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People on the move: how museums de-marginalize migration

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ABSTRACT

Newly set-up social heritage museums have attempted to counter the anonymous and stereotyped presentations of migrants in the public sphere. Drawing on the tension between media and museum representations of human mobility, this paper offers a multimodal analysis of de-marginalization strategies in museum discourses of migration. We argue that in contrast to contemporary news media and their predominantly “exclusionary” discourse (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2018. “The Mediatization and the Politicization of the ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Europe.” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16 (1-2): 1–14), museums portray (e)migration enthusiastically, with varying degrees of sophistication, with strategies to generate involvement, empathy, and pleasurable experience. Historical actors and events are thereby stretched as well as compressed and essentialized into a phenomenon of people of all times everywhere. In this process of de-marginalization, however, museums and visitors also pay a price of differentiation and authenticity. We suggest that this mainly happens under the pressure of neoliberal economic conditions and the exigencies of the experience economy.

KEYWORDS

migration; heritage museums; multimodal analysis; normalization; marginalization

Introduction

In the public domain today, legacy news media and museums are both prominent and highly visible mediatized institutions. They narrate, commemorate, visualize, and editorialize historical events, suggesting ways of seeing the “other” and understanding social reality. Moreover, they inevitably take some part in discursive strategies changing “the norms of wider social, political and economic conduct”, involving “new norms of viewing and describing individual and social actors”, thus effectively normalizing “modes of ideological behavior coined by populism and neoliberalism and their politics of exclusion” (Krzyżanowski 2020, this issue). We will argue, however, that in representing human mobility, these institutions show very different degrees of aligning with normalization discourses. Whereas legacy news media are at the core of the normalization of exclusionary representations, heritage museums, mostly (and equally) operating under a neoliberal regime, seem to assume those representations in their discursive strategies. In doing so, museum discourses can thus be seen as a kind of “response”, a post-normalization or counter-discourse if you will, designed to generate empathy and positive

attitudes to human mobility. The logic of the experience economy, as we will show, adds some ambivalence to this enterprise as it both enables such empathy and commodifies the migrant experience at the same time. Such ambivalence is, however, not unique to experiential economies, but should be seen more broadly as inherent to neoliberalism (Holborow 2007) and consumer culture (Dean 2009).

Indeed, under conditions of global capitalism, museums have transcended their elite status and have become part of a thriving cultural and destination heritage tourism movement (Bearman and Geber 2008). Understanding how museums mediate migration can throw into relief “wider political dynamics and policies on immigration in contemporary Europe” (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2018, 4). Set against a borderline public discourse that normalizes refugee migration and its actors as (undeserving) fortune seekers, passive victims, and politically undesirable if not threatening (KhosraviNik 2009; Santa Ana 2015; Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017), this paper shows how heritage museums portray migration as a lived and (re)liveable reality, generating a post-normalized, anti-borderline discourse if you will that de-marginalizes mass migration in an attempt to offer pleasurable and memorable visitor experiences.

Migration flows in the news

While our focus will be mainly on discursive strategies employed by heritage museums, we begin by very briefly outlining how migration flows to Europe have recently been reported in the news. We realize that news discourse is but one strand of a wider public discourse on migration but one that both reflects and shapes this wider discourse nonetheless, especially regarding immigration. In broad strokes, research on migration discourse has documented how the socially weak are marginalized or otherwise negatively perceived (Giullem 2015). For instance, in their analysis of the Syrian refugee crisis in news photos, Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017, 1163) chart “the various performances of responsible agency, which, by recurring news imagery of the ‘crisis’, act as forms of ‘moral education.’” They analyze headline images from a selection of Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Irish and British newspapers and offer a typology of visibilities and the implied forms of civic agency and responsibility towards refugees. Their findings identify the refugee as an ambivalent figure in news media: images of powerless vulnerability on the one hand, and of agentive malevolence on the other, cast the refugee as “either a sufferer or a threat, yet never a human” (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1165). In their roles as voiceless victims, two representational processes stand out: *massification*, i.e. images of “indistinguishable individuals” (1164), and *passivisation*, i.e. people depicted as “bodies-in-need, deprived of food, clothes or shelter” (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1164). Contrastively, when seen as evil-doers, refugees are attributed sovereignty and malevolence. As the authors observe, “the attribution of sovereignty (...) construes refugees as active and hopeful individuals rather than destitute bodies, and, related, the attribution of malevolence, which defines this sovereignty narrowly as the refugees’ will to harm ‘us’” (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1164). Similarly, in their large-scale analysis of the verbal interpretational lenses or frames Austrian newspaper media were using in their reporting of migrant flows during that period, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017, 1757) found that the media mainly “employed established, stereotyped narratives of security threat, economisation, and – to a lesser extent – victimisation”. They also note that these results are similar to what was found in previous studies of

discourses on migration in Western media and conclude that the “persistence of stereotyped interpretations of refugee and asylum issues, even in times of major humanitarian and political crises” (1763) is unlikely to contribute to welcoming and inclusionary policies. On the contrary, the construction of migrants and refugees as dangerous, deviant or threatening has led to a growing conflation of immigration control and crime control (Guia, van der Woude, and van der Leun 2011; van der Woude, Barker, and van der Leun 2017). In this process, the news media may not always have been the driving force, but nevertheless play a supportive role (Brouwer, van der Woude, and van der Leun 2017).

Of course, as could be expected in a diversified mediascape and over time, the dominant representations of migrants and migration in the news are interspersed with other, more affective presentations and responses in the public sphere. In 2015, the news photograph of a young boy’s washed-up body on the beach in Bodrum, Turkey was taken up by the public and tweeted around the globe 30,000 times in 12 h, reaching the screens of 20 million people (Prøitz 2018). Almost overnight, the image shifted the Twitter debate on faceless migrants to one on individualized refugees fleeing from war and terror (Prøitz 2018). On a far more modest scale, but fairly consistently over the past decade and a half, newly set-up social heritage museums have also attempted to counter the anonymous and stereotyped presentations of migrants in the public sphere. Let us turn to that now.

Migration museums

In the past couple of decades, a new interest in social and migration history as well as new conceptions of multiculturalism led to the emergence of immigration museums in Canada, Australia and the USA (Baur 2009). The successful launch of *Ellis Island Immigration Museum* in 1990, moreover, was very influential in the development of half a dozen mirror museums on the European mainland (Verreyke 2011; Beelaert 2018), memorializing the “Age of Mass Migration” (Hatton and Williamson 1998) transatlantic migration flows of more than 55 million people from port cities in Europe to the New World. Between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century they made their way to North or South America, often after a long and difficult journey overland from Eastern and Central Europe, often also under circumstances of economic and political duress. Politically these heavy emigration flows from Europe have curiously been regarded as fairly unproblematic, with narratives frequently foregrounding the contributions of expatriates to their new homelands (Gouriévidis 2010, 79–88, 2014, 5). The emergence of the new emigration museums in Europe was embedded in a context of progressing globalization, increased social and metropolitan diversity, urban regeneration, and also intensifying mass migration. Whereas the political context evolved in such a way that mainstream media and politicians have considered refugee and immigration flows problematic, heritage emigration museums have paradoxically thrived. No longer the elite institutions of nation building, they mostly operate in a system of joint sponsorship by (local) governments, private donations and corporate interests. Firmly embedded, moreover, in destination cultural tourism and urban regeneration programs (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Message 2006; Gouriévidis 2010, 2014), they have had to become more inclusive and attractive to a wide audience. Of course, curators of new migration museums have been aware of the thematic links between their historical collections and contemporary

realities. As voiced by the conclusions of the first Expert Meeting on Migration Museums organized by UNESCO and IOM in Rome (2006), they have increasingly explored the role of the emigration museum in promoting contemporary migrant integration and cultural diversity. Convinced that “migration is inherently linked to the evolution of European societies” and critical of the phenomenon that “the memory of past migrations as a constituent component of European identity has often been ignored or has even been consciously downplayed in order to serve the (erroneous) dominant idea of the homogeneous nation state” (Beelaert 2018, 110), they have designed displays with physical objects, ego-documents, photographs and digital files often tied together by personal stories to deconstruct negative perceptions of migration (Vinson 2007; Verreyke 2011; Beelaert 2018) and to link migration history to positive social change.

We direct our attention to three emigration museums in Belgium and Germany which opened in the years 2005, 2007 and 2013 respectively, in historically relevant locations in the ports of Bremerhaven (*Deutsches Auswandererhaus Bremerhaven*), Hamburg (*BallinStadt*) and Antwerp (*Red Star Line Museum*), which together symbolize and remember the passage of more than 14 million people through these ports alone. We argue that against the backdrop of contemporary news media and their predominantly “exclusionary” discourse (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, and Wodak 2018), these museums portray (e)migration enthusiastically, with varying degrees of sophistication, with strategies to generate involvement, empathy, and pleasurable experience. Historical actors and events are thereby stretched as well as compressed and essentialized into a phenomenon of people of all times everywhere. In this process of de-marginalization, however, museums and visitors also pay a price of differentiation and authenticity. We suggest that this mainly happens under the pressure of neoliberal economic conditions and the exigencies of the experience economy. The specific research questions this study takes as its guidelines and the manner in which we have tried to answer them are explained in the next section.

Research questions, data and methods

Deutsches Auswandererhaus in Bremerhaven (from now on referred to as DAH Bremerhaven), *BallinStadt* in Hamburg (henceforward BallinStadt) and *Red Star Line Museum* in Antwerp (RSL Antwerp) all set out to memorialize and narrate their share of mass migration events that took place roughly between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, and to provide present-day museum visitors with an agreeable experience in the process. In this paper, we investigate how the institutions represent the events to achieve their goals, and in the second instance, how these representations compare to representations of migration in the mainstream media today. The data collected mainly by the first author between 2015 and 2018 cover a wide semiotic range including (auto)ethnographic fieldnotes of (repeated) visits and photographs of museum displays, museum website pages, museum publications for visitors comprising brochures, floorplans and museum guides. We triangulated those data with content posted on the museums’ social media pages and visitors’ reviews on the travel website TripAdvisor (mainly till 2016). The table below shows how the data thus roughly divide into three categories, according to varying degrees of mediation and authorship (Goffman 1981): (Table 1)

Table 1. Overview of data used.

Authorship	DAH Bremerhaven (opened 2005)	Ballinstadt (opened 2007)	RSL Antwerp (opened 2013)
Observational activities	Fieldwork observations of visits & photographs of displays		
Museum	Website pages https://dah-bremerhaven.de/	Website pages https://www.ballinstadt.de/	Website pages https://www.redstarline.be/nl Curator's museum guide
Museum and visitors	Brochures Social media owned & managed by museum (Facebook)	Brochures Social media owned & managed by museum (Facebook)	Brochures Social media owned & managed by museum (Facebook)
Visitors	eWOM (Tripadvisor)	eWOM (Tripadvisor)	eWOM (Tripadvisor)

In the first batch of data, we included field notes about and photographs of representational displays inside the museums, mainly gathered in 2015¹ and later supplemented with additional visits to DAH and RSL until 2018. The displays comprise curatorial text, (reproductions of) historical documents including passenger lists and other shipping company documents, personal letters, spoken reproductions of ego-documents, all sorts of visuals including video, photographs, graphs, maps, paintings and physical objects such as suitcases and liner fittings, accompanied or supplemented by sound elements which all work together to generate an on-site experience of the museum. The field notes occasionally also recorded our affective responses. The way in which the elements of the displays work together is carefully planned by the museums. All three are so-called “narrative museums” (Edkins 2003, 153 ff, Sherman 2016), which means that the displays are arranged according to a master story line that the visitor is carefully guided or “choreographed” through (Reeves 2018, 221). We will return to this in more detail lower. Our focus is mainly on the permanent, core, exhibition in all three museums, even though all of them have temporary, associated exhibitions and activities, which do not take up a constitutive part of the main narrative. These temporary exhibitions will therefore be referred to only in their function in the museum as a whole. In a second move, we also scrutinized the museums’ own communication beyond the displays, mainly aimed at visitors not necessarily in the museum, including the museum website pages² and printed materials such as brochures, books and floorplans. Finally, we checked the museums’ Facebook pages allowing for some edited and managed visitor comments, and studied a considerable set of visitor-generated comments on TripAdvisor including 2015 (Pelsmaekers and Rollo 2016).

Drawing on a linguistic anthropological perspective (Agha 2005; Blommaert 2007; Wortham and Reyes 2015) we have analyzed how the narrated events index relevant contexts of likely or otherwise preferred interpretation and through consecutive cycles of multimodal analysis we show how the narrated characters, migrants, are voiced and how visitors and migrants are positioned in the various instances of semiosis during a physical or virtual museum visit. To facilitate the report of the analysis and to deal with the visual aspects of the multimodal representations on different levels, we loosely use the four distinctions made by Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) *Visual Grammar*: referential meaning, modality, composition and interaction. Referential meaning has to do with a recognition of what is represented based on the viewer’s practical experience, taking into account conventions and technical affordances of the medium. Modality refers to the degree to which

a visual appears credible in a naturalistic sense. Visual images can represent people, places and objects as if they are real, or as if they are not – “as though they are imaginings, fantasies, caricatures, etc.” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 156). Composition is the arranging of elements, whether these are people, objects, diagrams, either in or on a semiotic space which can range from a page or a canvas to a museum as a whole. Interactive meaning indicates relationships with the viewer. In photographs, for instance, represented individuals may look directly at the viewer in close-up as if in an attempt to “make contact” with them, to “establish an (imaginary) relation with them” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001, 145), while images can obviously also keep the viewer at a distance.

Reference: time frames and migration flows

On a referential level and in the physical museums, groups of displays in all three emigration museums roughly cover three time categories: the historical “core” category narrating the local share of 19th-twentieth century emigration, a more recent time period of migration, not necessarily related to the precise location (for instance in a temporary event or exhibition³) and in the case of RSL Antwerp, also a “universal” span that stretches from the beginnings of humanity to contemporary times all over the world. We will discuss further how the composition of these groups of displays in the museum as a whole is meaningful. On the webpages, DAH Bremerhaven and RSL Antwerp also have substantial dedicated sections to time frames and migration flows beyond the core category: DAH Bremerhaven features a “Sammlung und Forschung” (collection and research) section referring to “300 years of emigration and immigration” in Germany, with migration claimed to be an indelible part of German society. Another section is dedicated to “Studio Migration” with information about ongoing projects and visitor events such as debates on migration under the motto “Angst in Neugierde verwandeln” (changing fear into curiosity).

In the core exhibitions, occasional reference is made to group nationalities. All three museums associate with ports that attracted people from all over North-West and Central Europe and many emigrants were therefore only transiting through the country and port city (cf. the contemporary term “transit migrant”). The museums mostly background the group approach in their references to people, in favor of a more individual, narrative approach. DAH Bremerhaven and RSL Antwerp systematically stage the stories of biographically identified people, sometimes in episodes, activated by the visitors or not, throughout the museum and/or in summaries on the website. These stories include interpretations of motives, often set in a wider historical context of environmental, political or economic pressures. They cover a wide range of people and a whole spectrum of biographical pre-and post-stories. In Ballinstadt, the storylines are linked to social types (farmer, schoolgirl etc.), while the most specifically biographical information is about the man in whose name the museum was set up, Albert Ballin. As the director general of the *Hamburg-Amerikanische Packetfahrt-Actien-Gesellschaft* (HAPAG) he realized the purpose-built *Emigration Halls* (accommodation for passengers waiting to be shipped) in 1901, which the museum emphasizes was a model for the rest of Europe, where many “transit” migrants had to rely on inadequate, unsanitary and overpriced hotels or goodwill of the local population during their wait for departure.

Modality: reduced realism, atmospherics, and peoplescapes

Modality, or the question of how communication relates to the factual, is a paradoxical and complex category in the three museums. Borrowing from linguistics, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 155) refer to “low modality” if the sign is understood as less factual, and “high modality” if there are cues for high credibility. Even though there is a factual historical component, it is clear that the dominant display modes are that of reduced realism. Genuine historical material objects entextualized in a museum are already removed from reality as the visitor knows it (cf. Foucault’s ((1967) 1998) heterotopia). Here, historical and reconstructed objects are atmospheric as well as mimetic. Moreover, apart from document reproductions, photographs and some fittings and equipment from first class ship compartments, the collection of historical objects is small as few of them would have been precious enough to preserve from the 19th-early 20th centuries.

Striking in all three museums are the very large purpose-made objects, installations and atmospherics (scenes featuring ships, quays, manikins, animals and the like) combined with audio-forms of so-called augmented reality: sounds superimposed on theatrical displays that should give the visitor a more “realistic” experience of what is obviously no longer real. What is sometimes called a “faithful” reconstruction is thoroughly emblematic and essentializing. In DAH, for instance, the second room of the permanent exhibition (“Abschied” – farewell) features a reconstructed quay including the huge bow of a ship, in reduced light, with life-size manikins wearing different period dress and attributes spanning the 1830–1955 era (Figure 1). A voice describes different emotions emigrants go through at the moment of saying goodbye (ambition, doubt, hope, fear etc.) while



Figure 1. Room 2: Abschied in DAH.

excerpts from emigrant letters are read. Voices are heard in different languages, while other, non-human sounds are meant to suggest different activities (like loading and moving goods) on the quay. However, anything that might be too disagreeable in the multi-sensory perception of the representation (bodily harm, dirt, smells, awful temperatures etc.) is omitted or obscured.

The museum buildings, which are meant to be part of the display, are also equivocal in terms of credible historical buildings. Ballinstadt and RSL Antwerp are only still somewhat recognizable as historical buildings from specific angles outside, since both were thoroughly reconstructed, inside and outside, to qualify as attractive present-day museums. Contemporary, often striking parts were added to the outside (such as a lookout “tower” in RSL Antwerp, mimicking a ship’s steam chimney), or new museum buildings were designed altogether. DAH’s new buildings near the historical shipping company’s offices allude to ship sails. Their presentation in three large photos on the museum homepage gives them an unreal, dreamlike quality. The conditions of reduced light and golden artificial shimmer set at a quay without much human activity or even normal clutter make it seem posh and festive but removed from daily reality. The presence of an historical sailing ship, sails down, sitting with its rear side to the viewer in almost perfectly still water further underlines the other-worldly character of the scene (see [Figure 2](#)). The angle from which the building was photographed displays its powerful size against a navy sky. This gold and navy color theme, reminiscent of golden stripes on a navy officer’s uniform, returns on the other website pages.

Remarkable for the museum website pages is also the representation of people, which largely fall in either of two categories, visitor or museum object (including migrants, special guests or performers). Notably RSL Antwerp and DAH make a point of showing museum visitors on the highest-level, most accessible website pages. Recognizable from a realistic and present-day setting inside the museum (high modality), they are typically gazing away from the photographer, absorbed as they seem to be in what the museum has to offer. Strikingly too, the people featuring in the photos predominantly look removed from present-day background of immigration: predominantly they are white families or older people, seemingly middle-class, not representative of a super-diverse urban reality as we know it.⁴ The presence and repetition of this pattern has consequences for who can align with this suggested image of the visitor and more pertinently who cannot. Migrant photos, on the other hand, are often black-and-white (low modality) because of obvious older techniques, and even those more contemporary and in color differ by presentation from the visitor photos. In the migrant photo, the represented person is mostly facing the viewer and posing – as they would do in family snapshots or even official institutional photos. Kress & Van Leeuwen have termed them “demand” portraits (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 118). In the museum displays and on the web pages they are typically of individuals, family groups, not visibly engaged in any activity but appealing to the viewer for interaction (see lower).

Composition: journeys reenacted

Message (2006, 604) observes that “a certain homogeneity exists amongst new museums; they appear visually similar and they share a common approach to representing material culture and storytelling”. In all three museums, the main storyline of people journeying

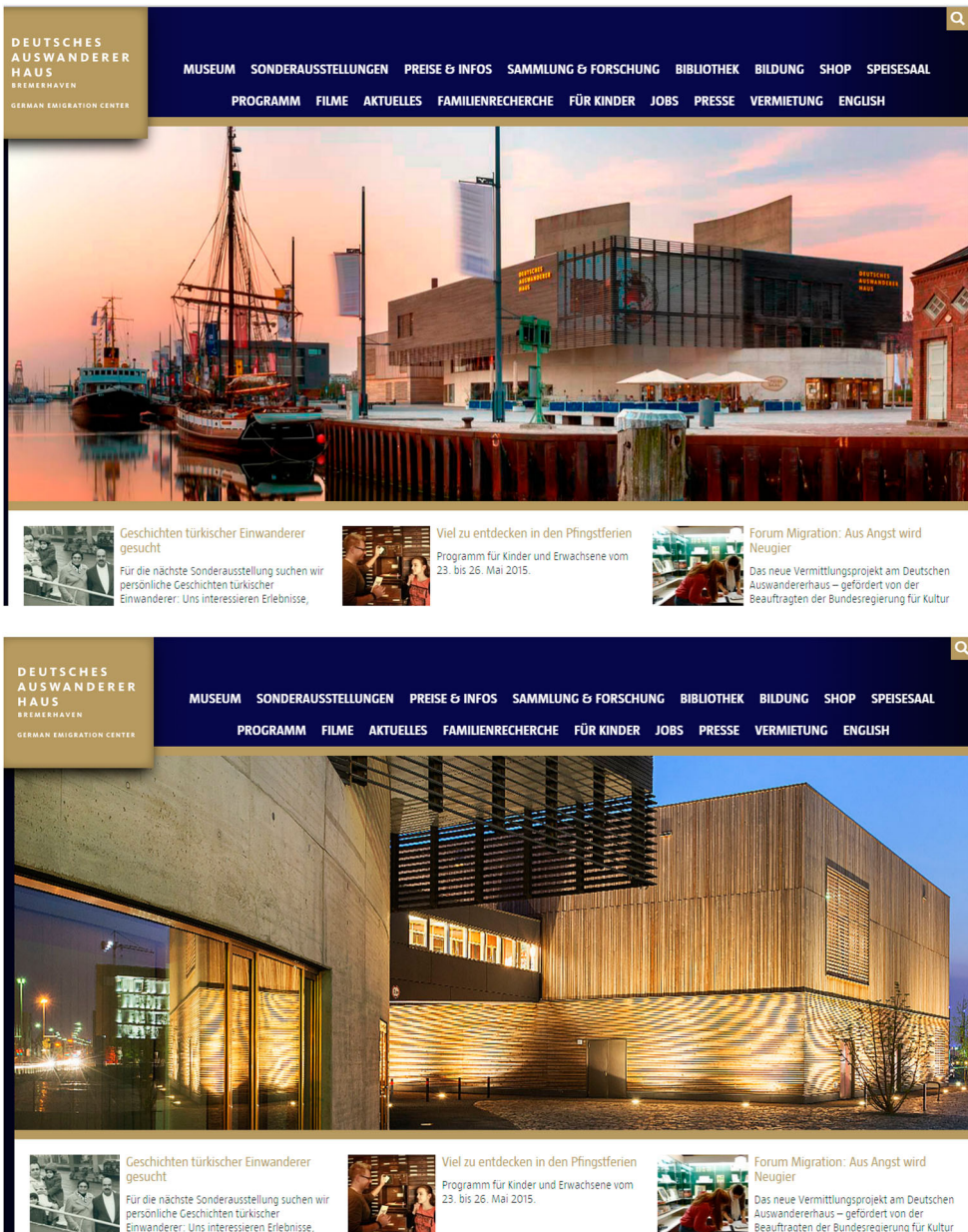


Figure 2. DAH Bremerhaven homepage visual.

from home to a place in the New World, passing through the liner premises, is mirrored in the sequence of the thematic displays. The visitor is made to “travel” through the thematic halls in analogy to typical stages of an historical emigration journey.

The sequence and groupings of the displays also suggest what curators have considered more central and peripheral in the museum, but as the path is linear rather than circular, beginnings can have a powerful effect. In RSL Antwerp, the main thematic journey is preceded by a universalizing “always on the move” section, showing and

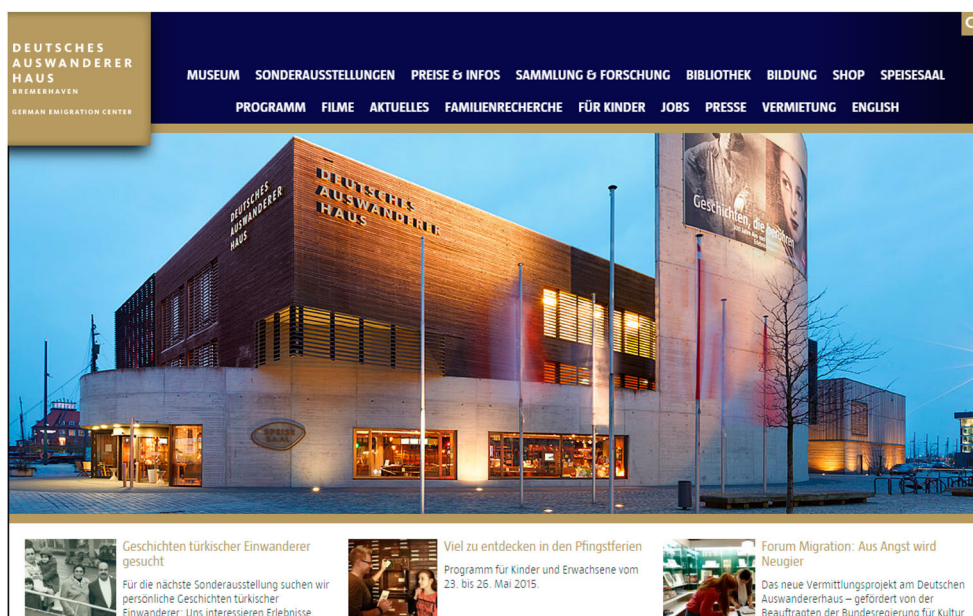


Figure 2. Continued.

explaining by means of many examples how migration for a wide variety of motives was always part of human history. This effectively frames the events narrated in the core exhibition as part of a continuing human endeavor to travel where life holds the promise of improvement. After the central part memorializing the stories of preparations and journey to New York, the visitor is ready for a final section with personal stories of contemporary immigrants in the city, from inside as well as outside of Europe, and an invitation and facilities for the visitor to contribute their own stories. This leads to the almost paradoxical situation that the substantial core exhibition is sandwiched by displays that take the attention away from the historical. RSL curator Bram Beelaert recently wrote about his ambition and project to not just safeguard local history, but to build a substantial and genuinely participatory repository of contemporary migration histories to be conveyed to the public in 2021, on the 70th anniversary of the United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees (Beelaert 2018, 111). In DAH Bremerhaven the core section is supplemented with an additional, easily accessible but separate purpose-built wing to accommodate the museum's permanent exhibition on immigration into Germany in the 1960s and 1970s. It is smaller and more schematic as well as atmospheric than the main exhibition, and visitors are given the option to exit the building before this part starts. Whereas the visitor gets a juxtaposition of (many) identified and identifiable but historically disparate and dramatically abbreviated stories in RSL Antwerp along the museum itinerary, DAH Bremerhaven visitors are handed two "identity cards", one for an emigrant and one for an immigrant, with some biographical information about the historical figures they represent. These cards then allow the visitor to activate more information through electronic readers in the course of the museum itinerary. If one of the cards does not work, it is exchanged for another, equally arbitrary selection from the pool.

In Ballinstadt, there is a stark contrast between the stereotypical stories of millions represented by sound files and wooden manikins, and the amount of detail given to Albert Ballin, the legendary HAPAG manager. In the museum itinerary, the reconstruction of Albert Ballin's office occupies a large central and atmospheric space. The website pages honor him with multiple portraits, biographical details and tributes on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his death, which is specified as caused by suicide at the breakdown of the German empire after World War I.

Interaction: pleasurable, sanitized visitor experiences

Clearly, to different degrees, the three museums aim to do more than represent narrated events, and actively work to draw in the visitor and make them an active participant in the narrating event (Wortham and Reyes 2015). Through their representational, modal and compositional policies the museums collapse time categories and reshape ("quasify") the museum spaces to suggest something other than they are – accessible ship hulls, train stations, and so forth (cf. Beardsworth and Bryman 1999). In the same move, they are appealing to visitors to participate, sometimes as if they are actors in a theatrical piece, and then again as readers and spectators. On its homepage RSL Antwerp promises an interesting travel experience: "The Red Star Line Museum. An eventful journey in the footsteps of the emigrants" (Figure 3), while Ballinstadt expresses it even more forcefully in the imperative form:

Gehen Sie auf eine spannende Reise und erleben Sie die Ein- und Auswanderungsgeschichte über vier Epochen hinweg im Auswanderermuseum BallinStadt Hamburg. In insgesamt drei Häusern auf 2.500 qm begleiten Sie Menschen mit all ihren Wünschen und Träumen, die sie auf ihren Weg in eine neue Heimat mitnahmen

(Take an eventful trip and experience the fascinating immigration and emigration history of over four eras at the Emigration Museum Ballinstadt. In three halls on 2,500 square meters you will accompany people with all the wishes and dreams they took with them on their way to their new *home* – translation and italics ours), and DAH joins in with "Mit der ganzen Familie eine Zeitreise unternehmen ..." (to take a journey through time with the whole family). Visitors can "hear" emigrant stories read by actors, or city noises of the time, enter a ship, enter a replica of Grand Central Station in New York or sit on benches supposedly in the train from the Ukrainian border to Antwerp and much more, all in a state-of-the-art, pleasant and agreeable environment. They can also look up family records in the museums' shared data bases or contribute their own stories to the museum repository. DAH and RSL Antwerp encourage visitors to contribute their own stories and photos through the website or on-site channels. The solicited stories may be about specific historical periods, or about migration in general, or even about immigrants keeping in touch with their home country. Some of these are then published on the web pages. The museums' Facebook page allows visitors to post comments and photos, even though they get managed and sanitized by the museum.

Visitors are also encouraged to get involved through the museums' use of language. Not only do the museums boast bilingual German and English text inside the museum and on the website (Ballinstadt and DAH), or even a (partially) quadrilingual website (RSL Antwerp), everywhere the curatorial text has been tailored to non-expert visitors.



AANRADERS



Figure 3. Homepage RSL Antwerp promises an interesting travel experience: “The Red Star Line Museum. An eventful journey in the footsteps of the emigrants”.

This was most consistently done by RSL Antwerp, which uses simple language in the local variety of Dutch, while storylines and wording resonate with human interest as well as migrant reports in local mainstream news media. RSL Antwerp’s brief version of Abram Spiwak’s story is a good example. Prefaced, on the website, as one of the stories by “a migrant who had the courage to leave everything behind and to move in search of a better future” the narrative is presented as a love story (“in search of his beloved”) and framed by comments on the universality of the migrant experience:

Illegal refugees are a phenomenon of all times. Not all Red Star Line passengers arrived in Antwerp with the required documents. Now as well as then family members pay huge sums to human traffickers to buy their beloved a safe journey to freedom. (our translation)

In this particular case, agency in the story is mixed and attributed to the main character (“decided to travel”) as well as other agents (family, human traffickers, The US government). The appeal to the reader is made by making reference to a touching and tragic personal story involving loved ones lost and found; the terminology resonates with familiar topics in the press today, such as legal identification, human trafficking, charity, (“compassion of strangers”), immigration laws & quotas. The moral of the story is clear too – “illegal” migration may be necessary for survival (in the long term). An accompanying audio file in a first-person narrative speaking the local variety of Dutch, and a photo of a friendly-looking young man in a suit looking at the viewer makes the appeal to the

audience complete. The young man who had to bribe his way through border control to survive and find his beloved speaks in the museum visitor's own voice.

Involvement of the audience is extended far beyond the traditional role of the museum. Beside websites and social media platforms, the museums also feature (themed) restaurants, shops, and make some of their space available to private functions or exhibitions. Links are made with local education initiatives and special educational documents and programs are set up, at various levels. In DAH there is an (e)migration research center, and DAH as well as RSL put out their own academic/scholarly publications.

Discussion

The representational policies in the migration museums are aligned with the literature on the new museology. Complex, drawn-out and possibly unsettling historical events have been made accessible, converted into "heritage", and commodified, sanitized and packaged for easy consumption (Hewison 1987). Moreover, this consumption is no longer presented as an activity for its own sake, but as a form of "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud 2002), whereby the exhibition seems to vie for attention with prestigious "starchitect"-designed or -altered buildings and their facilities (Smith and Richards 2013, 3). All three migration museums have thus become tourist destinations, and, perhaps of necessity, operate in the so-called experience paradigm (Pine II and Gilmore 1999, Chen and Chen 2010), assuming that creating value in the consumer economy is about staged experience and theming (Carbone and Haeckel 1994). By creating the atmosphere of a boat, for instance, through lay-out, objects, colors, pictures, noises, music and other atmospherics, audiences are encouraged to respond emotionally and perceive the space in a way that is orchestrated and controlled by the organization. It also requires a (meta)narrative, such as "the journey" (in the footsteps of the migrants, or through time) to impose coherence, and it infuses mundane objects with meaning beyond their immediate value or use, which is useful if authentic historical objects are scarce. It is in this sense that museum discourses on immigration display a duality: they effectively respond to prevailing, wider public discourses on (im)migration while simultaneously fulfilling their new-found social roles as cultural industries.

The widespread use of theming in museums is often accompanied by other phenomena, the whole of which has been described as "Disneyization" (Bryman 1999, 2004) and which has been observed to varying degrees in museums for decades (Kalin 2016). This is a process whereby the principles underlying the operation of Disney theme parks are applied to other areas of society, including the interlocking of diverse institutional spheres (the museum exhibition, restaurant, shop, events, private functions, library etc.), the growing importance of merchandizing (museum-branded products of all kinds feature in the museum shops) and performative labor, which means that staff are increasingly involved in the theming activity, such as cooking themed meals in DAH and Ballinstadt. However negative the term Disneyization may seem, visitors' perceptions of experiential quality in the context of heritage tourism have been shown to be related to a sense of involvement, peace of mind and educational benefit (Chen and Chen 2010).

Doubtlessly, in their attempt to create a glossy, pleasurable and educational visitor experience, and by suggesting that a visitor can relive some of the historical truth (which individual's truth, by the way?) the three emigration museums have trivialized

what must have been traumatic experiences for many people over a long period of time, and they have relished in it too. DAH (Museum of the Year 2007) is grand in what it does, and it is no coincidence that the museum is part of a complete museum park around the old docks in Bremerhaven, where institutions like it vie for attention. On the other hand, beyond their main “edutainment” exhibition, each museum has an additional set of representations. RSL Antwerp, for instance, published a collection of essays by historians, urbanists and sociologists that puts the main display into perspective. DAH has a library and research center that employs and publishes academic and educational materials on migration on a regular basis; it also organizes lectures, workshops and, reflexively, expert debates on questions of representation in a museum (Studio Migration); its website features an online questionnaire on forced migration after the first World War. This may qualify Kalin’s (2016, 150) claim, therefore, that once Disneyization and its trivializing corollaries have infiltrated in the museum, a post-political landscape is created where social issues are “concealed, neglected, parodied, sanitized and/or quickly forgotten while continuing on unchallenged and unchanged”.

More fundamentally, it could be argued that this kind of museum only helps to reinforce the dehistoricizing constitution of an “(im)migrant” or “refugee” category, which Balibar (1988) and Malkki (1996) see as oppressive and buttressing inequality. In spite of the individualized and emblematic stories the museums offer, the oppositional representations in the museums’ images of visitors versus migrants could be just another symptom of that broader problem. The practical consequence of belonging to such a category today, they say, is the partial or complete disappearance of historical or political rights of democratic participation and authority to speak in one’s own name. In a context of growing transnational capital mobility and the emergence of (ethnic) nationalism, which raises bars against the free movement of people or the international mobility of workers (but not capital), a self-protective reflex from economically powerful groups and their political affiliates leads to the restraint of progressive democratic rights. Citizenship, therefore, needs to remain limited, and the international class of workers has to be divided into citizens and non-citizens (Balibar 1988). Inside the migration museum world, as well, critical voices have been heard. On the occasion of the opening of the French *Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration* in Paris in 2007, the editor-in chief of *Museum International*, a UNESCO journal, pointedly asked the question whether “the plethora of museum projects on migration reflect an attempt on the part of the public authorities to bypass the issue under the guise of culture and so ignore it politically [...]” (Vinson 2007, 4).

In spite of these possible criticisms and if we agree that normalization yields borderline discourse that galvanizes extremist ideas (Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017), then we can safely say that the museums we examined are spaces where such positions are assumed as well as contested, reimagined or otherwise subverted. In their diversity as well as acclimatization to neo-liberal pressures, museum discourses of migration still offer a meaningful, layered and socially relevant counter-discourse to the widely circulating stereotypes in public discourse. If we are going to unpack tendencies in public discourses successfully, then it is in our own interest to include and understand counter-discourses such as those produced by knowledge institutions like museums. The abundant and overwhelmingly positive reviews that the three museums have generated on a platform like TripAdvisor suggest that many visitors do engage with the museums’

perspective, expressing empathy with the fate and motives of people on the move, emulating some of the museums' rhetoric and extending the significance of the historical events to current events (Pelsmaekers and Rollo 2016; Boeckx 2019).

Notes

1. To our knowledge, no major policy changes and only smaller exhibition changes have taken place in the time between 2015 and now.
2. For the website pages we will refer to the pages in German for DAH Bremerhaven and Ballinstadt and Dutch for RSL Antwerp respectively. These are the main local languages used, and even though the museums aim to attract an international audience, the English pages tend to have reduced content.
3. In November 2015, for instance, Ballinstadt hosted a temporary *Amnesty International* exhibition in a room close to the entry but off the core track entitled "Unsichtbare Opfer Migrantinnen und Migranten auf ihrem Weg durch Mexiko" (Invisible victims, migrants on their way [to the USA] through Mexico). The exhibition mainly consisted of text and photographs on large boards. From December 2015 to May 2016 DAH Bremerhaven featured a temporary exhibition on economic migration and (political) responses to social change: "Plötzlich Da. Deutsche Bittsteller 1709, Türkische Nachbarn 1961" (Suddenly there. German petitioners 1709, Turkish neighbors 1961). From September 2015 to April 2016, RSL Antwerp had a temporary exhibition named "Ik, zigeuner. De reizen van Jan Yoors" (I, gypsy. The travels of Jan Yoors) dedicated to work by photographer Yoors who worked all over the world in the 1930s and showed a fascination in his work for what he called "minorities". The outer museum premises were also used by a group of socialist activists, in September 2015, to organize a solidarity wake for Syrian war refugees.
4. Asked about the photography policy on the Antwerp city museum websites, which all use this or a similar pattern, the web content manager responsible reported that "people like to look at other people" and that the photos were a selection from those taken of real visitors. (Oostra 2016, 20)

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