

# **In Between**

## **Alpine tourism in a condensed transitional landscape**

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## Alpine tourism in a condensed transitional landscape

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Despite all the differences in social, economic, and political contexts we, as scientists, tend to search for structural similarities for *several* forms of tourist experience. My search is characterised by my own professional background as a theorist as well as a historian of architecture who tries hard to teach young architects about the social and spatial principles of tourism. But on the other hand my search – at least concerning this paper – is also based on my empirical knowledge gained through my own social origins, grown up in a top-notch ski resort in the Austrian Alps. In this paper I want to emphasize on those spatial aspects that structure the individuals encounter. In contrast to most of the works recently published from scholars with a background in architecture architects I will intentionally ignore the dominant discourse on the function of buildings as visual markers only and on the predominant notion of the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002). Instead of that I want bring back to mind some old quite old but not outdated notions: that of *rites de passage*, thresholds, liminal and liminoid spaces and stagescapes. This paper will focus on detail – but with a notion of irony – on the many thresholds of perception and especially the many physical thresholds which structure the alpine tourist encounter.

### The tourist space of experience

There seems to be consensus that the success of the tourist desire production is based upon the promise of an experience of 'difference'. In order to warrant the considerable investments of time and money on the part of the consumer this experience of difference must bear the prospect of positive effects on his or her everyday life: discovery of one's identity (e.g., on the Grand Tour), regeneration (in Fordism) or the testing of identities – either by infantile excess or by meditating in on one's own body and mind (in post-Fordism).

Usually this difference is of a geographical nature. Yet there is always a social difference too, as for the majority the beginning of a holiday marks a transition from serving to being served! We thus witness a temporary switch in the social hierarchy.

Hence there is a demand for service personnel who not only have to assist the tourists in their experience of difference but also with the recreational and ‘medical’ needs of these tourists. The income of such personnel should remain lower than that of the tourists, who would otherwise not be able to afford their services. As a third social group, local residents come into play who deliberately or not become bit players of the experience of difference.

The *ménage à trois* between tourists, service staff, and residents obviously does not always proceed without conflict. Therefore protective mechanisms were installed in the members of all those three groups little by little that prevent disappointment as well as painful experiences: The travellers convert from their source culture into a holiday culture, and the residents from their regional culture into a service culture (Thiem, 2001). And despite the fact that this cultural exchange is performed between already modified forms of culture it is – to stay on the safe side – enhanced by a stage-like setting.

Back in the 1950s Erving Goffman introduced the metaphor of the stage as a model for the social space of human interaction, as we all know, contrasting centre stage with a sheltered backstage area. Goffman uses the famous example of the swing door separating a restaurant kitchen from the dining room. This swing door obviously functions as a material realisation, a physical threshold between a publicly visible centre-stage, and an occluded backstage area. It usually has a porthole-like window to minimise the view into the kitchen for the guest while at the same time enabling the necessary recognition of potential oncoming traffic for the staff. For the waiter this swing door represents the transition from the sometimes coarsely militant kitchen jargon to the friendly face of the courteous service staff. The swing door hence is a behavioural threshold with the extra virtue of serving as a relief for the aggressive potential of the personnel who may bestow it with kicks of appropriate force as a vent, and as the door swings outwards the waiter enters centre stage with the friendly face of the service provider (Goffman, 2003:112-113).

In the 1970s Dean MacCannell (1999[1976]) extended Goffman's model to a multi-layered continuum of stages with several successive curtains. But since then we faced an increasing expansion of tourism, the restructuring of everyday life through tourist mechanisms as well as an intense travel activity to destinations of all kinds and in all conceivable directions. MacCannell's multi-layered stage landscapes therefore are no longer restricted to single attractions or destinations. They can no longer be read in one direction only. They cover the entire planet and affect both poles of tourism: Since what is day to day routine for one is the

ardently longed for experience of difference for the other – and again for the third it might be merely the prop of a stage setting, which can be passed by without further ado.

Within the trend towards short trips to ready-made entertainment worlds enabling self-promotion and infantile collective ecstasy at the same time more and more ephemeral event stages are emerging. Everything there is set up – and everyone knows it and plays along.

However more experienced tourists are becoming increasingly independent of the services of professionals to provide façades of varying degrees of authenticity – increasingly preferring to perform by themselves. Instead of actors and directors there is hence a growing demand for dramaturges to provide stage as well as production elements that can be informally adopted for self-promotion in a do-it-yourself manner. The most advanced tourists have long since learned to assemble their own informal and asymmetric stages according to their needs. The exceptionality of holiday produces a more open and expectant public encouraged to join in the *mise-en-scène*.

Of course not all tourists are always willing to perform without professional assistance. Many of them still appreciate the separation of the raised stage and staged settings. But the level of this staging can vary greatly. The investment in scenery, props, lighting, sound, costumes and make-up varies considerably.

Obviously the metaphor of the stage leads our perception back to transitional stages and to rites de passage from the early discourse of anthropology. Richard Schechner, in 1960s Founder of the *The Performance Group* in New York and well known scholar in Performance Studies, calls this transition from the traditional directed drama on a coercively adjusted picture-frame stage in favour of a performance art oriented towards body and subject from 'liminal' towards the 'liminoid' (Schechner, 1998).

### *Performance*

On the other hand a 'good performance' describes the success of an enterprise or a portfolio of shares. It also holds that anyone who wants to succeed in one's professional life has to be a good 'performer'. Whereas holidays during the heyday of Fordism helped the recreation of the workforce to exploit it still better upon return, the performative testing of different identities during holidays under neo-liberalism serves as an excellent training camp for the deregulated

daily grind of future Ego-corporations. And the occasional excesses function as carnival-like vents for social tensions, making the tourists dance at their destination instead of fighting at their places of origin.

Yet the hype of the performance idea has very different origins: During the 1950s the scholar John Austin developed his theory of speech acts to denote utterances that perform actions (or action sequences) by the mere fact of being uttered. As the simplest but a key example one may take the utterance of "yes" in the course of the wedding ceremony (Austin, 2002[1962]).

Among the thinkers occupied with the notion of space it is, above all, Michel de Certeau who explicitly referred to the theory of speech act. He stated "each and every description is a culturally creative act. Sometimes it has a distributive or even performative power (it does what it says) whereby it produces spaces" (1988: 228). The former also applies to the function of narratives for the production of desires (word-of-mouth recommendation), the latter to the process of the tourist experience itself. "The narratives precedes the social practice... it creates a performative theatre" (1988: 231).

The production of space is, according to de Certeau, basically always "caused by a movement that links space to a narrative. Each and every oral report is hence always the account of a journey dealing with space". The reported adventures produce "geographies of action".

According to de Certeau, these reports do indeed "govern your steps. They perform a journey, before or while your feet re-enact it" (1988: 216).

This is all the more true for holidays. Listening to other people's accounts of their travels has always been followed by a virtual journey through printed brochures and travel guides – or the fabled fingertip trail on the map.

Unexpectedly the notion of performance from speech act theory can be easily applied to tourist routines. The decision to go on holiday first triggers a selection procedure of potential destinations, i.e. extensive inquiries that in the case of the package holiday end up with the act of booking – online or at the travel agency. This act in turn kicks off a whole flood of actions which, because of their typically seasonal setting, bear the character of rituals: buying travel guides, packing bags, loading the car, last safety checks etc.; or going to the station or the airport. Off we go! At last!

Conversely the narratives of travels during the holidays are, again according to Michel de Certeau, "constantly marked by the naming of significant places which give structure to the

narratives. They are visual markers to be linked to the anecdotes of emotional experiences” (1988: 222).

Among the most significant places of this kind are the many material thresholds – almost barriers or even obstacles – structuring the transitional phases from everyday life to the extraordinary, i.e., from private retreat to the aforementioned multi-layered ‘stage-scapes’. These thresholds often also function as behavioural or perceptual thresholds. By passing them the traveller step by step approaches holiday culture or – if she or he has already arrived there – enters a public realm within this holiday culture in order to initiate a staged interaction.

### *Rites of passage and states of transition*

The phrase 'rites of passage' was, as we all know, coined by the anthropologist Arno van Gennep who stated already in 1908 that each society tries to stabilise every threat to its "static social order" implied by spatial, temporal, and social transitions with rites. Rites are there both to mitigate the destructive power of disturbances and to maintain control of social life. According to van Gennep they are structured in three phases: (1) during the phase of separation the ties to the old place or the old state of affairs are loosened; (2) the transitional phase is, as it were, suspended between the old and the new; and (3) the phase of integration assimilates the new place or the new state of affairs (Van Gennep, 1991[1909])! While some authors – e.g. Michel de Certeau – claimed utopian aspects within the stadium of liminality, of finding oneself "betwixt and between" (Turner 1998[1964]), Turner admitted that rites of passage do not obliterate social hierarchy, authority and obedience but rather suspend them temporarily. Hence they may even engender the opposing effect by emphasising social differences all the more poignantly (after the phase of transition).

The historical precursors of tourist travels – pilgrimage and the romantic idea of the grand tour – provide abundant evidence for transitional phases as well as for rites of passage. Other contemporary travel formats such as the obligatory trip to Europe by American intellectuals after graduation, travels in the gap year, or Interrail trips by teenagers bear the features of transitional phases in the travellers' lives. Similarly the popular and long-enduring holiday formats of the European middle classes still adhere to seasonal cycles. Every year hundreds of thousands of middle-class families still make their well-earned recuperative journeys in-line with working and school holidays.

Examining a contemporary holiday trip, a skiing holiday in the mountains for instance, we will find that the thresholds have been increased and the duration of each passage condensed. Through this multiplication they are paradoxically prone to lose significance: The thresholds diminish in import; the transition phases get ever more diffused. Yet they do still exist...

### The journey as a transitional phase

The journey proper, it is widely held, starts with the packing ritual. We pick the costumes, guises, the make-up, behavioural scripts, and all those little mobile props and prostheses that will assist us in the design of our mise-en-scènes during the extraordinary phase of travelling. The packing ritual is mirrored by the rite of unpacking upon return, when we incorporate the trophies from the completed journey into scripts for accounts of the trip.

Whether undertaken by car, bus, train, or plane the long trip to the destination is already a rite of passage par excellence: In his book *The Practise of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau (1988: 209-214) describes the train ride as a specific transitional phase between the experience of place and space which effectively puts the traveller in a dream-like state. Both the travellers in their seats looking at the countryside out of the window and the objects comprising the landscape being gazed at, respectively, are bound to their location. Through the movement of the train both kinds of objects – separated only by the train window – are repositioned in relation to each other. Thereby the train ride produces a spatial constellation that is constantly dissolved through the fast pace of the train. The train ride lets the short-term relations between subjects and objects comprising the landscape dissolve or rather slip into the unconscious... And apart from the promise and remains of utopias intrinsic to each temporary escape it is precisely these very travellers' daydreams that render the trip itself an attraction.

The sequence of rites of passage is also repeated and condensed on a small scale: First at the airport terminals at the source and the destination regions, which can fulfil their function only in tandem. For the tourists this tandem represents a highly complex structure comprised of several thresholds helping them to detach themselves from the 'familiar' and pass over and adapt to the 'unfamiliar'. At some point somewhere within these landscapes comprised of thresholds and transitional zones travellers eventually leave their source region's culture and enter the holiday culture of the destination region. And at some point somewhere on their trip

home they will have returned to their source culture. On their way they pass one glass sliding door after another, one control facility after another. In each zone they gather again in order to prepare for the next transition. And while business travellers regard any minimal delay as an embarrassing incursion on their interests, holiday travellers seem capable of assimilating any delay, any queue as well as any of the manifold checkpoints, as rites of separation and integration into their holiday expectations. Even the notorious stamp in the passport can become a sought after trophy.

After landing at the destination the kick of arriving is boosted by intermediate bus transfer: sliding doors at the airport, the coach's luggage flaps, sliding door access to bus, the drive, hotel driveway, sliding door access to the hotel...

At the destination the increase of thresholds naturally continues within the hotel, where the continuous change of spaces for private retreat and stages for (semi-) public flaunting becomes radically condensed: hotel room (private), corridor (semi-public/backstage), elevator (a secondary transitional phase), lobby (public/centre stage)!

In the Austrian Alps the phase of integration of the ensuing hotel stay starts with the welcome schnapps provided in the hotel lobby. It is followed by an elevator ride to the floor, looking for one's room number on the countless doors of a seemingly endless corridor, the occupation of the room, the not always frictionless appropriation of the room by unpacking and arranging one's utensils, and finally the timely planning of prospective activities within the cosy new ecosystem of the hotel room! The next steps consist of completing one's toilet, dressing and getting ready for the first evening scenario. All these glances into the mirror! Then you take the long way through the corridor again, this time accompanied by first-night nerves. You wait for the elevator to arrive. The sliding door opens! You enter the elevator; press the "ground floor" button, a last glimpse into the elevator mirror, final adjustments to your outfit, hairstyle and make-up. Now the elevator door slides open! You enter stage! Everyone in the lobby seems to be staring at you and only you...

In the destination's tourist microcosm the same speech acts are performed over and over again: Let's go for dinner! We are on our way to the pool! We are on our way to go skiing! Again a whole sequence of transitional phases has to be worked off. Planning the day, checking the map, re-packing, dressing, off to the ski storeroom or the ski rental, waiting for



the bus to arrive, getting on the bus, pushing and shoving, getting off, queuing up at the counter for ski lift tickets! Then with the precious ticket off you go to a long queue confined within a steel fence construction specifically designed for the orderly channelling of large masses of people. The tickets are inspected at a computerised checkpoint and, at last, the turnstile unlocks. In the cable car cabin the close proximity of your fellow travellers is not what you are used to, but you endure it courteously. It is as if the entire journey to your destination is being re-enacted once more. Finally the ascent begins! The cabin starts swinging at the supports! You arrive at the upper station. The cabin door slides open, the station door slides open: The traveller reaches the climax – in an aesthetic, material and Freudian sense!

Despite the enormous infrastructure that had to be employed to even arrive at this final destination on a mountain peak, and despite having taken along all the cumbersome prostheses necessary to survive the winter's cold and arrive in the valley again – in short: despite all these casually consumed technological efforts – the first alpine panorama from this height gives you a sublime experience of nature!

Finding ourselves 'above the clouds', only one step to heaven, but still linked to ground, we might feel seduced to shout out loud: "I am the king of the world!"

### *Junk Space*

From a dramaturgic point of view this quotation of Leonardo di Caprio at the very bow on board of the Titanic would have represented a perfect end for this paper presentation. But for a philosophic minded urban intellectual like myself the mental or even physical emotion, I feel on top of the mountain, seems like a painful affair. Immediately I feel obliged to start to search for arguments to escape this seemingly awkward situation. And of course I am smart enough to find them: in the cultural critique of tourism and the academic architectural discourse, I was socialized in.

Then it is this very contrast that increases the value of the experience achieved. All those cultural achievements, the whole aesthetics of the technology, all the monuments of progress only seem to serve the enjoyment of one very small experience of nature – they serve nothing more than the staging of nature.

And it is as if the cable car stations were like miniature copies of ports or airports, just another significant threshold – another perceptual gate on a long journey. And just like the departure

and the destination airports, the station down in the valley and the upper station only function in tandem...

And just like those other terminals passed during the journey to one's destination, the cable car stations are increasingly being converted into multifunctional consumer zones adapted to the increasing spending power of their clientele – into a shopping mall plus entertainment division and multi-storey car park. The Dutch architect and writer Rem Koolhaas once characterised airports as prototypical "junk spaces" (Koolhaas: 2001). They are mega-structures in regional camouflage adapted to the demands of their market. They house private vehicles, all sorts of requisites and souvenirs. It is there where you take off and where you will land again. They are no longer inflexible edifices, audacious monuments of a functionalist modernity, but multifunctional hybrids that are continually being re-structured and extended in order to adjust to the permanent change of attractions, of systems of signs, and sometimes even of business plans necessary to succeed in international competition. And many of today's alpine tourist destinations leave the impression of being just such a Koolhaasian "junk space" proliferating around a terminal.

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