

# The Micro-history of a world event: intention, perception and imagination at the Exposition universelle de 1867

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## Abstract

Universal exhibitions are almost exclusively described as representations of an outside reality. The authenticity of the exhibits and the relation between the display and the real thing are put into consideration to investigate the political aims and ambitions of the organizers. However, the records of the spectators show that these were more likely to evaluate the objects according to other criteria. Here exhibitions reveal themselves as events that were not judged in the first place for their capacity to represent but for their ability to create. Visitors used them to develop pleasing mental images according to their individual and hedonistic motivations. In this sense, the exhibitions did not so much hint back to the outside than rather hint forward to an evolving imaginary inside the viewer. Thus, the paper focuses on the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867 to explore how and to what purpose the spectators dealt with what they saw. My aim is to analyze exhibitions as independent imaginary worlds, which serve as starting points for creative cultural actions that are very little concerned with the realness of the display.

**Key words:** Universal exhibition, perception, imagination.

## Heterotopia

The designation *Exposition universelle* perfectly captures the nature of the 1867 exhibition: its task was the complete representation of the world. The exhibition was to unite 'as far as possible, works of art, the industrial products of every country and in general the products of each branch of human activity' (La Commission Impériale (ed.) 1867: 2).<sup>1</sup> The self-imposed ambition to study the world as an indivisible unity led to the construction of a micro-cosmos, which understood itself as a representative substitute for the world that surrounded it.

We may borrow Michel Foucault's term *heterotopia* to describe the Universal Exhibition of 1867, as an 'external space' (Foucault 1986: 23), with the unusual trait of being 'in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect' (Foucault 1986: 24). While Foucault does not cite world exhibitions as examples of heterotopias, his definition of this concept fits them in an ideal-typical manner. They were 'real places [...] which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (Foucault 1986: 24).

A heterotopia is a place that understands itself as representative of as many other places as possible, precisely as the exhibition understood itself as representative of the world around it. The Exhibition of 1867 established 'a sort of systematic description [...] of these different spaces, of these other places. A sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live' (Foucault 1986: 24). In this sense, the Exposition universelle de 1867 can be described as the 'absolutely universal form of heterotopia' which Foucault thought did not exist (Foucault 1986: 24). The exhibition was 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault 1986: 25).

The rejection of all thematic limitations led to the construction of a model of the world. The spatial arrangement of exhibits could not be accidental: it had to make sense for all the participating nations and provide structure to the world of the exhibition as a conceptual whole. On that basis Timothy Mitchell argues that Universal Exhibitions thus generated an 'unprecedented effect of order and certainty' (Mitchell 1992: 290) that proclaimed nothing less than human mastery and control of the world. To what extent the exhibition's public understood, accepted and incorporated that vision is the topic of this paper.

Inevitably, the display was very much based on a specific ideological vision of the world. The aim was not, however, to show an image of the world to be compared with other possible images. The intention was to create, with the help of proven experts from all fields, a reconstruction of human civilization anchored in recognized scientific findings; empirical comprehensiveness was to prove the veracity of the objects displayed (Greenhalgh 1988: 87). The organizers saw themselves as agents whose task was to concretize objective, scientific truth by the means of representative objects. The exhibition claimed to be a truthful and valid image of the world, not an individual vision of it.

The classification system used at the Exposition universelle de 1867 - unique in its theoretical rigour and thus in the history of international exhibitions - illustrates this positivist claim. This system reflected 'considerations of a philosophical nature, with encyclopaedic intent, whose ambition is to frame the totality not only of industrial production but of everything peculiar to human activity' (Rasmussen 1992: 24). Objects from forty-nine participating nations were subdivided into ten groups and ninety-five classes and arranged within the exhibition hall in such a way that exhibits of the same type but different national origins could be compared as easily as possible. This classification system formed the schema into which the world was squeezed for the duration of the exhibition.

The idea of progress served as the criterion for comparison, with the help of which each nation's rank within the supposedly universal civilization should be determined. The fundamental functional mechanism of civilization was to be rendered observable and, by consequence, comprehensible. Thus, the exhibition understood the world as principle, not the world in a moment-to-moment, transitory condition. Planning for the exhibition went ahead regardless of changes in the wider world. The protracted war in Paraguay and the far-reaching consequences within Europe of the German-Austrian war of 1866 had practically no effect on the exhibition concept. Changes in the world itself did not inspire changes in the exhibition that was meant to represent it (Tenorio-Trillo 1996: 3-9).

The Exposition universelle de 1867 was the most consistent attempt ever made to literally create a world exhibition. Yet its hermetic model was characterized by manifold ruptures. The organizers' absolute commitment to completeness meant that the 150,000m<sup>2</sup> Palais d'Exposition lacked, by a long stretch, sufficient space to house all the exhibits, a feat it had managed during the three previous forerunner exhibitions. As a rather coincidental consequence 1867 featured the use of the first park within a Universal Exhibition and the invention of the National Pavilion as its most striking display technique. This opening up of the space coloured the perception of the visitors as much as the broader model that fundamentally informed the exhibition.

Any attempt to depict the Exposition universelle de 1867 in its entirety must be both wide-ranging and highly selective. The subject of enquiry is, on the one hand, because of the exhibition's ambition to universality, the largest that one could imagine: the world as a whole. On the other hand, the exhibition constitutes a clearly defined research subject, both spatially and temporally, one that brought together the whole world in approximately 450,000m<sup>2</sup> over 217 days. The universe was condensed in one place, the Parisian Champ de Mars, and within a very short period of time, between April 1 and November 3, 1867.

This paper's methodological response to the simultaneous immensity and minimalism of the exhibition is comparable to Fernand Braudel's call for a *histoire totale*. By taking into account various temporal axes (*longue durée*, *histoire lentement rythmée*, *histoire événementielle*), Braudel attempted to develop a mode of historical writing capable of describing a historical constellation in all its facets, and thus to capture it in its totality. Braudel was convinced that one could get at the historical character of an event only by eschewing tearing it bodily from its context (Braudel 1969b: 12; Braudel 1969a: 54-5; Braudel 1979a: 13,

16-7, 640, 644; Braudel 1979b: 8; Braudel 1979c: 7-8).

It was in fact the micro-history developed in Italy and France that went furthest in responding to Braudel's plea. The description of a context of signification in its entirety ultimately demanded a highly specific object of study; total history was possible only through examination of the very small (Ginzburg 1993: 171-2). This emphasis on small units, such as villages or individuals was, on the one hand, intended to render visible microstructures which super-ordinate concepts such as modernization and industrialization failed to capture. On the other hand, micro-history aimed to cast more light on the particular motives of specific actors, not least in their irrationality and in light of their emotional content. This type of history approached society not so much as a structure super-ordinate to the individual, but as the continuous interaction of specific actors in narrow confines.

The attempt to comprehensively describe the Universal Exhibition of 1867 compels one to respond in a similar way, by concentrating on the micro level of the exhibition grounds and leaving aside the question of how representative this 'copy' actually was. Ignoring the world outside the exhibition can be justified both pragmatically and methodologically. One cannot hope to do justice to the historical situation of all forty-nine participating nations in the 1860s or even for the single year of 1867, not to mention the highly comprehensive colonial exhibitions that would demand additional attention. Such a venture would be all the more illusory in that the exhibition also aimed to include the history of all the nations presented. The Universal Exhibition attempted to do nothing less than represent the historical development of civilization from pre-history to 1867.

This paper does not tackle the question of how typical the Exposition universelle de 1867 was of its time (Purbrick 2001: 1-25). Clifford Geertz has convincingly shown the danger of the symbolic super-elevation of a single example to the level of a model of an all-embracing totality. Instead, Geertz calls for 'thick description'. He rejects a 'microcosmic model', summed up in the phrase 'Jonesville-is-the-USA'. For Geertz, this involves a methodological 'fallacy', namely that the chosen example is representative of more or of something other than itself (Geertz 1993: 21-2). Yet this is to tacitly assume that which should be proven through analysis of the particular topic. An approach of this kind not only pre-empts its own results, but makes the anticipated result the analytical point of departure. This is methodologically flawed even when the object of analysis itself makes a claim to universally valid representation, as the Universal Exhibition of 1867 did. Geertz thus urges us 'not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them' (Geertz 1993: 26).

## Representativity

It would be a fool's game to repeat here the mistakes of the organizers by viewing the exhibition as a copy of the world in order to then examine aspects of that world through the 'representative' exhibition. Rather, this paper recognizes the microstructures of the exhibition grounds and investigates how this particular model of the world functioned. Its multiple semantic structures can best be grasped by concentrating on presence at the Champ de Mars. That is: the presence of the organizers' intentions, the media display and its production of an exhibitionary world and the visitors' experience of these. This simultaneity constituted the exhibition experience as distanced opposition of object and observer. The exhibits' representativity of the wider world was of secondary importance with regards to perception and interpretation. Inside the exhibition grounds, the observer was unable to experience the object's relation to the outside world in any concrete way.

There are several reasons for this. To begin with, exhibits were chosen according to their capacity to illustrate the fundamental components of human civilization. Their potential for abstraction and synthesis was crucial to condensing the world spatially and temporally, as the exhibition demanded. Enabling people to recognize objects, nations or industrial sectors was of secondary importance. Most exhibits were individual, manually built pieces which, far from illustrating an entire industrial sector, were to represent the cutting edge of progress within each sector. They should embody that which was possible and achievable in 1867, the provisional end of a developmental line that was presented as progress. By capturing the exhibits ideologically and putting them on splendid display as luxury goods, they were isolated from their

context and inscribed within the self-referential frame of the exhibition, within which they took on a specific meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, emphasis was not placed on the exhibits' functional character. The relations of production that generated them, the social context of their manufacture, their functionality and their spread and accessibility among the wider population – all were ignored. Within the confines of the Champ de Mars, the exhibits' links with the world outside, which they were alleged to represent was neither explicit nor evident (Purbrick 2001: 2, 17).

The issue of the exhibits' representativity was pushed aside in favour of their significance as milestones in the triumphal march of progress. Within the exhibition, visitors found no alternative models for verification or falsification. Comparison, a fundamental principle of the exhibition promoted throughout the Champ de Mars, was possible only with other exhibits, not with the world beyond. The exhibition proclaimed in an almost totalitarian manner its intention to represent the world in its entirety. It asserted its own capacity to explain the world and thus had no need to consider concrete links with the wider world.

Above all, one must take into account that, though it claimed not to be, the exhibition was clearly utopian in orientation; it tried to 'say everything about everything, in order to model the future in its entirety' (Ory 1982: 22). Most exhibits were anything but typical of the subject represented. The model workers' houses, which in no way reflected the living conditions of French workers, are a prime example. Here, the elite of the Second Empire laid bare its notion of an ideal social order. This promised workers a life of modest material prosperity, achieved through paternalistic welfare and surveillance, in which they would benefit from benevolent supervision by their employers and the state (Bennett 1995: 22, 47; Foucault 1999: 24; Rydell 1993: 9; Purbrick 2001: 5). There was no sign, in the Champ de Mars, of destitution, difficult working conditions or poor wages. Unsurprisingly, the exhibition organizers were primarily concerned to construct an exhibitionary world that flattered their self-perception.

This meant that the representativity of this collection of outstanding objects was largely ignored. Moreover, widely known facts were systematically denied within the grounds of the exhibition, which was arranged as a conflict-free, harmonious world. The organizers made the Exposition universelle, erected on the training grounds of the Military Academy, a symbol of world peace, and this at a time when the people of France were haunted by the spectre of a war with Prussia that might begin at any time.

The exhibition's appearance as oversized pleasure park also tended to place the issue of the exhibits' representativity on the back burner. As described, 1867 was the first time that the organizers were compelled to go beyond the confines of a single building. From this point on, international exhibitions became open-air events. Following the financial losses endured at the 1855 exhibition, the organizers thought hard about how to make the event profitable, that is, how to attract as many visitors as possible. Creating a spectacle and entertaining the masses were thus key concerns, the park forming the epicentre of the organizers' efforts. The park was to fascinate and bewitch the visitors; it was to wrench them out of their everyday life, not to reproduce it.

We must therefore view the exhibition primarily as a self-contained experiential world, not as a more or less successful copy of the world and shape analytic tools in accordance with that. The exhibition, which saw itself as a representative heterotopia embracing all persons, places and times, could not base itself on a world outside, however understood. Just as Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, investigates the structures of signification and functional patterns of a discourse and not its relation, however conceived, to the 'real' (Said 1995: 5) Orient, this article probes the structures and semantics generated independently within the Universal Exhibition of 1867.

The exhibition claimed to be able to represent the world in its historical entirety; its connection to the world in 1867 had thus to be ignored. In light of this insight, Timothy Mitchell, examining the world exhibitions of the nineteenth century, has radically called into question the division between original and representation: '[t]he exhibition persuades people that the world is divided into two fundamental realms - the representation and the original, the exhibit and the external reality, the text and the world' (Mitchell 1988: 29). Once this representation was presented as complete, not as an aspect of a reality lying beyond it, this paradoxically implied that 'outside the world exhibition [...] one encountered not the real world but only further models

of representations of the real' (Mitchell 1988: 12; Mitchell 1989: 224).

Thus, the exhibition took on an independent reality which this paper understands as the experience of the exhibition. However, this micro-history of the Universal Exhibition of 1867, in contrast to other micro-historical studies, does not directly bring the various actors under the spotlight. The individual disappears among the thousands of organizers, the 52,200 exhibitors and the more than eleven million visitors.

Organizationally, the exhibition took on a dynamic of its own from the very beginning, as a result of the organizers' having allowed far too little time for planning; they struggled to keep up. The various conflicting interests together with financial and logistical problems caused ever-worsening organizational delays; these in turn produced unique challenges that took on their own momentum. The organizers were far from having total authority over the exhibition. They in fact tried, wringing their hands all the while, to keep abreast of this enormous undertaking.

Already at this point, the objects of the exhibition prove to be independent bearers of meaning between organizers and visitors. The world of objects on display was not so much the result of strictly implemented plans as of a plethora of unforeseen necessities and pragmatic, stopgap measures. The way the exhibition finally turned out matched no-one's intentions exactly.

Within this microcosm, the human being seems to have been caught in a permanent state of participation and non-participation. As the protagonist of the process of civilization, he was the topic of an exhibition, created by humans to be seen by as many other humans as possible. Yet he had first to step inside this world, though it was dedicated to him and presented as a result of his inherent nature. The human being then saw exhibits which symbolized nothing other than himself, catching sight of them from an unbridgeable distance, and, by thus looking at them, was invited to grasp his own nature (Bancel *et al.* 2002: 10, 17).

My research is therefore primarily concerned with the simultaneity of overlapping medial entities and the perceptual practices that these gave rise to. In relation to the latter, sources - such as diaries or private correspondences - not written specifically for the exhibition or which were not intended for publication reveal two key facts: the visitors' perception and interpretation revolved neither around the issue of representativity nor the intentions of the organisers. The initial impression is rather one of enormous discursive diversity.

This diversity of impressions is rooted in the polysemy of each object, which was at the same time a material expression of the organizers' intentions and convictions, an element within the staging of the exhibition and the basis of visitors' interpretations. Therefore, no object on exhibition could develop a uniform symbolism valid for all spectators. On the contrary, the exhibits allowed and stimulated quite different readings.

One must therefore distinguish between the organizers' intentions and the medium that was to display these intentions, as well as between the display and the perception of the visitors. In his historical studies of reading behaviour Roger Chartier calls for a clear tripartite division into text, book and reading, in which the material bearers of signification are allocated an autonomous and equal place as medial entity between author and reader. These three spaces, 'in which meaning is constructed' (Chartier 1989: 1513), must be carefully separated. In a very similar manner, the world of objects on the Champ de Mars produced its own pattern of communication (Davallon 1999: 18). The visitor interacted singly and alone with this pattern, and not with the unseen organizers. In a situation that Eileen Hooper-Greenhill has described as typical for mass communication (Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 36), the exhibits threw the visitor back upon himself (Davallon 1999: 29).

This simultaneity of discourses was already a core principle of the exhibition of 1867. Thus, the transitions of and ruptures within the message between sender (organizers), medium (exhibits) and receivers (visitors) are of particular interest. By analyzing these, we can hope to explain the fundamental discrepancy between the organizers' intentions and the visitor's interpretations as observed in the sources for 1867. Examination of visitors' perceptual practices lays bare that even in that early time of the modern museum we are not dealing with a straightforward intention-result chain. The most productive means of grasping the reality of the exhibition as experienced by the visitors is to examine why such a multiplicity of autonomous discourses arose within the Exposition universelle de 1867.



### Semantic rupture I: from organizer to medium

Here the emphasis is on the transition from the organizers' intentions to an autonomous world of objects with an independent structure of signification, which was anything but a material reflection of the organizers' image of the world. The question is: why did the then biggest exhibition in history, organized with the help of exceptional financial, logistical and political means, fail to communicate the organizers' message to the public in unsullied form?

An initial clue is the differing emphasis placed on the terms *exposition* and *universelle*: the latter received significantly more attention than the former. While the organizers went to great lengths, in diplomatic correspondence over a number of years, to encourage as many nations as possible to take part, and had no compunction about arranging displays at short notice to represent non-participating countries such as China and Mexico, they paid little attention to which criteria should inform such staging. Apart from the classification system, the organizers produced no documents laying out the theoretical bases and intellectual goals of their exhibitionary practice. Rather, without theoretical ado, they set about making the event happen, ignoring its problematic as a media.

The placing of exhibits within the rigidly structured classification system was marked by a highly pragmatic approach. As a consequence, the issue of how, concretely, to display the exhibits, was pushed to the background, as was that of their interaction (across thematic sections) within the exhibition. This was partly a result of the continuous planning delays that characterized the preparatory phase from beginning to end. When on June 22 1863 Napoleon III announced plans for a Universal Exhibition in 1867 – no reason for this date proved forthcoming – the organizers began a race against time, which they ultimately lost. When the exhibition opened on April 1 1867, many exhibits were still packed in boxes; some of the buildings in the park opened only months later.

The participant nations' lack of initiative was largely responsible for this. Each nation had been asked to appoint regional exhibition committees, which were to select exhibits and then transfer them to a national exhibition committee for transportation to Paris. Lack of interest, financial and logistical constraints and, not least, the major problems experienced by the central exhibition committee in Paris, which had to coordinate all these procedures, created mounting delays, forcing the organizers to come up with pragmatic, stopgap measures in order to ensure that the exhibition opened on time, a topic the Paris press had been speculating about wildly months before the opening date. At the expense of careful planning the exhibition increasingly took on a dynamic of its own.

The often clashing interests of the various exhibition committees, which numbered in the hundreds, further intensified this process. Ultimately, the invited nations did not come to Paris to contribute to the self-glorification of the Second Empire, which presented itself as the leader of universal progress; rather, they pursued their own goals. Above all, the interests of the individual exhibitors – selected by the different national committees – were opposed to noble visions of an international peace festival, civilizational stock-taking, paternalistic concern for the working classes and global exchange of the latest scientific findings. They wished mainly to promote and sell their products.

This striking conflict of interests became clearly apparent in the ban on selling exhibits, shyly announced by the Commission Impériale only a few weeks before the opening date and coming as a great surprise to the exhibitors, given that contracts had already been signed. The exhibitors, whose main reason for taking part had just been rendered null and void, then dragged out the installation of their exhibits and provoked additional delays. They arranged their products in the most spectacular manner possible, in order to attract more public attention than their competitors and waited until the last minute to unveil their exhibits, in order to ensure that no-one else could copy them. Furthermore, the organizers had provided the exhibitors with no regulations to guide their displays, other than allocating them a particular location. This led to a huge diversity of exhibitionary forms and hindered the formation of a uniform image right from the start.

The semantic rupture between the intended discourse and that which was actually implemented is anchored in the clash between the two fundamental imperatives that marked the exhibition: the demand for a scientifically verifiable universality on the one hand and the

constant concern over profitability on the other. As financial rewards could be ensured only by appealing to a wide public, the key need was to make the exhibition as attractive and spectacular as possible. During the course of the seven months that the exhibition was held, the spectacle clearly gained the upper hand over the scientific ambition to present a comparative view of the progress of human civilization. In the final months, many exhibitors vacated their sections and, through unofficial channels, rented them to travelling entertainers and innkeepers. The world's exhibition became 'the world's inn' (Basch 1869: 107).

The organizers, who attempted to control the exhibits spatially, temporally and functionally through the strict classification system, through special historical sections and by rewarding the best objects, nonetheless failed in this task. The lack of a concept of exhibitionary *mise-en-scène* allowed for the juxtaposition of independent attractions, which many visitors failed to get the hang of. The lack of information displays and the failure sufficiently to distinguish between exhibit and aesthetic ornament also contributed to the development of an autonomous medial discourse, which pushed the authors' intentions into the background (Richards 1990: 27). Thus, the intention of the French organizers was clearly visible only at one single moment of the exhibition: the festive awards ceremony on July 1 1867 held at the Palais d'Industrie on the Champs Élysées. For only here could the influence of medium and visitors be suppressed, by exercising total control of the proceedings and by firmly fixing the 20,000 invited guests in the places allocated to them.

However, the organizers' intentions were not entirely washed away within a media display marked by numerous chance happenings. This was chiefly because of the exhibits that were not to be seen at the Champ de Mars, despite the relentlessly asserted pretension to completeness. Territories such as Guatemala and Korea were nowhere to be seen; wilderness and unsullied nature were likewise absent. No mention was made of topics such as sexuality, love and death or of professions such as housewife or prostitute. Of beggars, the unemployed, cemeteries, banks and prisons there was no sign. The omission of these topics prevented the development of a coherent social critique within the universal harmony presented (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 13).

This is one aspect of the exhibitionary complex as described by Tony Bennett. The Universal Exhibition 'produced a position of power and knowledge in relation to a microcosmic reconstruction of a totalized order of things and peoples' (Bennett 1995: 97). Within this structure, the organizers attempted to establish their political convictions as scientifically verifiable truth and thus to strengthen their own power in the long-term. With the help of an autonomous exhibition police force, a superbly equipped medical service and a comprehensive collection of rules, they created a 'complex of disciplinary and power relations' (Bennett 1988: 73), intended to help order and control passage. The Universal Exhibition, as ideal typical museum of human civilization, also had a normalizing function as explicatory model of the world (Barth 2007a; Foucault 1999: 48; Bennett 1988: 76-8; Bennett 1995: 102). The arrangement of objects drew on a homogenous model of society that allocated to everyone a clear position and specific function. The exhibition was 'simultaneously ordering objects for public inspection and ordering the public that inspected' (Bennett 1988: 74).

Within this complex, which aimed primarily to ensure security and public access to the medium, the visitor gained nonetheless, and far more than Bennett admits, substantial room for manoeuvre. This originated in the individual choice of route through the enormous grounds. It was also the product of a whole series of chance events arising from the colourful, noisy hustle and bustle of the masses and the ever surprising confrontation with the most diverse exhibits from all over the world. It is going too far to describe the roughly 50,000 visitors who shoved their way through the exhibition every day as an 'ordered crowd' (Bennett 1988: 85) or even a 'controlled collective' (Purbrick 2001: 14).

The structure of this exhibitionary complex was in fact far from being so rigid as to deprive visitors of any means which they could take up and use to their own ends. In another context, Alf Lüdtke has described this as 'Eigensinn' (willfulness). By this he refers to social actors' efforts to break out of a structured space of signification and escape its compulsions and constraints in order to satisfy one's 'demand for a space of one's own' (Lüdtke 1993: 139). *Eigensinn* thus points to the search for room for individual action within a given structure and power relation. This should not be seen primarily as a form of resistance but as the opening up of a space for

action, within which personal interests, with no direct relation to the function or aims of the structure, can be satisfied. This analysis corroborates Abercrombie and Longhurst's investigations of modern mass audiences (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 30).

The exhibitionary structure, designed to entertain as well as to inform and within which visitors could peruse whichever objects took their fancy, did not exercise a disciplinary effect of such severity as to ram the organizers' ideological aims down visitors' throats. The Exposition universelle de 1867 opened up multiple spaces of *Eigensinn*, anchored in the semantic ruptures between the varied media discourses, which allowed the visitors to interpret the exhibits as something other than yardsticks of progress or advertisements for national power and potential.

Thus, both the authors' intentions and the collection of objects that constituted the Universal Exhibition as medium form two distinct structures of signification, both of which warrant equal consideration if we are to get to grips with the exhibition. The medial discourse appears so important because the visitors came into contact only with the exhibit and not with the organizers. The organizers were unaware that a statement changes, or becomes changeable, at the moment of its representation through a medium; thus they opened up room for divergent interpretation.

### Semantic rupture II: from medium to visitor

Visitors did not simply recognize and adopt the medium's structures of signification. The lack of a pre-established route of perusal and of explanatory texts next to the exhibits, containing specific information, further encouraged people to come up with independent interpretations. Spectators had to identify the exhibit, anchor it in the overall context of the exhibition and subject it to personal evaluation. This last was necessarily rooted in individual interests and preferences, but also in factors such as one's mood at the moment of looking. Falk and Dierking speak in this context of 'the important role played by prior knowledge, interest, and the museum experience itself, as well as the unpredictable but important role of subsequent experiences' (Falk and Dierking 2000: 7) for the interpretations of museums, a point further stressed by Hooper-Greenhill (Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 51). Since the exhibition was too large to be explored in a single day, it invited visitors to seek out those objects about which they were, for personal reasons, most curious.

Visitors' behaviour makes clear that their expectations had little in common with the goals of the organizers. Primary, they came neither to be instructed about humanity's civilizational progress as evolutionary principle nor to inform themselves about the latest technological achievements. As exhibition visitor Louis Reybaud bluntly put it, they were more interested in the 'spectacle' than in the 'study' (Reybaud 1867: 737). They were looking for a 'learning oriented entertainment experience' (Falk and Dierking 2000: 87). The public was fascinated, above all, by the imaginative experiential world of the exhibition park, with its unexpected juxtaposition of different national pavilions, churches, restaurants, engine rooms, school buildings, factories and souvenir stalls.

Moreover, many people were anxious to profit from the exhibition in more than the spiritual sense; the Parisians proved exceptionally adept at sniffing out money making possibilities around the Champ de Mars. Printers' shops offering calling cards, umbrellas for rent, photographic studios and translation bureaus are examples of some of the businesses that progressively opened within the grounds of the exhibition. Outside the gates, improvised catalogue-holders and all manner of fake entrance tickets were on offer. In the full-to-overflowing city, hotel prices increased three or four times over and thousands of Parisians rented out their apartments at horrendous prices.

The Universal Exhibition, clearly identified as a scientific event through the afterthought that was the imposition of a sales ban, was thus able to develop into Walter Benjamin's much quoted 'phantasmagoria of capitalist culture', which one 'entered in order to divert oneself' (Benjamin 1983: 50). The entertainment and pleasure facilities, which sprang up like mushrooms over the course of the summer – the apparently static medium Universal Exhibition thus proving remarkably dynamic – promised to satisfy the most off-beat wishes of the millions of visitors. The park, which surrounded the central hall, to which many visitors failed to venture, offered a truly broad range of attractions, which quickly became the key foci of the exhibition although they had



in fact rather been intended as places to take a break or as fringe events. Theatres and concert halls, innumerable restaurants and refreshments stalls, a hot-air balloon, an automatic parachute, rowing regattas, fencing, chess and billiard tournaments, underground aquaria and Chang, the Chinese Giant, awaited visitors to an exhibition that had in store additional parties and fireworks displays almost every evening.

The Universal Exhibition was thus much more than a display of progress. It was a global media event and in 1867 the undisputed epicentre of Paris, which became, in the wake of this and future exhibitions, the 'capital of the nineteenth century' in the words of contemporary Maxime du Camp. Events were by no means concentrated solely within the grounds themselves. The arrivals at the railroad stations of Paris of foreign monarchs who had come to visit the exhibition, stylized as official receptions, the military parades held in their honour, the grand awards ceremonies, free entry to the capital's museums for the duration of the exhibition, the numerous receptions organized by Parisian personalities, and particularly the various exhibition annexes, all led to a gradual fusion of city and exhibition. The bearer of this blending was the enormous mass of over eleven million visitors, which circulated through the city along the exhibitionary network.

Like Timothy Mitchell, Vanessa Schwartz has convincingly shown the mutual dependence of the city of Paris and the exhibitions it hosted. Schwartz describes how the rise of a new viewing of events led to the formation of a new viewing crowd.<sup>3</sup> In a city that accommodated five Universal Exhibitions in forty-five years, each larger and attracting more visitors than the one before, it was 'not always easy in Paris to tell where the exhibition ended, and the world itself began' (Mitchell 1989: 224). The Universal Exhibition was the archetype of a new, urban space, marked not so much by a specific infrastructure as produced by a broad mass of common behavioural and perceptual patterns: '[t]he apprehension of urban experience and modern life through visual re-presentation was a means of forming a new kind of crowd' (Schwartz 1999: 202). In other words: it became more and more difficult to differentiate specific groups within the audience. (Ang 1991: 154)

Thus, the anonymous mass of visitors is scarcely graspable. Furthermore, with a few exceptions, no statistics or other data are available (Niquette and Buxton 1997; Rancière and Vauday 1988; Taylor 1999). The burgeoning quantity of visitors tends to obscure their characteristics. This mass was, above all, something other than the sum of its parts. It was not the juxtaposition of various classes and genders. It was formed, on the contrary, only in facing the object of its gaze. It constituted itself as mass in the moment of confrontation with the exhibition and crumbled when the spectacle observed was no more. The principal trait of the mass was its anonymity and uniformity at the moment when it came face-to-face with the cause of its formation. This momentary confrontation in the grounds of the exhibition dissolved such otherwise decisive differentiating criteria as social position or educational opportunities for the duration of the perceptual event (Schwartz 1998: 21).

The individual visitor found himself isolated amid the anonymous mass, within which he could either drift or through which he had to force his way to the exhibits. The mass of visitors offered itself an ever new, ever changing sight (Rydel 1984: 2). This constantly changing picture suggests a further reason for the diversity of perceptual practices and observable interpretations. Not all visitors saw the same exhibition. At the risk of overegging the analytical pudding, one might say that each visitor saw an exhibition unique to him or her, and fostered its uniqueness through his or her own interpretation. Individual routes through the exhibition, individual preferences and previous knowledge, individual expectations and individual moods at the moment of perception led to individual impressions of the exhibition, to individual readings as the exhibition as a text (Bal 2007; Ravelli 2006).

Which types of perception arose from this and how can these be described? The issue of which sources to examine comes to the fore here. The Universal Exhibition did indeed leave behind a large number of official texts as well as newspaper reports around the world. These are however of meagre use in attempting to analyze individual impressions in the moment of confrontation with the exhibits. Official documents, largely composed by those working for the exhibition, offer detailed descriptions but otherwise little more than endless repetition of the organizers' flattering discourse. Press reports must be taken with a hefty pinch of salt, both because of frequent plagiarism and because of the high level of censorship that marked the

French Second Empire in general and the exhibition in particular. Press authorization, conferred with reluctance at the best of times, could be withdrawn at any time without explanation. Loss of access to this unique event and money making opportunity could have serious consequences not only for individual journalists but for entire publications. Reporting was thus highly favourable and no journalist was excluded from the exhibition by the censors.

*Le Figaro*, which had devoted a daily column to the Exposition universelle, abandoned coverage on July 27 1867, stating that, despite its noble ideals, the exhibition had degenerated into an enormous fun fair. But even a moderate press scandal such as this offers little material for analysis of perceptual practices. The exhibition was indeed a means 'for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power' (Bennett 1988: 74) and the propaganda pushed by the Napoleonic regime bore much fruit, as most press reports illustrate. However, brochures and newspaper texts likewise provide little evidence of the variety of emotions and impressions bound up with a visit to the exhibition and the forms of perception to which they gave rise.

Personal sources, such as memoirs, diaries or private correspondence, offer far richer pickings. These shed light on visitors' specifically individual impressions beyond the organizers' intentions. The father of Dabot, an exhibition visitor, appeared to find the serious transportation problems and exhausting jostling of the crowd highly tedious (Dabot 1899: 226). Jules Verne visited the exhibition not to compare the progress of civilization but to have lunch with his brother (Dumas 1988: 435).

Visitors' ways of dealing with what they experienced, as evidenced in these few and far between sources, were as diverse as the objects and attractions to be found (MacKenzie 2002: 193). However, such testimony is problematic: relevant personal sources come almost exclusively from artists, intellectuals, scientists or high ranking politicians and are thus hardly representative of the broader public. It is once again apparent that generalizations about the perception of the exhibition are impossible. We can merely describe certain perceptual practices, for which good evidence exists, as interpretive options embedded in the exhibition. Nonetheless, these certainly represent one component of the exhibition grounds' historical reality (Ginzburg 1992: 82-96; Ginzburg 1993).

### ***Eigensinn* and mimesis**

Visitors' perception and interpretation are not characterized by linkage of the portrayal with the world beyond it, but rather by the generation of a plethora of imagined worlds. The Universal Exhibition of 1867 was a polysemic event in which different structures of signification interacted simultaneously. The imperative of universality as fundamental exhibitionary concept transformed the Champ de Mars into a site of a dizzying viewing experience further intensified by the visitors' perception and imagination.

The idea of simultaneous diversity also underpins Lüdtké's concept of *Eigensinn* mentioned above. He states: '[i]ssues of diversity are [...] crucial. Issues, to put it more precisely, of the difference within the simultaneous. This perspective is essential to elucidating the range of the historically possible' (Lüdtké 1993: 409). Lüdtké assumes that potential for action can only be evaluated through detailed depiction of a specific historical situation; he thus calls for a micro-historical approach.

*Eigensinn* facilitates the satisfaction of personal interests and emotions beyond rational societal demands. This concept refers to a strategy that helps the individual to achieve more direct contact with the world and is thus concerned with a particular form of appropriation of the world beyond its mediation through super-ordinate structures.

The exhibition offered people the chance to forget their everyday working lives for a few hours. It was not solely a matter of political propaganda, a positivist attempt to explicate the world or a normative model of society – it was also a leisure time activity (Bal 2007: 74; Brooker and Jermyn (eds) 2003: 231). This spectacular experiential world attracted millions of visitors; its surprising and unfamiliar diversity was highly appealing. The exhibition was characterized to a significant degree by a tendency to demand and encourage visitors' *Eigensinn*. This usually took the form of mimetic action rather than resistance against the officially propagated model of society. Mimesis, as a technique of exchange between person and world, could develop beyond social necessities and, astonishingly inside an exhibition which intended to depict the

world, it could also develop independently of the issue of representativity. The concept of mimesis, which involves making a “copy” of an existing world and using it to help generate one's own action’ (Wulf 2002: 1112), appears as a key to grasping visitors’ perceptual practices within the room for *Eigensinn* manoeuvre provided by the exhibition. After all, the Universal Exhibition was precisely such a copy of the world, inviting visitors to interpret. New, specifically individual realms of imagination were created through their interpretations.

This creative element, neither intended nor foreseen by the organizers, was characteristic for the exhibition. Bernhard Waldenfels neatly captures this from a phenomenological perspective: ‘[...] because we cannot simply assume that things in themselves clearly are, once-and-for-all, just what they are, the process of determination entails moments of creation’ (Waldenfels 2000: 63).

Within the grounds of the exhibition, this creation was by no means dependent on the event's self-definition. I have attempted on other occasions to describe the process of *Eigensinn* and mimetic creation of individual imaginative worlds as a three-stage process of ‘consumption’, as defined by Colin Campbell (Barth 2003 and 2007b). He refers to ‘consumption as a voluntaristic, self-directed and creative process in which cultural ideas are necessarily implicated’ (Campbell 1987: 203). Consumption then means hedonistic action that can also be described as ‘day-dreaming’ or ‘fantasizing’ (Campbell 1987: 77; Ang 1991: 154). ‘What audiences are doing, therefore, is drawing from the endless media stream that passes them by a set of diverse elements out of which they can construct imaginative worlds that suite them’ (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 107).

In the perception phase, the observer becomes aware of the object of consumption, is fascinated and attracted by it and endows it with qualities he considers positive. He thus paves the way for the subsequent appropriation of the desired object, which constitutes the second phase. This action should be understood as cultural in nature: the consumer makes use of specific options for signification offered by the object and places it in a direct relationship with his personal opinions, interests and preferences. The positive connotations of the object are transferred to oneself. Ultimately, the transformational phase involves further creative development of the object's discursive sphere, a development that culminates in its inscription in the identity of the consumer. This identification appears as cultural action rooted in individual motives.

Paul Ricœur has developed a similar three-phase model in relation to the mimesis of textual structures, which is relevant to analyses of perceptual practice at the Universal Exhibition. He describes three distinct mimetic levels which, based on an existing text, enable the creation of individual imaginative worlds, which characterize the act of reading and make it comprehensible as action. Mimesis I refers to previous knowledge of narrative structures and to the reader's social milieu as indispensable to understanding the text and to constructing a frame of reference within which structures of signification and interpretive options can develop (Ricœur 1983: 12). These references form the basis of Mimesis II, whose ‘rupturing function’ and ‘capacity for mediation’ are the precondition for further interpretation (Ricœur 1983: 106). These inhere in the text as latent options for signification but are not generated automatically; rather, they must be produced by the reader. Thus, the reader changes the text through the act of reading just as the visitor changes the exhibition through the act of looking (Ricœur 1983: 107). This is the moment of transition from ‘*présupposition*’ to ‘*transformation*’ (Ricœur 1983: 110; italics in the text).

Further creative evolution characterizes Mimesis III, which involves a ‘new configuration by means of fiction of the order that underlies action’ (Ricœur 1983: 12). Ricœur argues that each text spreads far-reaching structures of signification before it and that these must be grasped by the reader if he or she is to understand the text and endow it with meaning (Ricœur 1983: 152). In other writings, Ricœur draws on the work of Northrop Frye, who understands poetic texts as options for unlocking imaginative worlds. For Frye, ‘the suspension of the actual reference is the condition for access to reference in a virtual form’ (Ricœur 1975: 288). Ricœur even goes one step further, calling for ‘the eclipse of a referential mode as condition for the emergence of another referential mode’ (Ricœur 1975: 301). Readers re-invent the reality that they perceive as soon as they get caught up in their fictional, imaginative worlds; as he or she interprets, they inevitably find themselves within a social frame of reference that prestructures the

interpretive possibilities but which does not make this the basis of the individual imaginative world that they seek. For Ricœur, the interpretation of a text is 'the proposition of a world that I might inhabit and in which I might project the powers most specific to me' (Ricœur 1983: 152), in other words, the space of *Eigensinn* described by Lüdtke.

In the context of the Universal Exhibition of 1867 the act of reading and interpretation can be portrayed through the example of exhibition attendee Hans Christian Andersen, who eternalized the event in a highly personal manner in his fairytale *The dryad*. A wood nymph, determined to see the exhibition despite a prediction that her life will last only half a day if she does so, sets things in motion. On the way to the Champ de Mars, the dryad passes by the revamped Parisian catacombs, opened for the duration of the exhibition, a place inscribed in its discursive sphere.

Andersen gradually introduces a whole series of specific exhibition-related motifs. He transforms the event, however, from a scientific display of progress into a 'wonder of the world' (Andersen 1992: 1031). Through the figure of the nymph and the creatures she meets in the wonderland of the Champ de Mars, he describes the exhibition from the animals' point of view and questions the motives of the human beings who created it. The fairytale culminates in the nymph's visit to the aquaria, which are depicted from the fishes' perspective. On the other side of the glass, the silent denizens of the aquarium are not only object to be looked at, but are themselves looking:

They had come to see the Exhibition, they saw it from their fresh or salt water abode, they saw the teeming human mass passing by from morning to evening. All the countries of the world had sent and put on display their representatives so that the elderly tench and bream, the agile perch and the tattered carp could see these creatures and express their opinion of this space. (Andersen 1992: 1042-3)

Andersen is interested in the exhibitionary world, he is fascinated by it, gets caught up in and devotes himself to it. This he does, not to praise the Second Empire or pay homage to universal progress, but by instrumentalizing, interpreting and reshaping the exhibition in line with his interests as author and artist. Rooted in his knowledge of the object, he develops an individual fiction on the basis of personal preferences and convictions. He does not reproduce the world of the exhibition but merely uses it as a frame of reference to create an individual and unique imaginative world. The original reference fades and is replaced with a new context of signification that remoulds the appropriated object into an entirely new semantic structure. Thus, Andersen's fairytale is an example of *Eigensinn*, mimetic appropriation and the individual transformation of the exhibition for purposes that bear no relation to its original goals.

## Conclusion

Robert Rydell und Nancy Gwinn have rightly highlighted the problem of perception in analyzing historical exhibitions. They ask rhetorically: 'Is it correct to regard fairgoers as sponges, awash in a sea of overlaying and reinforcing ideological meanings, absorbing messages presented to them?' (Rydell and Gwinn 1994: 4).<sup>4</sup> While it is crucial to examine the organizers' ideological aims, this in itself is no sure guide to visitors' experience of the exhibition; we cannot assume that they simply soak up the organizers' self-promoting propaganda. The French organizers certainly made use of the Exposition universelle de 1867 both to fix France's status as a world power and to construe it anew. A brief review of the perceptual practices of the visitors lays bare, however, that while their efforts were recognized and often appreciated, they rarely informed visitors' evaluation of the exhibition. This event was a miniature, utopian version of the world, but by no means its reflection. It was rather a model featuring several autonomous structures of signification, a model that functioned largely independently of the allegedly representative depiction of reality common to all people. The key, if one wishes to avoid preemptively declaring the Universal Exhibition a representative token of its age or symbol of a dawning modernity, is to trace out these very structures.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All translations in this paper are mine.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Things appear as independent actors on the historical scene' (Richards (1990), 11). Cf. as well Purbrick (2001), 18-9.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Paris did not merely host exhibitions, it had become one' (Schwartz 1999: 1).

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