

See You on the Holodeck! Morphing into New Dimensions

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Introduction

Shot into Space

Imagine you are walking through Las Vegas and suddenly bump into a group of Klingons. They invite you to *The Star Trek Experience*, which starts with an exhibition of the lives and times of different Star Trek Generations. Wandering around between snapshots of “The First Contact”, models of Warp I and II, logbook entries and exhibits of alien species you suddenly realize that you are facing some of the essential space concepts constituting modernity: expedition, exhibition, and a space of infinite distances. Or in Las Vegas terms: mass tourism, theme parks and the logic of games. These three notions signify the importance of travelling for opening up new spaces and the idea of moving around in moving spaces, of always being on the way as an exemplary way of being in modern times.

At the end of the exhibition an elevator is waiting. “Step in!”, a staffsperson says, “Let’s have a look at the starfighters.” Some others and I enter the elevator and a little catastrophe takes place. Unfortunately, the elevator does not take us to the promised 2nd floor, but explodes instead. Steam everywhere. The floor is shaking wildly, while the staffsperson keeps yelling “Oh my God! Please stay calm! Oh my God!” And then, with a last roar of the elevator’s engine, we are propelled to the 23rd century, right onto the bridge of the enterprise. Bad luck, we are in the middle of combat. Even worse, one of us must be the ancestor of Captain Picard, who vanished the moment we arrived. So there is no time to lose! We hurry up, get into a space shuttle and try to find our way back to where we belong. And there we go, right into the middle of an inferno! I see space on fire. Starfighters everywhere, explosions, breathtaking maneuvers. The enemy is right behind us, we do our best, but it keeps coming closer and closer. DAMN! They have hit our left wing! The shuttle vibrates, starts to rotate, my stomach keeps coming higher and higher, we are lost! Lost! But no! There, a light, I can see a light! It is the time tunnel, we are safe at last! With a loud crash our plane hits the ground and we are relieved to disembark. With wobbly knees I am back in the Nevada desert.

What Happened?

This paper interprets attractions like the *Star Trek Experience* as a technological play of intermediality.¹ By means of steaming rooms, vibrating vehicles and high-tech simulations, the culturally established boundaries between the senses collapse. The pictures feel, the sounds

leave a taste, shock and excitement surpass oppositions between the visible and the unseen. With the malfunctioning elevator perceptual barriers between the worldly audience space, the illusionistic movie screen and the fictitious theatre stage space become magically blurred. In the course of immersion these special-effect spectacles turn out to be true “boundary distinction breakers” (Ndalianis 2000). They keep the participants in a transitional state of heightened attentiveness and offer them the double role of being part of the audience and as performers at the same time. Suddenly everything seems possible. One is part of the show, absorbed by the action taking place, and it is absolutely unimportant that Klingons or the Enterprise might not exist: This high tech performance is inevitably real. Or in other words: The experience of ambivalence between sensory involvement in a ‘magical’ experience and ‘rational’ astonishment about the technology which performs it, is able to suspend dualistic thought about the real and the fictitious.² In view of the sensation of complete vivacity they shrink to formalistic academic distinctions.

The following argument is divided into three sections: First the basic components of the new entertainment technology will be briefly outlined. A second part will explain some of the central connections between the action-cinema, computer/video-games and theme park attractions. Finally the experience which has been just described as magic and spectacular, will be traced back to earlier entertainment genres. It will turn out that the *Star Trek Experience*, despite its heavy dependence upon the latest technology, is not a completely new invention of the digital simulation age, but shares several features with historic developments.

1. The New Entertainment Technology

The *Star Trek Experience* is an example of the current process of combining movie art, computer games and theme park attractions. The new entertainment genre seems to meld four basic concepts of entertainment architecture into a new idea of immersive environment: the “dark room”, the “theatre”, the “scenery” and the ride machinery.

The “dark room” is the place where things start to get weird. Very often just a passing point or not even a mark in space, but rather a dramaturgic moment in time, the “dark room” unhinges connections to what, two minutes ago, one used to regard as one’s normal life. It functions as a threshold, as well as a means of transportation. When ghosts appear and walls become translucent, when elevators explode and sirens are hooting, one is on one’s way through the purgatory of popular culture. Thereby the symbols of initiation may be as diverse as the world of entertainment itself, which gobbles up everything which comes near the stage. But the outcome is always the same. When the lights are turned on again one is part of the show.

The notion of “theatre” encompasses all the parameters that dramatic action needs to take place. The theatre architecture provides a stage and directs the sequence of spots of attention. Actors and audience-performers are offered their platform thereby pre-arranging the set of possible actions. The concept of “theatre” is very close to that of the “scenery”. The “scenery” works as a mind-distracting attraction, a connective passage between different parts of the show, as well as its beginning and end. It invites the visitor to wander through it idly, to become part of its story and truly breathe the atmosphere of another life at another place in a different time.

Whereas “theatre“ and “scenery” are media of mimicry³, the ludic category of change, metamorphosis and alternative option, the ride machinery implements the archive of industrialized ilinx.⁴ It offers all possible modes of movement apt to cause vertigo and ecstasy. While one is shot into the sky the machinery demonstrates its absolute power, but the display of the latest technological achievements is only part of the story. Equally important is the chance offered by these laboratories of technological pleasure, which is to enter a magical space within an arrangement of technological rationality. The kinaesthetic order of modern times reveals itself here as a modern aero-aesthetics of motion transferred into a spectacle of extremes.

Popular events like the *Star Trek Experience* derive their thrill from their special-effects management. Digital, cinematic and fair-ground technologies combine old and new features designed for astonishment: 3-D and wide screen cinema, surround sound systems, simulation ride technology, digital animation. The outcome is a multidimensional space, an immersive environment with the inherent principles of change and transformation. It offers a spectacular trip in sound and vision, which follows a pure event-dramaturgy and replaces complex story-telling by simple settings, basically get in or get out. Accordingly, the primary or intended mode of perception is a flow of sensations, a state of heightened awareness that leads to the experience of absolute presence.

2. Mutual Influences of Action-cinema, Computer Games and Theme Park Attractions

The entertainment industry’s current interest in combining cinematographic techniques and computer games in an amusement park setting is not a brand new idea. On the contrary, there are various relations of interchange and similarity between the three entertainment types. One important point of intersection lies in the fact that action-cinema, computer or video games and theme park attractions are deeply concerned, in one way or another, with the transformation of movement into an aesthetics of motion. The primary field of shared interest is that of transformative spaces, and especially the process of creating space by movement. The creation of space by movement implies and demands that the nature of movement itself is subject to

examination. To human perception space is not a given factor, but a challenge. It has to be explored, conquered, remodeled, converted, destroyed or created. One of the currently most typical modes of space creation is the explosion. Presently, sound and vision of bombs and missiles form elementary aesthetic principles and establish the explosive moment as a privileged way of space-design. In this context, people, vehicles, buildings or other items 'flying-through-the-air', or floods of fire surging through corridors, wells and tunnels become a non-hermeneutic mode of expression.

Expressive motion frequently shapes the protagonists' performance. The hero, gambler or passenger is confronted with space phenomena which require either physical acrobatic talents or excellent coordination with or in raging machines. Think of James Bond fighting on the wings of an aero plane, rally-driving in arcade-games or a ride on a roller coaster. There is a striking mutuality of influences between architecture and space structures in action-cinema, computer/video-games and theme parks⁵. They are all based on a spatial arrangement of sub-ensembles, which form a closed topographic world. Each ensemble is basically defined by the way you move around in it or by the obstacles which try to prevent you from doing so. Every encounter starts as a situative exposé following the outlines of a spatial and temporal frame of attractions. The underlying scheme resembles favorite game settings: the task is to get in or out, to catch or escape and to move on to the next level, adventure or pavilion. You have simple rules, a limited set of personnel, an adventurous steeple-chase-parcours and a clearly arranged panel of devices and options.

The influence of action movies or computer-games on theme parks is quite clear. Both are main attractions of theme parks as the introductory example has already illustrated. But the exchange relations also function in the opposite direction. As indicated above one also finds entertainment park motives or game structures in the cinematographic sphere. Many action movies, for example, employ rides. One just has to think of Indiana Jones in the coal-mines of India, or remember famous car chase scenes in movies like *French Connection* or *The Blues Brothers*. Moreover, action movies like to employ the logic of computer games which is to reach the next level. Each level offers a different set of tasks and options, and the provided space is designed as a series of experimental situations. This serial dynamic turns every protagonist into a player who must face a succession of event-settings populated with a variety of vicious opponents hidden somewhere in the dark.

The action hero is at home in a condensed exotic scenery forming little pastiche theme worlds. Each stay takes place in a touristic theme park scenery: The hero is in Mexico? People wear sombreros and drink tequila. He has to contact someone in Germany? The camera pans over Heidelberg. Trouble in Moscow? He lands on The Red Square by parachute. The topic of

the theme world is actually one of the most striking fields of interlusion between the three entertainment types of movie art, gaming and amusement park. As the term ‘theme world’ already connotes, space is generally not recognized as a three-dimensional place, but as a conglomerative area of motley imaginary landscapes. Accordingly, the experience offered is largely based on a touristic perception.⁶ Action cinema prefers to take place in foreign countries, sightseeing surroundings, landmarks known world-wide or exotic settings. In video- or computer-games you have to find your way through forgotten palaces, archaic labyrinths or slip by ancient gate keepers. And amusement parks are by definition an assembly of symbolic environments. Theme parks, as well as the action genre, combine a fictitious geography of mass tourism with an emphasis on experiencing transport technologies in all possible variations. Next to Cinderella’s Castle you can take the cable-car up to the little Schwarzwaldhaus, take the phantasy train back to the Caribbean Sea and then the huge chute right down to the newly built roller coaster. The simulation rides are especially action-based and both events play with absorbing space structures. Moving vehicles, moving cameras pull you into a spatial organization which is always in motion. It is the movement that makes the event; the real star is motion.

3. Precursory Developments

Multimedia events like the *Star Trek Experience* are rich in historic precursors. One of the earliest ones may be “The Journey to the Moon” which gave name to the first modern amusement park, the Lunapark on Coney Island, founded 1903 by Frederick Thompson. At the entrance to the park visitors were invited to a simulated airship-trip to the moon. In a mobile suspended boat about 30 passengers could experience the illusion of a journey to the moon created by huge illuminated screens passing by. On the moon the passengers were expected by inhabitants of a green moon town who welcomed them and offered them moon-food, for example green colored cheese (Blume 2001, 43-45). Although those tricks seem very cheap in our eyes today people around the turn of the 20th century were enthusiastic about these new entertainment forms. Without perfect simulation techniques and amidst a cheap scenery people experienced the show as spectacular and the whole of Lunapark as a magic garden.

The combination of magic and the spectacular is a description which was widely attributed to another amusement park attraction, the Early Cinema. The Early Cinema or “Cinema of Attractions”, as Tom Gunning has named it (1996), was basically concerned with effects. It led the development until 1906/07, when the narrative cinema took over and began to dominate the official discourse on movies. But, as indicated above, the blockbuster- and action cinema owes a lot to the Early Cinema of Attractions. Both expose latest technological achievements, both are

mainly concerned with special effects, influenced by a visual curiosity which appreciates shock, spectacle and stunning surprises rather than indulging in a closed narrative universe. Like in modern action movies many productions of the Early Cinema were concerned with motion. Countless variations experiment with the speed of modern times, be it performed by trains, cars, metropolitan life or the moving camera itself. In the movie-camera's eye modern space was perceived as a passage. It is interesting that in a way the Cinema of Attractions already was what I have called a boundary distinction breaker.

In the early days of the cinema movies were openly communicated as forms of experiencing magic. One of the favorite protagonists was therefore the magician. Surprisingly, magicians like comedians treated the camera like an audience. They bowed, waved, grimaced and did every possible gesture to demonstrate that this was not a closed fictitious space. The illusion was that they were there, seeing you. The aesthetic of the eye of the movie-camera was therefore one that did not accept the spatial division by the screen and always attempted to invalidate the distinctions between the real and the fictitious, the here and there. So in practicing the total lure for attention the early Cinema of Attractions circled around one final boundary. It tried to be what its early name promised, a living picture. In this sense the Early Cinema reveals the profound relation between concepts of movement and experiences of liveliness. It reveals that any aesthetics of motion forms part of a society's aesthetics of life.

Summary

As the *Star Trek Experience* has demonstrated there is a trend in the entertainment business to meld action cinema, computer/video games and theme park attractions. These three entertainment types maintain various relations and reflect the creation of space by movement. In fact, motion is one of the key experiences.

The ambivalent fascination with being in the center of impossible movements and the possibility to participate in visual and acoustic illusions is embedded in a larger historical context. Events like the "Trip to the Moon" or the Early Cinema of Attractions vicariously stand for or refer to larger developments like the establishment of popular mass culture or the changes in perception modes due to the velocities of modern life. In my opinion these new media play with intermediality, causing the experience of magic to become an essential contribution to a modern mode of adjusting to the incomprehensible. Entertainment forms have played (and still play) a vital role in elaborating an aesthetics of motion as a way to deal with the dynamics of modern life. They break boundary distinctions between the real and the fictitious, between here and there, performer and audience. All these distinctions are basically organized in terms of spatiality. What causes the break is the use of extreme motion, wondrously moving spaces,

astonishing transformations. By being on the move we get to the backside of a Cartesian world where intermediate spaces evade being locked into the concepts of objectivity and identity. That is the overt secret of all media, they perform science as well as magic, sometimes even simultaneously.

Notes

- ¹ For the concept of intermediality and the notion of media in their relation to the distinction between the real and the fictitious I refer to Pfeiffer (2002).
- ² Angela Ndaliansis comes to similar interpretations in: "Special Effects, Morphing Magic, and the 1990s Cinema of Attractions" (Ndalianis, 2000).
- ³ Roger Caillois (1982) divides the world of play into four basic categories, *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*.
- ⁴ For the relation of play and the notion of archive see Adamowsky (2003).
- ⁵ I am gathering inspiration here from two articles by Isabella Reichert and Drehli Robnik, "Das Action-Kammer-Spiel. Hollywood-Filme nach dem DIE-HARD-Bauplan. Teil 1 und 2" (Reicher/Robnik 1996,1997).
- ⁶ For the touristic perception see Christoph Hennig, "Reiselust" (Hennig 1999).

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