

*I had a Dream in Tropical Islands Resort in Berlin. Was it real?*

Stephen Muecke

It is a matter of inventing or discovering... positive modes of existence, which come to meet us with their palm fronds, to greet our hopes and aspirations, or our problematic speculations, in order to gather them in and comfort them. All other research is a metaphysical famine. [1]

Etienne Souriau

*I'm writing to you, Jimmie, because I can trust you, I think, with these fumblings I call writing. I wanted to ask you about what's really real, and what's 'just' made up, like stories we tell... they are supposed to have all these powerful effects, like orienting peoples' desires in that hazardous landscape of 'getting by in life'. You know, we bring up our children with stories, then, as you say in your book, talking about our friend Mick Taussig: 'There are abstract entities we credit with Being, species of things awesome with the life-force of their own, such as God, the Economy, and the State.' [2] BIG stories, equally made up, equally as real as our ephemeral dreams that disappear, like wisps of smoke, when our sleep is interrupted...*

Tropical Islands Resort is located in a hangar which sits like the carapace of an insect on the flat snow-covered plains of Brandenburg, south of Berlin. [3] As you approach on the bus that has picked you up from the station, you notice it is surrounded by old WW2 bunkers, some converted into workshops or offices, others falling into ruin. This stately pleasure dome, one of the largest by volume in the world at 5.5 million m<sup>3</sup>, is some 360m by 210m. It is large enough to contain a tropical rainforest, a sandy beach 200 meters long fronting the 'beach' ('Südsee'), another lagoon, spas, waterslides, villages with restaurants. The atmospheric temperature is 28° with 48% humidity; the water is kept at a steady 31°, all year round, 365 days a year. You can live there, I guess, since tents can be rented for the night.



When you pay your entrance fee, you are issued with an electronic key, which you wear like a wrist-watch. It has the number of your locker stamped on it. So after we found our lockers, we could store our clothes and valuables, and use the key to get through turnstiles. We could buy lunch with it, pay to go on the waterslide or get a massage. We had passed the frontier into a paradise of consumer liberty, for you could never know how much you had spent until the time came to go back through the turnstiles at the end of your holiday. Spend like there is no tomorrow, and the Dow Jones just went down another 5 points.



We installed ourselves on deck-chairs at Südsee, the winter sun shone through the plastic roof of the building onto us, it seemed, but the warmth was pervasive, undirected, we wondered if there were heaters on the ceiling. The restaurant was handy, only 3 meters away. The beach a few steps down. Outside it was 5° below zero, but that information was not flashed up on the electronic screen to our left. The outside was the reality we were supposed to forget, but we could see it through the side windows; snow and ice, bunkers.



“Like one layer of reality coming loose...” says my Facebook Friend, Berndt Sellheim, way over in Sydney. [4] And he’s right, reality is what this is all about. Where is reality? What is it? Who cares? *P!nk* is playing over the sound system, not too loud, but she is still screaming:

*So, so what?  
I’m still a rock star  
I got my rock moves  
And I don’t need you.*

*And guess what  
I'm having more fun...*

I order another drink, Sebastian gives me that disapproving look; he goes off to the water slide again. I gaze out over the Südsee, to the horizon, about 30 meters away. Above it rises a nicely painted backdrop of blue sky with attractive fluffy clouds. It almost joins the edge of the pool, so that it looks uncannily like the horizon that Jim Carey ran into in *The Truman Show*.

Patience and I take a walk, through the rainforest where the turtles and goldfish seem to be enjoying the pools. In the tropical village we pass a grass hut café where there is a man working on his laptop, just like he was taking his holiday in Thailand. Coming back along the Südsee, there is a tramp at the far end. The place is not too crowded, so he is on his own occupying two deck chairs. Undisturbed, he sits and sorts through all his junk that he has removed from his bags: dirty rags, bottles, instant coffee and powdered milk (he has his mug), books, newspapers. I'm thinking this guy is not going to be going swimming, but how long has he been here?

I find out the heat is directed up the walls by blowers, so that condensation does not form on the ceiling. They had to make this modification, because earlier on there would be little spontaneous rain showers, inspired by the high humidity and the presence of the 30 000 trees in 500 different species.

“Like one layer of reality coming loose...” The businessman on holiday and the urban tramp have found their way here, paid their 25 Euros to get in for the day, and are as real as all the rest, but we expect this reality to be *less* real, totally fake. In the eighties, cultural theorists Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco were enthused about simulacra and hyperreality. [5] A simulacrum like Disney World collapses time and space. It doesn't matter *where* this environment is, or *when*. Disney is also Euro-Disney; it is still a ‘small small (Yanqui!) world’, wherever it is, and it never changes. And the hyperreal was about the *scandal* of the fake, but that depended on the idea that some solid origin existed somewhere, say in Europe, and that was before the killer critique that was delivered to European modernity by the capitalisation of the erstwhile developing world. At that very instant, those origins are not so original any more, the philosophical ground shifted with the instance of the tectonic shifts of the sliding movements of global capital. The Malaysian Tanjong company bought this little piece of Germany for €17.5 million in 2003. The hangar was originally commissioned by *Cargolifter AG* to build a useful cargo zeppelin, the CL160, but the company folded.

‘But what if it is not a matter of *two* orders,’ I'm saying to Patience as we paddle in the Tropical Lagoon (31.4°), ‘you know the real and the hyperreal, as if there are primary and secondary orders of the real? Like, is a resort at Phuket in Thailand all that different? And this place is owned by some kind of Malaysian consortium isn't it? Post-colonial revenge on the Europeans? But why only two levels of reality? Why not exfoliating *layers*, or *chains of mediations* coming in and intersecting in the place?’

We have lunch, I treat myself to a glass of red, and Seb treats himself to another moralizing glance.

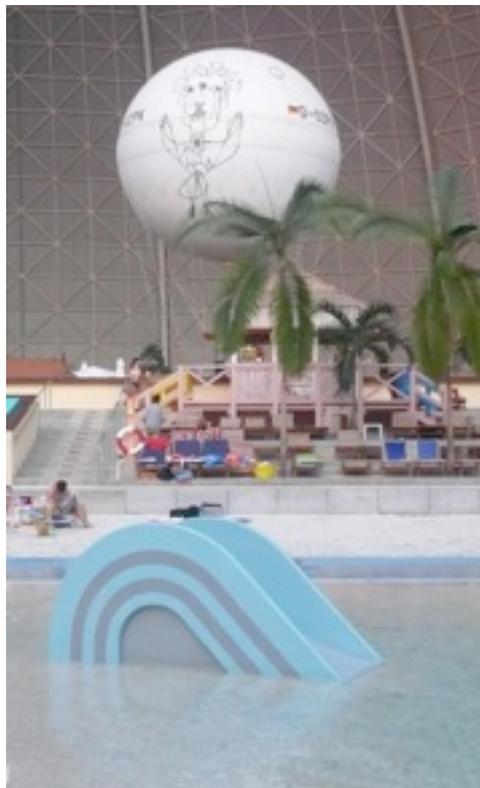
After a while I find myself drifting off in my deckchair, but before long my granddaughter is tugging at my sleeve (do I have a sleeve?) saying, ‘Look Grandpa! It's the tramp!’ And there is The Tramp, looking remarkably like Charlie Chaplin, with the big shoes, being chased by bunch of security guards with truncheons, dropping his belongings as he disappears into the rainforest. I knew he couldn't last long in this controlled environment. Thank goodness, now I can sleep the sleep of the security-enhanced.

But it seems we have stayed for the evening performance. The lights go down, the music, a lovely Schubert *lieder* rises, and the spotlight follows a man dressed simply in a business suit onto the stage, which is set in the sea just beyond the beach, huts on two sides. He stands silently for a few moments centre stage.

‘Meine Damen und Herren, Ladies and Gentlemen,’ he then begins, ‘I know that tonight you were expecting the usual native dances and magic show. I regret to inform you that the Samoan

troop we contracted for this winter season has declined to appear tonight as they renegotiate their contract. Likewise with the magicians, our negotiators were not able to pull anything out of the hat at the last minute. “Money doesn’t grow on trees,” they said, or rather that is what I said. My name by the way is Celuc Sayyid, I am CEO of the consortium that owns *Tropical Islands*; I am here on holiday myself! Isn’t it great!

‘Anyway, I thought I might entertain you with another kind of story, perhaps as strange and as magical as the performances you have not seen. The Dow Jones went down another five percentage points this afternoon, putting the US officially into a recession. Our consortium has investments largely in East Asia, so we are also extremely concerned about the shrinkage of the overall value of another Tropical Island, Singapore, as you know, the financial capital of Asia. It is all fantasy paper money! You know, like that money we burn at funerals. I’ve been thinking a lot about that lately; I keep seeing images of burning money. Let me tell you have we tried to make something real here. *Tropical Islands* is based on real tourist experiences, and a good part of that reality is fantasy. Real fantasies and desires, converted with our labour into real comforts and pleasures. People will pay good money for that, and why not?’



The little girl is tugging at my sleeve again. ‘Look Grandpa! It’s the Tramp again!’ And I look to where she is pointing. There is Charlie rising triumphantly in the Angelus Novus balloon, waving and smiling to the frustrated cops underneath. Before I can decide if this is part of the performance, I am drawn back in fascination to the fact that Sayyid has now put up a spreadsheet and is explaining in detail the various intersecting financial costings. That figure for heating the place, I think a lot of us were wondering about that; I glance at Patience, she and the rest of the audience are riveted. And there is a history to the Brandenburg city’s State investments in the form of tax breaks and various in-kinds. That guy who was working on his lap-lap, I mean lap-top, in the Thai Village earlier has it out again, and seems to be making notes. We are getting a financial history of a company going down, or rather ‘belly up’ as they say, exposing its exploding metaphorical guts as it were. There are all these tricks for keeping it afloat, like the elevation trick in the show we didn’t see. How do they hide the wires or props? How much hiding of the wires can go on before the financial fantasy breaks through into the real-world economy? Sayyid is being remarkably frank, to the point that some other suits sitting at a table by the bar seem agitated. He has told us about why the Samoans wouldn’t take a pay-cut for performing their routines; he has told us that what he stands personally to lose is both

his bonus and his investments, but his bottom line is that he can retire to a few houses in a resort village on Malaysia's west coast, where he can have quality time with his family. Tropical Islands. What he really loses is the part he plays striding the global stage as the CEO of a major corporation, no small thing; 'I have a lot of emotional investment there,' he admits. In a performance! And he takes a bow, strides off stage left.

Applause! The audience loves it, not because he has peeled away a layer of artifice to reveal the financial workings, no: we love these financial workings because of their own reality - no, not as basic, boring spreadsheets, but because he has made the story connect with the here and now, and his act is just as vulnerable as the rest.

When Walter Benjamin talks about montage, he is thinking of Brechtian performances, with the interruptions of the action qualifying as epic, always working against the audience falling into illusion. Reality, in this, is not two-fold; it can be of an indeterminate number of layers, the first layer (or strike, or link - call it what you like) being the one you begin with, your contingent moment. It doesn't matter when or where you begin, but it will often be with a surprise that marks reality's entrance. Benjamin says we need to make the theatre work by treating

elements of reality as if they were elements of an experimental set-up [... The spectator] recognizes them as real, not as with the theatre of naturalism as complacency, but with astonishment. Epic theatre does not reproduce conditions; rather it discloses, it uncovers them. [6]

Something is nudging me and I awake to the realisation that I have no granddaughter, she was the surprise guest, she got in for free on the oeneric layer, and was enthralled by the hide-and-seek tactics of the tramp. Patience is suggesting we make a move, not to be too late getting home. I say, no, I don't mind missing the evening performance. So we have a last swim, shower and go back to the lockers. Then a trip to the shops so Sebastian can get a dry T-shirt—Queen Kong in bra and undies—and we check out and wait for the bus. The excursion to the tropics ends with a fifteen-minute wait on the platform of *Brand Hauptbahnhof*, out there in the aching sub-zero of the Brandenburg plains: 'Through caverns,' sings the dreaming Coleridge, 'measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea.'

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Etienne Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009) pp. 142-3 (my translation). See also Bruno Latour, 'Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les différents modes d'existence*,' in Graham Harman, Levi Bryant and Nick Srnicek, Eds., *The Speculative Turn*, (Melbourne: re.press (in press)).

<sup>2</sup> Jimmie Durham, *Jimmie Durham: Between the Furniture and the Building (Between a Rock and a Hard Place)*, (Munich: Kunstverein München, 1998). p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Ilaria Vanni for suggesting this fieldwork site.

<sup>4</sup> Berndt made a comment about my photo in the album "Tropical Islands". To see the comment thread, follow the link: <http://www.facebook.com/n/?photo.php&pid=1298367&id=674009734>

<sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1986); Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Pan Books, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock, (London: Verso, 2003). pp. 99-100.