

Tillers of the Soil/Travelling Journeymen: Modes of the Virtual

By A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul

As virtual technologies increasingly mediate and redefine our experiences of the everyday, they also open up different ones. Exchanges between participants in virtual technologies take place through interconnections in manifold networks, no longer only between locally embodied selves or others. A similar combination of specific instantiation and networked relationships (as well as a formal affinity with aspects of hypertext) has frequently been observed about Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (Dubow; Featherstone; McLaughlin). Further, Benjamin had an ongoing concern with key terms and concepts clustering around virtuality – “*translatability, legibility, reproducibility, cognizability*” (McLaughlin 192).

Therefore, Benjamin's work is illuminating when looking at cases of *Blended Reality*, where virtual technologies mix with corporeal instantiations to produce forms of reality in which mediation takes on many and varied forms.¹ More and more people spend significant parts of their lives online (to work, to relax, to mix and mingle with other online-users; for political, commercial, or criminal purposes) and experience themselves as “distributed presences” (Turkle). However, these virtual streams of their reality are inextricably mixed with real streams. High speed internet access increasingly allows many of us to “be with others” outside of our physical location, while, next morning, we still open the door to our office, turning a handle that has been jamming for several weeks. How do those experiences relate to each other? Is there a mediation in which they mutually re-create each other? (Menninghaus 310) Handle and screen, in their mediacy, produce their users' sensorium differently and jointly (McLaughlin 194).

An understanding of virtuality as a “tendency in mediated contexts towards disembodied interactions and ways of being human” can be enriched by Benjaminian concepts.² His essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” seems an obvious place to begin to explore theoretical aspects of virtual technologies. However, two other essays, “The Storyteller” and “The Task of the Translator,” are illuminating insofar as they render virtuality in terms of translatability and experience, rather than technical reproducibility. For Benjamin, at least in the context of storytelling, the exchange of experience takes place in embodied interaction: between a “resident tiller of the soil” and a “trading seaman,” or between a “resident master craftsman and . . . traveling journeymen working together in the same rooms” (“The Storyteller” 85). In these spaces, the experiences of the local (the man who stayed at home and knows its tales and traditions), and those from afar (even master craftsmen were once travellers) are mediated.³ New meanings unfold. And, in good translations, the mutual reciprocity and complementarity of languages gives rise to an original's sustained life, gradually realising (some of) its unrealised potential.⁴

Blended realities: modalities of the virtual

At *Tropical Islands Resort* at Brand, 60km southeast of Berlin in Germany, it is difficult to tell tillers from travellers, virtual from real. Probably unnoticed by most visitors to the resort, virtual and real streams of reality combine continuously.⁵ Modes of reality change, significantly and constantly, and have done so from its inception. Around 2003, Colin Au, Chinese Malaysian multimillionaire with a background in luxury cruises, began to explore the possibility of “bringing the tropics to Germany” (Young). Part of his plan was to house “rainforest flora and fauna and six villages representing indigenous cultures in Malaysia, Thailand, the Congo, the Amazon, Bali and Polynesia” in “the largest free-standing arched hall in the world” (the dome of a gigantic hangar built for the production of

CargoLifters, a scheme that went belly-up and left the hangar to be sold off for US\$75million; dpa; Engels-Schwarzpaul).



Photo: Tropical Islands Management GmbH

Anecdote has it that Au researched traditional houses in the Pacific and found an image of a Samoan *fale*. The image he eventually brought with him to a meeting with the Samoan Tourism Authority (STA) in Apia may have turned up in a Google search for “traditional AND Samoan AND house” at <http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/American-Samoa.inc>. The image, wherever it was found, subsequently became part of STA’s commission to build *this fale* in Samoa, employing local *tufuga* (experts) and authentic traditional materials; to ship its components to Germany; and to erect the *fale* at *Tropical Islands Resort*. The venture made an impact on Samoan everyday realities. It involved not only the *tufuga* but also many local producers of building materials, school classes, and a troupe who would later perform the show “Around the World: Call of the South Seas” at the resort, for several months.

The *tufuga* eventually erected their *fale* in the same space (the CargoLifter hangar in the East German countryside), in which master craftsmen from other “indigenous cultures” also built their authentic (tangible, real) houses, made from their traditional materials. These exotic architectures (dwarfed by the huge grey techno-dome) house one mode of the virtual between digital flows and place-bound experience. Relying on an intimate reference to “some other place”, this mode of virtuality engenders fantasy (Johnson 81). The resort’s website hosts another: the mediation of its physical environment in a global domain. It not only provides images of the *Fale* in cyberspace but also an account of the Samoan troupe’s performance, at the Berlin *Carnival of Cultures*, on 15 May 2005. For seven hours, they performed in the streets, barefooted and in Samoan costume, while the audience wore raincoats and hats (*Karneval der Kulturen*). This gave rise to the telling of different stories, each from a specific point of view, in Samoa, Germany, and other parts of the world – person-to-person, in printed and digital news media, on the resort’s website, and in blogs.⁶

For Benjamin, storytelling arises out of the experiences of travel to “faraway places,” as much as from knowledge of the “lore of the past” (“The Task of the Translator” 85). Experience (*Erfahrung*) is a continuity-in-difference in the lives of people, which combines time (past) and space (distance).

Etymologically, *Er-fahrung* hints at the need to transport oneself, to travel, to gain wisdom and practical knowledge. These metaphors may make Benjamin’s approach seem nostalgic but, historically and in terms of agency, his concept of mediation is dynamic and relevant. According to Benjamin, a good translation risks the translator’s own language, to be “powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (81); there is a “central reciprocal relationship” of mutual supplementation and renewal between languages (74-5).⁷

If Benjamin thought that “the art of storytelling is coming to an end” (“The Storyteller” 83), the resort gives a new inflection to that idea – “it now seems that everyone is telling stories, and professing the ability to exchange experiences” (Simpson qtd. in Wickman 182). Benjamin, who was troubled by nineteenth century distinctions between “inner lived” and “outer sensory” experience, restored to the latter a quality of embodied exploration of things unknown, but collectively transferable (183). He conceived of a sensuous human comportment to things (phylogenetically prior to conceptual, non-sensuous mediation in language), resting on a mimetic ability to produce and perceive similarities. “Felt knowledge” (*gefühltes Wissen*), is a knowledge that is able to feed not only “on the sensory data taking shape before [one’s] eyes but can possess itself of abstract knowledge – indeed, of dead facts – as something experienced and lived through” (*Arcades* 880). Images, like dreams, both obscure and point to that which cannot be discursively articulated, or actualised in semiotic systems (see Tiedemann 270). A century’s language of images, like its houses, can represent the “dream configuration of its deepest levels of sleep” (*Arcades* 844). Architecture, with its decisive impact on the sensual-supersensual image of social life, is thus “the most important witness of [a century’s] latent mythology” (834).



Dolls at souvenir shop, 2007 Photo: author

The aesthetic experience/ knowledge gleaned from images and things is fundamentally mediated by the human sensorium. Following Simmel, Benjamin noted the impact that changes in the technological world of things in his time had on “the tiny, fragile human body” (“The Storyteller” 84). He believed that the mythical content of successive perceptual worlds (*Merkwelten*) “comes more quickly and more brutally to the fore” the more rapidly they break up (*Arcades* 462). Accelerated change, then, can make visible the correspondences “between the world

of technology and the archaic symbol-world of mythology” (461). The very existence of *Tropical Islands Resort* reflects such rapid change: Au’s idea of bringing the tropics to Germany rests on the technological possibilities of transporting tiny, fragile human bodies, and also things and images, all over the world – physically and virtually.⁸ The blend of virtual and actual streams of objects and information produces, in one sense, a new continuum of space and time: a digital image retrieved in one location can materialise within a short time in another; the resulting thing (in this case, the *fale*) is shipped to yet another location, where it is erected by Samoan master builders. Samoan performers subsequently fly to Germany to perform a raft of different Pacific dances to a German and international public in a defunct aircraft hangar spanning the tropics. (This is truly dazzling. Perhaps, one has to have “really” experienced Apia and Brand to appreciate this blend of realities).

While the scale and speed of this operation are new and different from earlier modes (and will therefore produce different perceptions), in principle, it nevertheless perpetuates similar ventures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, the Frankfurt zoological garden staged four

performances of Samoan troupes in 1896, 1897, 1901 and 1910.⁹ They were advertised in the newspapers as an opportunity to view the “peculiar beauty of paradisiacal islands”, and the “dreamy existence of a completely heterogeneous but ... beautiful human race” (Steffen-Schrade 373). While the performers were “authentic,” the Papase’ea rock, down which the women had to slide into the water, was clearly an imitation (385), as were other elements designed to give the scene exotic authenticity, such as Samoan huts in a “tropical” landscape. The shows were complicated and marred by incidents that speak of profound ignorance, or misunderstandings between those involved in different roles. The potential and desirability of the then available means of transport for bodies was obviously not matched by an equivalent desire and potential to engage with their context. Historical accounts clearly indicate that the Frankfurt translators of Samoan culture into a German context had no intention of being affected by the foreign.

Some individual good intentions notwithstanding, the circumstances surrounding the Frankfurt shows were adverse to good translations and did not stimulate a telling of stories that could open up space for shared discoveries of new meanings. It is likely that the shows were inspired by economically successful exhibitions, in several German cities, of *Naturvölker* (natural peoples) by Karl Hagenbeck, (dealer in wild animals, and later zoo and circus director; Corbey 345). Despite their avowed intention to promote *Bildung* (education), they employed a narrow range of stereotypes to provide mass entertainment, stimulate erotic fantasies, and confirm assumptions of anthropological and social hierarchies. This strategy was closely intertwined with colonial politics: Samoa became a German colony in 1900, and exposing the “new fellow-countrymen” to the German audiences’ gaze and touch was also propaganda.¹⁰ A century later, colonialism has given way to globalisation: thus, *Tropical Islands Resort* was not planned and implemented by a German government, nor a local entrepreneur, but by the Malaysian consortium of *Tanjong Plc* and *Au Leisure Investments Pte Ltd*. Does this make a difference to its politics, compared with nineteenth and twentieth century shows?

The 2005 Samoan performance at *Tropical Islands Resort* was advertised in print and electronic media with similar flavours to those in Frankfurt. Again, misunderstandings and ignorance led to complications and conflict. As a century earlier, venue and staging of events appealed to European erotic and nationalist fantasies (of being technologically and culturally more advanced), provided entertainment, and purported to educate. As then, the transport of bodies (and now also of substantial objects) was not matched by the transport and mediation of a cultural context. Rather than incrementally realising a potential that perhaps cannot be conveyed in a Samoan idiom (see “The Task of the Translator” 80), what was presented involved no mediation but relied on stereotypes a non-Samoan audience was presumed to hold.



Tropical Islands Resort was never just about bringing the tropics physically to Germany, although it did: a *Tropical Rainforest* presents tropical plants, a *Tropical Village*, houses from tropical regions of the earth. Importantly, these objects help to “tell stories.” When visitors first encounter them on site, many will have already read media accounts and/or the stories told on the resort’s website where the Samoan *fale* is described as a “typical Polynesian straw hut,” “a sort of ‘community house’ for several villages. It is particularly large and each of the 28 beautifully carved wooden posts represents one of the participating extended

families" (*Samoa Fale*). The *Tropical Village* includes "authentic houses from 6 tropical regions of the world," which "were constructed on site at *Tropical Islands* by craftsmen from their respective home countries" (*The Tropical Village*). Whatever the marketing drive, the appeal to a perceived loss of "natural tradition" and "paradisiacal innocence" is palpable. It is likely to touch a nerve in any European audience. On the other hand, the claim that the *Fale* is "particularly large," being only 9 meters long (compared to the hangar's 360m), is bound to confirm prejudices about the West's superior understanding and control of life.

Thus, the resort is partly a continuation and realisation of strategies pursued at nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exhibitions, those "places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish" (*Arcades* 7). Arcades, world exhibitions, and performances at zoological gardens foreshadowed today's themed spaces (Roberts 85). They provided a repertoire based on the reduction of nature, history and culture to a standing reserve (Heidegger). Benjamin observed how, in the 1851 World Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, "[l]ightly plumed palms from the tropics mingled with the leafy crown of the five-hundred-year-old elms; and within this enchanted forest the decorators arranged masterpieces of plastic art, statuary, large bronzes, and specimens of other artworks" (*Arcades* 184). Today's marketing of cultural and natural heritage similarly reduces nature and history to leisure experiences; it expresses (and also effects) the mutation of modernism's *historicism* into today's *thematism*, a "progressive transformation of the relics of the past into an ever expanding theme park" (Roberts 89), in which originals become their own replicas. At *Tropical Islands Resort*, the exotic local is uncomfortably blended into the phantasmagoria of a global "[p]rimordial landscape of consumption" (*Arcades* 827), accessible at the price of a ticket and travel that takes only hours.

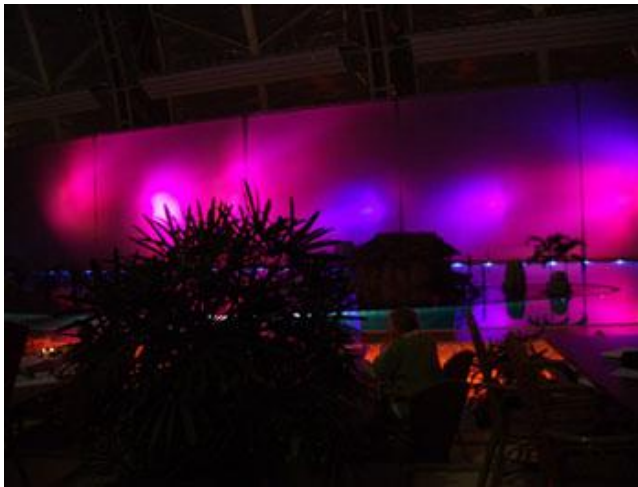
The virtual as potentiality

Rather than as virtualisation through digital technologies, or realisation as simulation, the virtual can be conceived of as potentiality. The way in which spaces are left open to exploration and engagement, or the way in which they are closed and made real/manifest, will allow different degrees of virtuality. Benjamin observed that "[c]oncretion extinguishes thought; abstraction kindles it. Every antithesis is abstract; every synthesis, concrete. (Synthesis extinguishes thought)" (*Arcades* 864). Following this idea, the semblance of concreteness and realism (pursued in many virtual reality forms), the seamless continuum between fantasy and reality, which Benjamin described as a "sleep of the collective" (108), can stand in the way of an awakening "of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been," a break that could lead to the "dissolution of 'mythology' into the space of history" (458).

Not surprisingly then, recent developments in art involving virtual technology eschew the use of digital media as a means of escape into a disembodied techno-fantasy. Char Davies sees them rather as "a means of return, i.e., of facilitating a temporary release from our habitual perceptions and culturally-biased assumptions about being in the world, to enable us, however momentarily, to perceive ourselves and the world around us *freshly*", "as embodied sentient beings immersed in the flow of life through space and time" (see also Hansen 29). *This is possible because the medium's qualities are paradoxical, not seamless and simple. Virtual Reality techniques, as they are used elsewhere (particularly when combined with user interaction through joysticks, gloves or pointers), tend to reinforce a way of being that is based on "mastery, domination and control"* (Davies). There is more than a fleeting metaphorical consonance here with themed resorts, at home or abroad. Over the last 50 years, as long-distance tourism grew massively, turning holidays for many into pilgrimages to sacred sites, these sites were simultaneously "transformed by the power of technology and the power of the image" (Roberts 89-90). Here, too, "originals become over time their own replicas" (89) when, in "the quest for the encounter with the aura of the 'real,' this

experience of the 'real' cannot escape being measured against its image, its Platonic idea as it were". On holiday from reality, "today's spiritual pilgrimages amount to a suspension of disbelief, informed by a willingness to lend credence to sacred illusion" (90-1). This illusion (some derivative of Platonic ideals) is protected by the confinement of Samoan performers within their scene, which prevents them from mingling with their audience unsupervised, to play their role, present their lives, and mimic their world to strangers. The scene is defined by strict if invisible boundaries.

Benjamin stressed the difference between thresholds (border zones) and boundaries. They have different extensions and intensities. The threshold is an indeterminate space, open to contradictory movements. In comparison, a borderline is decisive but poor in potentiality. The way gaps are left intact or obliterated (spaces left open or closed) may also say something important about encounters between tillers of the soil and travelling tradesmen at *Tropical Islands Resort*. In December 2006, the *Tropical Islands Resort* underwent a period of reconstruction. In its initial version, a potential for mutual renewal and supplementation between quite disparate elements derived from various sources could be conceived: the shell of the building (an imposing ruinous trace of a failed high-tech scheme of gigantic proportions); the relationship with its regional context (the Spreewald region, suffering from high unemployment following the restructuring after German 're-unification', and itself relying on the commodification of local culture for economic survival); the resort's relationship with a history of colonisation and historical antecedents in the nineteenth and twentieth century world exhibitions and *Völkerschauen*; its relationship to the metropolis Berlin; and the many elements of tropical cultures (material and performative). At that time, even the affinity between the roof shapes of hangar and *Fale* was visible to attentive observation.



Room for imagination arose precisely where references were incomplete, sketchy, or incongruously juxtaposed. Thus, the various tropical houses were placed on a bare concrete floor, in a way that made them seem like islands themselves. The walk from one house to another, over the almost-non-existing surface, seemed indeed like travel from one island to another, even if bizarrely short.

After the evening performance, when the light show was dimmed to slowly changing colour combinations, the imagination was no longer hampered by specific details. It could

now feed on ephemeral allusions – silhouettes, the play of light reflexes on the water of the *South Sea* water area, the felt presence of others in the same space. These instances of the physically real were reminiscent perhaps of Benjamin's objects in the arcades, "scattered through space as stars" (Sieburth 23), which "might leap forth in constellatory instants to awaken our attention" (Dubow 269).¹¹ The creative potential of the virtual "lies in its capacity to produce things that are not real and even differ in decisive respects from what is (now) real, but that can make us think about the everyday world in new ways" (Bonsdorff §3).

How the world, bodies, and technologies are visually replicated in an image space (*Blickraum*) is also a political question. True, global aesthetic economies involve more and more consumers in excessive expenditure, but they are geographically unevenly distributed. Late capitalism not only depends on world-wide exploitation generally but, specifically, many around *Tropical Islands* cannot afford to visit. For those who do come, the space in which images can be creatively appropriated to project

how things can be otherwise (or, conversely, merely intensify a controlled leisure) has shrunk since the 2006 overhaul. Conceptually, the regular involvement of indigenous performers from the tropics was abandoned. Visitors seemed less interested than expected in “authentic” tropical shows; therefore, this piece of “tropical software” (Dowling; ddp-lbg) was no longer included in the new image. The hardware’s update included a generous application of seemingly handcrafted walls around plants and buildings, the filling-in of previously free space with yet more objects and structures, and the covering of the floor with a concrete imitation of hand-made tiles. This skin, however superficial, has the effect of stopping constellations from moving. The Samoan *Fale*, previously free standing in the middle of the *Tropical Village*, is now fixed in an awkward configuration with a stage (through a raised and paved platform between them, which serves as an eatery and seats the audience of variety shows). While its initially restricted access to the public was elitist, the *Fale*’s unused interior also preserved a mystery.¹² Today, visitors stroll in and out of the *Fale*, hardly taking notice of its space. In contrast, in the Benjaminian project “an always unfinished space and always unfinished image” put “critical thought into motion” (Dubow 270). At the resort, a striving for realism in representation (a common strategy in nineteenth century exhibitions, suggesting a reliable correspondence with the world) pins thoughts down before they can take off.¹³

Virtual and real, potential and actual, are modalities that can be explored through questions of perception and imagination (Bonsdorff §1). In these pairings, the virtual or potential tend to be given greater creative value compared with their opposites. Thus, *Virtual Reality* has been conceptualized as the realm of a liberated body in a virtual space, free of the real and actual. Ironically, this type of virtuality relies on verisimilitude or realism. Artists like Char Davies or Myron Krueger depart from this logic of visual resemblance to provide virtual spaces with a potential of changing how the world presents itself to perception and reflection (Hansen 25ff).



As perceptual modality, the virtual has an aesthetic dimension, which is about “visibilities of ... places and abilities of the body in those places, about the partition of private and public spaces, about the very configuration of the visible and the relation of the visible to what can be said about it” (Rancière, “Comment and Responses” §5). It opens up different aspects of embodied experience and creative imagination which, in rare cases, can become political (Rancière, “Dissenting Words” 124ff.).

Before Benjamin’s time, the panorama and panopticon set up novel regimes of visibility, creating new distinctions between being seen and seeing. In the panopticon, a non-corporeal power confined bodies by subjecting them to a field of visibility through a permanent virtual gaze (Friedberg, “The Mobilized and Virtual Gaze” 398). While the panorama did not mobilize bodies, it “provided virtual spatial and temporal mobility, bringing the country to the town dweller, transporting the past to the present” through the “perfect illusion” of ‘realistic’ views (400). A “mobilized ‘virtual’ gaze” (“not a direct perception but a *received* perception mediated through representation”) subsequently developed in the consumer culture of the Paris arcades and department stores (Friedberg, *Window Shopping* 2). In the twentieth century, it accelerated in the “imaginary *flânerie* through an imaginary elsewhere and an imaginary elsewhere” of cinematic and televisual spectatorship and “changed, in unprecedented ways, concepts of the *present* and the *real*” (3). At *Tropical Islands Resort*, and on its website, the position of the Samoan *Fale* reveals still more regimes of reality (virtual, real, blended). In their panoramic

variety, they raise questions about distance and engagement between the local and global, translatability in digital mediation, and spatio-temporal ruptures and interconnections.

Distance and engagement

Benjamin compares listeners to a story with readers of a novel. Whereas the former are “in the company of the storyteller”, the latter are isolated. In their solitude, the novel’s readers feel an urge to devour, even destroy, the material – as a fire consumes the wooden logs (“The Storyteller” 100). They feed on the novel’s characters to make meaning for themselves, as the strangers’ fate yields a warmth which they can never draw from their own life – warming their shivering lives with a death they read about (101). The storyteller’s listeners, conversely, may find their own experiences fashioned into a multi-layered sensory account. Interconnection and interaction of “soul, eye, and hand ... determine a practice” (108) as the storyteller may let “the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story” (108-9). Thus, storyteller and listeners are affected by the story, just as a good translator lets his own language be affected by a foreign tongue (“Translator” 81). The novel reader’s isolation parallels the loneliness of the modern city-dweller. Always close to crowds of people he does not know by name, “[e]xtraordinary narcissism and self-absorption” are the flip side of his distracted mind which “projects promiscuously onto everything and everyone” (Buck-Morss 128).

“Resident tiller of the soil” and “trading seaman” are “archaic representatives” of two groups holding different knowledges and experiences: local or global (“The Storyteller” 85). Both have stories to tell, but they need a shared space and a shared experience to unfold in them a new potential (86, 91). This appears to have happened during the construction of the houses in the *Tropical Village* in 2004. During the 2005 show “Call of the South Seas,” the voice-over narrating Pacific history may have even made reference to the marvellous, like a storyteller, rather than just supplying explanation (89). However, the “locals” were placed at a small but significant distance from the Samoan travellers, at tables along the *South Sea* beach, as they watched the show on the island while eating their dinner. Some tillers of the soil and travellers from afar working behind the bar, or as cooks and cleaners behind the scenes, may also have told stories to each other. But visitors at *Tropical Islands Resort* are onlookers, like the citizens roaming the world exhibitions. They seem to be panoptic, with a panoramic point of view, and thereby placed in a position to “assign significance and value to the events and characters” (Corbey 362).¹⁴ Thus, the real lives of tillers of the soil and travelling journeymen, the stuff that stories could be made of (“The Storyteller” 94), do not touch. Memories, which could pass on what happens from generation to generation in the string of traditions (98), are not shared. Or so it seems so far.

Re-engagement

Benjamin's stress on virtuality – as translatability and mediation, or mediacy, of experience – highlights how new types, new sensoriums, and new social, political and aesthetic collectives are formed. *Tropical Islands Resort* poses questions about how such new types, relationships and knowledges are given shape in virtual and real streams of reality. Their blending – of exotic architectures and performances inside the techno-dome, and their presentation on digital sites – combines machineries of capture and display. New technologies of vision and old strategies of representation combine to create illusions of authenticity, of unmediated encounters (Corbey, 341, 363). Digital flows and place-bound experience surface at the resort, at its website, and in blogs. But do they create new communities? (The few blogspots on *Tropical Islands Resort* usually get less than 3 comments – with one Samoan exception). Its "target market" is an amorphous collective, truly a mass public in its lack of characteristics, cohesion and form. Mass audiences are commonly deemed passive and reactive and, accordingly, entertainers and instructors are employed to keep visitors amused (to "be-fun" them, *bespassen*, in New-German terminology) – with mixed success. Many prefer to play on the beach with their kids, chat in a café, have a swim without an instructor or, in significant numbers, have extended naps on the deck chairs lining the expansive *South Sea* pool. It seems almost that some section of the masses refuses to be distracted (an attribute Benjamin thought of as characteristic of the mass public) and prefers to get bored. Boredom, notably, is a realm of potentiality: it is, according to Benjamin, not only "the apogee of mental relaxation" but "the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places – the activities that are intimately associated with boredom – are already extinct in the cities" ("The Storyteller" 91). Boredom is also "the threshold to great deeds" (*Arcades* 855). A bored virtual collective, or an undifferentiated mass, may resist efforts by the entertainment industry to refine and multiply its "varieties of reactive behavior" and to prepare it for "the workings of advertising" (201).



January 2006. Photo: author

There may be potential in the virtuality of *Tropical Islands Resort*. While its aesthetics are unlikely to support a Rancièrian politics, there are persistent fissures and gaps in which imagination may develop. There have been, and probably still are, moments of translation which were not unilaterally determined by those whom we expect to tell us stories, and translate for us. According to Rancièr, "politics is an activity of reconfiguration of that which is given in the sensible" ("Dissenting Words" 115). Disturbance of the given can arise by the introduction of a supplement, or a lack, which may widen the "gap in the sensible" and raise questions about "who is qualified to see or say what is given" (124). Whether the mode of virtuality on site at the resort, or on the website, develops into simulation, or leaves open a space of possibility for both tillers of the soil and travelling journeymen, will depend on the presence of moments of rupture and engagement.

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Endnotes

1. Benjamin sought to establish a different historical perspective by studying the afterlife of objects, to unravel history as we know it. His methods are viable in this context if “one accepts that we are already past the early phase of the digital media revolution” (Fold 22). They help us understand our own present by establishing historical connections and linking current to earlier technological, spatial and temporal developments.
2. In this Journal’s call for papers.
3. In German builders’ traditions, from the medieval to the twentieth centuries, craftsmen gained “experience of the world and a world of experience” through travelling (Leslie 5).
4. This is a different view of the virtual from Baudrillard’s, which sees in the virtual a final step of realization, as simulation (see Zhang).
5. The resort, as site, seems “real enough,” the only clearly obvious sign of digital technologies being a wristband with electronic chip visitors are given on entry. All monetary transactions, from consumption to entrance to certain parts of the site, are effected with it.
6. The blend of real and virtual streams may have become manifest in a change on the webpage for the Samoan *fale*: after 29 December 2006 (my last saved version of the page until March 2007), a link to the STA website was added. On 15 January 2007, I discussed the participation of the Samoan contributors to *Tropical Islands Resort* with the essentially sympathetic marketing manager of the resort. I suspect that there may be a connection since none of the pages of other houses have a link to their “origins,” to date.
7. Language and translation do not merely mediate a “non-verbally conceived ‘content’ between two speakers” but “the medium first *produces* what it seemingly ‘mediates’.” (Menninghaus 310)

8. Ironically, the transport of huge loads by airships, to markets anywhere in the world, was precisely the goal of the failed CargoLifter venture that later provided the dome for *Tropical Islands Resort*. For an intriguing account of affinities between CargoLifter hangar and the resort, including an interesting combination of images, see Jacob.
9. The last performance troupe was led by Tamasese Le Alofi II, a high ranking Samoan dignitary, who was unpleasantly surprised to find on arrival that his troupe was going to perform in a zoological garden (Steffen-Schrade 384). The entertainment, which attracted on some days up to 5000 visitors, was “dignified” by claims regarding the performances’ scientific and educational value.
10. At Hagenbeck’s *Völkerschauen*, the “supply of natives closely followed the colonial conquests” (Corbey 345). From a position of cultural and imperial superiority, Samoans were explored by the “legitimate” interest of science, and the less legitimate interests of, particularly male, visitors (known and tolerated by the organisers). Contacts between audience and performers varied, but they were almost invariably fraught and led to conflicts between the troupe and the organisers (Steffen-Schrade 372).
11. They may have also served as *points de caption* (Lacan’s quilting points) to temporarily stabilise relationships of meaning, to help setting the process of imagination in motion while providing normality (see Herzogenrath).
12. According to Rancière, Benjamin held that “the arcade of outdated commodities holds the promise of the future” only if it is closed, “made unavailable, in order that the promise may be kept” (Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution” 144).
13. Representation nevertheless remains distinguishable from the reality it claims to represent. Indeed, certainty of representation relies on the very “difference in time and displacement in space” separating “the representation from the real thing” (Mitchell 501), which is ensured by the exhibition’s distancing of observer and object.
14. See <http://www.my-tropical-islands.com/#>: “Tropical Islands virtuell 360?”

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