, like advertising, like popular romance and magazines pursue a forward-looking stance, suggesting that fulfilment lies ahead and that it is within easy reach, provided visitors seize the opportunity and pass through the turnstile into the world of pleasure.

The turnstile embodies an almost ritual moment – a rite of passage, in some attractions celebrated like an initiation that fosters in the client a sense of sharing and 'being part of it', frequently accompanied by quasi-ritual acts of transformation: putting on special garments, a helmet or protective wear as in mines or industrial heritage sites. The suggestion of potential danger also adds to the thrill. The visitor can relish to the full the sensation of peril, knowing that a safe return awaits him or her at the end of the journey. This promise is a vital constituent of the pact between visitor and attraction: wish-fulfilment at no risk. The very first station must convince the client of the worth of his or her trip (Scherrieb 1988: 117–119). Readiness to take in information is particularly high at the beginning of the visitor's journey. Not surprisingly, many attractions locate in the first room an information zone, with film or video presentations, frequently in the form of extravagant multimedia shows, information charts and posters. Often the first room looks like a cinema, embedded in the props and scenery that confirm the theme, an example being the pieces of sports equipment together with medals and cups exhibited in the big hall of the *Olympic Museum* in Lausanne, which prepare the visitor for the filmed history of the Olympic Games. These opening films or shows tend to correspond to the current viewing behaviour of modern television audiences and take the form of feature documentaries. Simulation here works at multiple levels: as in a theatre, the visitor is confronted with a 'stage', but unlike the theatre-goer he or she enters the stage, where there may be actors surrounding him or her and where a film is shown, superimposing yet another layer of simula-

tion onto the simulating space of the stage. Experiencing space and experienced space overlap in a polyvalent enactment of the theme.

This multiple interweaving of real and imaginary spaces continues when the film ends after a carefully defined time and, as is frequently the case, leads over to the next station. The visitor moves on. His or her walk is more than reading one chapter after the other, or proceeding from one act to the next when watching a play, because he or she is part viewer and part actor – like Alice in Wonderland, who is the prototypical visitor of a visitor attraction, as she encounters a host of strange creatures in various stations. Significantly, Walt Disney's film version of *Alice in Wonderland*, dating from 1951, anticipates in many ways the structure of the first Disneyland, opened 4 years later, notably in its layout, its frame structure and in Alice's clearly pronounced desire to enter a dream world (here the film radically differs from Lewis Carroll's original fantasy of 1865) (cf. Coelsch-Foisner 2007).

Visitors rarely come as individuals. They usually travel in groups – families or friends. Hence visitor attractions are faced with entirely heterogeneous clients and different client expectations. This ties in with observations in cultural theory that mass culture is homogenising culture, appealing to widely differing tastes. What is intriguing in visitor attractions is the fact that visitors move, and while they move together in the first couple of rooms, groups tend to disperse after the third or fourth room. Attractions commonly meet this desire for individual experience by providing opportunities for visitors to break free from groups and experience total immersion: special experience zones, such as sound or visual corners with touch panels and hands-on installations, coffee-shops or children's play stations with simulators accessible to one person only. Visitors organise for themselves when and where they meet again. Such alternations between group- and individual experience is unique in visitor attractions and distinguishes them markedly from the static community of theatrical audiences or audiences at poetry readings or stage shows, on the one hand, and from the individual act of reading fiction or poetry, on the other hand.

In every attraction there must be some 'tumult' or 'vortex', a sensational point (German *Wirbel*),² which means noise – and often shrieks on the part of the visitors, prime examples being the slides in saltmines, the staged fighting scenes in *Warwick Castle* or the ever returning volcanic eruption in the French attraction *Vulcania*. Or, there may be an illusion cabinet or mirror-room, which confronts visitors with an alien world, a strategy which the American chain "Believe It or Not", which builds visitor attractions, has adopted as its central policy. This ambition to produce a sensational point reached its peak when actors in the guise of officers on board the British museum ship *Cutty Sark*, recently destroyed by fire, ordered the children of visitors to scrub the deck. If a child did not obey, it was punished with a light kick, and the official photographer took a picture of the sadistic officer and the children, who showed great skill in imitating pain. Parents then could buy the photograph.

If the dramaturgy for a visitor attraction provides for a shrill and noisy zone, it also provides for the opposite: the quiet zone or point of emotion, a station where speed is decreased, where no information is conveyed and where visitors may relax and experience the magic of sound and light or just an expanse of space. In visitor questionnaires, these stations are commonly described as the climax of the journey through the attraction. The quiet zone may also take the form of an over-size multimedia presentation, as in the corporate lands of German automobile manufacturers, a subterranean boat ride, as in the *Seegrotte Hinterbrühl*, a cave in Lower Austria (which is no longer part of the attraction), a simulated ride over the firths in the Norwegian glacier museum from a bird's eye view, or the quiet zone in London's *Millennium Dome* (2000), where in a white room measuring approximately 300 square metres the stillness of the place was enhanced by gentle light effects.

Another crucial element in many visitor attractions is the 'crowd-pulling' original. If everything is simulacrum, at one point there must be the original (at least this is what the customer is made to believe) – if only for the overall simulacrum to work so well. The most striking original embedded in a carefully conceived dramaturgy is the *London Tower* with the Crown Jewels, for which visitors are carefully prepared for. What accounts for the mystery of the original? A couple of cleverly done short films dealing with the life of Queen Elizabeth, severe guards, the soundtrack which gets ever more imperial as the visitor approaches the climactic room, and the long queue in front of the showcase which houses the Crown Jewels. The violin Mozart played as a child in Mozart's birthplace in Salzburg fulfils a similar function, as do the ore deposits in the *Schwazer Silberbergwerk* (the Schwaz Silver Mines), the grave of a Celtic Prince in the archaeological Museum of Hallein near Salzburg, showing the real skeleton and funeral gifts, or a glass case displaying Sir Winston Churchill's slippers in Blenheim Palace. In a secular age, the original functions like the holy relic attracting pilgrims to the shrines of saints.

A visitor attraction with many attractions ends in a memorable finale. Doors may open to rooms where visitors may experiment with hands-on, touch screens or simulators, there may be a quiz for children, visitors may test samples or taste drinks – like a glass of mead awaiting visitors of Upper Austria's exhibition of the life and times of St. Severin in 1982. In the alternative, a summary of all that has been seen may be offered.

After the grand finale visitor streams are channelled into the shop, which is commonly situated in the visitor centre, through which visitors initially entered the attraction. The shop is light, creates a friendly atmosphere and is organised according to a strict pattern. Articles relating to the attraction are commonly placed in the front area, all that relates to the geographical surroundings is close to the cash desk. Every 'good' museum shop will offer little give-aways – salt-mines offer salt, in *Vulcania* visitors receive a little pumice stone and the *Danfoss Universe* in Denmark offers visitors a little key pendant or pencil to remind them of their visit and invite them to return. 'Buy me' and 'buy me again' are the im-

plied slogans of all visitor attractions – as of all leisure venues of popular culture. The bigger the gift obtained in the shop, the greater the client's satisfaction. The trophy in the plastic carrier does not only legitimate the visit, it also legitimates the fee.

Conclusion

Visitor attractions constitute an important sector in popular culture, both reflecting and shaping consumer tastes and behaviour. Foregrounding experience – both vicarious and sensational – they form part of a postmodern trend towards “museumization”, spearheaded in post-war British consumer culture and spreading all over Europe in the 1990s, as a wide range of examples show. Visitor attractions are customer-oriented, mostly privately funded, and cover a wide range of institutions and activities connecting, in varying degrees, entertainment and information in a real space. They are formulaic and follow a clear and consistent dramaturgy, which develops along a spatial and a temporal axis and is essentially connected with dramatic and narrative forms of entertainment. The overarching theme, the spatial layout with turnstile, zones and information clusters, an emotional point and a sensational vortex, affiliated shops and restaurants are designed in an overall effort to meet client expectations and respond to the unique dynamics of visitors moving both in groups and individually in and between stations and turning from spectators into actors in a richly simulated multi-media spectacle.

Notes

- 1 All statistical figures mentioned in this paper were given to us by the respective providers or tourist boards.
- 2 This term was used by Andreas Braun, the director of the *Kristallwelten* in a conversation we had in 2000.

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