

Translated excerpt

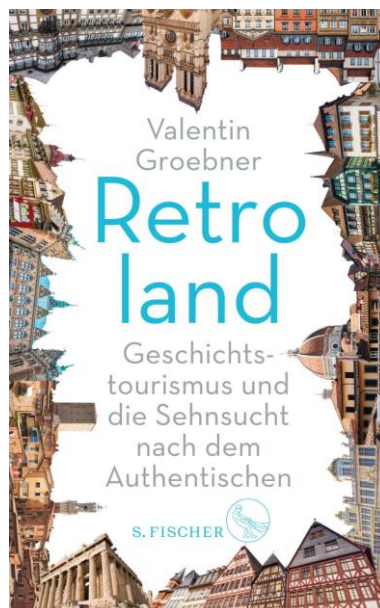
Valentin Groebner
Retroland. Geschichtstourismus und die Sehnsucht nach dem Authentischen

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Valentin Groebner
Retroland. Historical Tourism and the Longing for Authenticity

Translated by Jefferson Chase



This Place is a Time Capsule

Relative extensive, well-functioning and internally coherent parts of our own reality are made up of fictions. One such part is tourism, with its conscious staging of things that never existed anywhere outside of itself. Why, I asked at the beginning of this book, can tourism not exist without constant references to authenticity from the past? Why does it stubbornly insist on stories of origin as the roots and sources of its own identity? And if this identity is defined as historical and comes from the past, how can or perhaps must it forever be experienced anew?

That was the reason for the visits to specific places in the previous chapters to see how things are on the ground. What do you actually see of history if you go to Saint-Chapelle or Notre Dame in Paris, Lucerne's Kapellbrücke, Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka or the Southern Tyrolean Val Martello? The imaginary trip back to the past produces very different forms of history once again made visible in the present. At the beginning of this book I also cited Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who wrote that the one true remaining in the twenty-first century after tourists conquered the world is the past. But this locus of desire – unlike the picturesque historic city centers, paradisiac tropical islands, Mediterranean beaches and Alpine hotels we examined in the past chapters – is truly distant. Or to be more accurate: unreachable.

Islands, Layers, Reflections

We can in fact see the distinction between the past – unchangeable, off limits, over and done with – and history, which is the reproduction and re-narration of the past at a given present time. On what is today the border between Turkey and Armenia lies the city of Ani, or Harspasmus in Greek. Located along the northern Silk Road and controlled first by Byzantium and then the Seljuk Empire, this metropolis boasted more than 100,000 inhabitants in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and was known as "the city of 1001 churches." In 1319, it was levelled by an earthquake and began to shrink. It has been completely abandoned for more than three hundred years, its ruins rarely visited by tourists. Because of its Turkish origins, Turks seldom mention it. A historical plaque speaks vaguely of the "Christian legacy within the Ottoman Empire. And the remnants of the city continue to crumble.

Yet while Ani is known only to a very few period experts, the Ise Grand Shrine is famous around the world. The holiest site in Shinto Japan, located near Kyoto, dates back in its current form to the seventh century. Actually, it is only the form that is 1300 years old. Every twenty years, the temple is completely rebuilt in exactly the same form and using strictly regulated traditional techniques directly next to the old one, which is then torn down. The wooden parts of the old shrine

are burned, and those components that cannot be burned are buried. The shrine that can be seen today was built in 2013 and attracts more than six million tourists a year.

Both places neatly illustrate the relationship between the past and history. The past is gone, disappeared. It is only tangible in the form of broken, incomplete remnants – unless it is transformed into history, into today, the here-and-now, an effective narrative and visualization, and the result of the work of still living protagonists. Ani and Ise are two extreme examples of these categories. Ani's central principle is an absolute lack of history, only the past, which is slowly but irreversibly decaying. Ise's core principle is pure history, rebuilt every twenty years, and no past.

It's much more common for these two principles to occur in hybrid forms, for example, in the historical landmarks in European old towns we encountered in previous chapters. Even more frequent are buildings that present remnants of various epochs, layers of time piled atop one another. For instance, the intricate Renaissance façade of the Palazzo Tantuzzi in the historic center of Bologna dates back to 1521 and was painstakingly restored at the start of the twenty-first century. Equally minutely reconstructed in black and white were some surviving documents about shelters, the entry to which is located immediately behind the portal, and the contact information for air raid safety supervisors for use during "incuriono aeree." Addresses and telephone numbers from 1943 and 1944 are just as much a part of a past attraction as the frescos and architectural details from the sixteenth century, which have been restored to look as they used to in an earlier period without being anachronistic. They are, so to speak, permanently old.

The reverse is also possible. Since 2001, part of the University of Frankfurt am Main has been located in a former administrative building of the IG Farben chemicals company, which was built in 1928 by architect Hans Poelzig. This gigantic structure with its severe, imposing façade has been carefully restored, and on every floor large glass panels provide information in German and English about the company, its collaboration with the National Socialists, and its involvement in the Second World War and the organization of the concentration camps. The strange thing is, noted the young IG Farben employee who gave me a tour of the building, that the restoration obliterated almost all traces of the fact that after 1945, the building was used for fifty years as a headquarters for the US military administration in West Germany. Carefully displaying memories of the years from 1925 to 1945 is simultaneously an act of concealment, which causes the period of American usage, although it was more than three times as long, to disappear. The only remaining trace of that period is General Dwight D. Eisenhower's former office, which is frequently used for special occasions.

Making history is a performance akin to what the humanists did in the sixteenth century. The restoration of old remnants is not just about preservation, but rather involves selecting the "correct"

phase of the past, when the attraction was most worth seeing. It's applied time management. What gets presented is a new (hi)story, cleansed of any inappropriate or superfluous bits. The Parthenon in Athens is an especially famous and intensively touristic example. It only became the epitome of a classical stylistic ideal in 1762 with the publication of a picture book entitled *The Antiquities of Athens*, which introduced Antique Greek architecture to an educated European public as a model for emulation. And the temple only became a civic and national landmark after 1832, with the removal of the remains of the mosque into which the Parthenon had been transformed when Athens was conquered by the fifteenth-century Ottomans. Before that, it had been used as a cathedral of St. Mary.

In his famous later, "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis" Sigmund Freud described an experience he had while on vacation as an example of the troubled relationship between the past and his own desires. "A surprising thought suddenly entered my mind: 'So all this really *does* exist, just as we learnt at school!'" Freud wrote. "By the evidence of my senses I am now standing on the Acropolis, but I cannot believe it." When Freud wrote these words, the Parthenon was one of the most often reproduced images in the world: contemporary reproduction is always part of what's historical about historical landmarks. Every monument of this sort is a multimedia complex, distributed across several layers of time, forever understood in slightly changing ways and with external augmentations, without which no remnant can ever become a historical moment – to say nothing of becoming a historical *attraction*.

At their most extreme, augmentations are merely doublings of whatever has remained of the past, which is equally impenetrable and insufficient. Particularly fragile historical monuments like the Lascaux cave paintings aren't open to public viewing. Most people can only see them in the form of replicas. The same solution has been used for a number of popular attractions from the past, from the Stonehenge megaliths to the sandstone sculpture of Roland on the Bremen market square to the façade of the Basel Minster. There is little that's more destructive to monuments, it seems, as the all-too-intense interest of visitors. With Stonehenge, a sarcastic British artist has even made a copy of the copy in the form of a movable bouncy castle. It is a huge hit.

The three "medieval" castles in Germany that attract the largest numbers of tourists – Hohenstaufen, Wartburg and Neuschwanstein – were all built in the nonetheless century. Nonetheless, we should not scoff at the rebuilding of medieval monuments as an instance of historicist excess. Attractions from the medieval past are also being constructed in the twenty-first century. There are plans in Iceland, for instance, to reconstruct the fourteenth-century medieval cathedral in Skálholt. In Guédelon in Burgundy, construction on a thirteenth-century castle has been going on, exclusively using medieval building techniques, since 1997. It attracts more than a quarter

of a million tourists annually. In Friesach, Austria, construction abiding by the same principles is being done on a castle from the thirteenth century. Its motto is: "The Castle-Building Experience." In Messkirch in Schwarzwald, southern Germany, a complete ninth-century monastery town has been under reconstruction since 2012. Building there too has been restricted to resuscitated medieval techniques. "A unique journey through time," boasts the project's homepage. "Building as it was 1200 years ago...Experience the Middle Ages up close and personal...here the clocks tick differently." So are today's bouncy castles into the past – anyone and everyone can jump inside.

With the Parthenon, the relationship between old and new is more complex. The original is open for tourists to view, but because of the poor state of preservation of the temple as a whole, it's a permanent construction site, an uninterrupted and uncompletable salvation project. The Parthenon Museum at the foot of the Acropolis, which opened after extensive planning in 2009, offers a purified, über-version of the attraction. Its third story has exactly the same measures and orientation as the original so that it is able to display the marble frieze in its full length and original sequence. The parts of it that were taken away in 1801 and are today kept at the British Museum have been repatriated in the form of replicas at least. The Parthenon Museum attracts five million visitors a year. It's a special kind of mirror, an affirmative reflection that efficiently makes anything incongruous disappear: the bright lights of the modern city down below, which are hidden by large blinds in front of the windows, as well as three centuries of the Ottoman Empire and a thousand years of Byzantium. In a spacious display case in the museum, there is a further model of the precious holy relic on display, a copy of a copy of the Parthenon, reconstructed in bright plastic. It's made not by Playmobil, although that would hardly be surprising. Instead it consists of Lego blocks.

The new life breathed into the remnants of the past is defined by its insufficiency, which needs augmenting and completing supplements. The Parthenon is a good example of this. "The whole psychological situation, which seems so confused and is so difficult to describe, can be satisfactorily cleared up by assuming that at the time I had (or might have had) a momentary feeling: '*What I see here is not real,*'" Freud wrote at the end of his letter in 1936. Since 2015, the nighttime Parthenon can be viewed in the new lighting created for it by a French architectural firm expressly for that purpose. The scaffolding disappears, while the building itself seems to hover over the city, bathed in pink green and orange, like a gigantic ice cream cake with an overabundance of sugar icing. What might Sigmund Freud have said to that?

Reeling in the Years

Other attractions offer visitors alternate ways of ordering time. Warsaw, Castle Square, 11:15 AM. It's a cold, overcast December day, but above the castle's main gate, a window is open. A man with a trumpet appears and plays a melody that echoes from the outside of the buildings across the way.

This takes place every day, my tour guide tells me. Day in, day out, the man plays the Warsaw city song, always at the same time, to mark the first air raid by the Wehrmacht on the city in September 1939. After being hit by a bomb, the clock on the outer wall of the castle stopped at 11:15 AM. In August 1944, the castle, together with the rest of the old town, was destroyed by the Wehrmacht. Today, my tour guide continues, only five percent of the city's residents have relatives who lived there before 1939. Three-quarters of Warsaw's population back then of 1.3 million didn't survive the Second World War. Between 1949 and 1955, the historic city center was painstakingly, if sometimes fictionally reconstructed. The castle, funded by private donations, was rebuilt between 1977 and 1988. And since the fall of communist government in 1989, a trumpeter has played the city anthem every day at 11:15 AM.

Time, which has come to a standstill, must be re-propelled over and over so that history doesn't disappear. There is stasis, then a new beginning for the roughly four-minute duration of the city anthem, then more stasis. Even the pause has to be repeated, lest it too disappear. If you freeze time for the purpose of commemorating it, you have to do that over and over. What punishment would be incurred, we can't help but ask ourselves, if this moment of pious commemoration were skipped?

It's well worth taking a look around the alleyways surrounding Warsaw Castle. The historic buildings reconstructed sixty years ago – only those dating back to before 1850 were rebuilt – are now themselves in need of renovation, and many of the exteriors are covered in scaffolding. The company charged with the renovations is called Monument Service, and there's a Nike flagship store lurking behind a Renaissance façade covered in graffiti. I visited in early December. A Christmas market had been set up before a rebuilt remnant of the old Warsaw city wall. It consisted of a long succession of miniature knights' castles made of wood, and the market was full of the mulled wine, sweets and stuff in tinsel and red – exactly the same as at Christmas markets throughout the world. I was reminded of the tourism planet science fiction author Ursula LeGuin described in one of her short stories. On the planet, visitors were able to celebrate specific occasions connected with a variety of locations every day. On Christmas Island it was always Christmas Eve, the Easter bunny showed up every day on Easter Island and on New Year's Island, every midnight was rung in with

champagne, fireworks and resolutions for the coming year. In the story, the planet was run by something called the "Great Joy Corporation."

Warsaw resonates with a likewise bizarre sensation. The entire old town feels like a backdrop to sell things in front of. The unimaginable numbers of casualties from the Second World War have disappeared, and in their place the lovely old houses of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have come back. Could it be, I found myself wondering, that historic city centers – those rebuilt after destruction like Warsaw or Münster and those restored and polished up like Lucerne and Bologna – are actually Christmas markets, or planets from an ironic science-fiction story? Can it be that visitors don't care a whit which time period the streets they explore come from, as long as they can purchase gingerbread, mulled wine and sneakers made in Asia there?

Of all holidays, Christmas is the one that unashamedly creates a fictional, nostalgic past. Red-suited Santas frolic in the snow in front of rural wooden huts along with white and gold angels, baby Jesuses and reindeer, replete with blinking blue, red, white and green strings of lights and oversized snowmen of white plastic, illuminated from within. Everything will be perfect, we tell ourselves, if only snow arrives in time. Christmas is the ritualistic obsession with nostalgia, expressing the diffuse sense that we have lost the rural idyll in which we actually grew up. The decorations create a snowed-in wonderland located at some point in the final third of the nineteenth century simultaneously in Salzburg and alpine Bavaria (the blond baby Jesus), New England (Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer), London (fireplaces, stockings, Dickens), Sweden and the Erzgebirge mountains of central Germany. This wonderland has no room for the two places where the majority of people in the twenty-first century spend the largest portion of their time, factories and offices. Beatific infantilism becomes a behavioral imperative. No sooner has Christmas come and gone, than most people feel embarrassed – or relieved. But just as inevitably, Christmas season returns eleven months later.

The narrative upon which tourism is based is one of traveling into time as a site of enhanced experience, a site on which visitors can dive into the past without threatening or questioning their own place as a part of modernity. The visited past needs to offer sufficient contrasts to our own present day, but people also have to be able to use, view and photograph practically and conveniently. That creates a set of paradoxes. Historical tourism focuses on our own origins but in unfamiliar and seductive exotic form. The Parthenon is celebrated as the birthplace of modern Western Europe, but it also has to mask all traces of modern-day Athens. Restored historic Warsaw remembers national sacrifice but also allows visitors to amuse themselves and shop. These contradictions don't diminish the effect of tourist attractions. They augment them. As literature

specialists know, narratives become increasingly stable the more extensively they can attract and co-opt dichotomous options and uses.

The obvious conclusion is that everything which allows a site to function as a beginning and historic origin gets added later. Otherwise, it wouldn't work for its visitors in the present day. Usually there is nothing at the site of a historic origin – the beginning is over, gone, disappeared. In the preceding chapters, we have looked at a whole series of local forms of such sites, from medieval battlefields and cathedrals to national anniversaries and staged productions by entertainment industries and counter-cultures. For a site to become a historical "location" people visit in order to recharge and rejuvenate themselves with something fresh from the past, the remnant, the trace, the monument must first be reconstructed, installed and restored – and the attendant stories must be constantly updated to remain effective.

For this reason, the original has no choice but to remain invisible. The intact, authentic past is a literal blind spot outside all stories of loss to which tourism has such an intense relationship. When people speak of the destruction of what was formerly so lovely through modernization and touristification, it is tacitly assumed that there must have been a point from which this beauty – be it an intact medieval city center or cathedral, an Alpine landscape, the day-to-day culture of farmers and fishermen, a paradisiac beach – was able to be appreciated, described and documented, in direct unadulterated form, in all its purity and completeness. That is the sense behind the melancholy word "still" so often used by tourist offices and tourist guides when they describe the changes wrought over the past century-and-a-half. Writers from 1975, 1910, 1830 or 1790 who were present in a given place when it was real, authentic, raw, unspoiled and beautiful are cited as witnesses – witnesses to a loss, we should add. Ever since organized tourism has existed, visitors have believed that they are only seeing the damaged remnants of a much more complete impressive complete experience that is unfortunately gone for good. But the past as a fragile world perfectly preserved under glass only exists in the moment when we look back. In truth, it has always been lost. That's why we so often feel homesick for places we've never been.

Origin Narratives as Talks with the Dead

The metaphor of bringing historical events to life or making the past come alive again – one which has cropped up often on the preceding pages – is so commonplace that we've stopped even registering it. Consult a friendly search engine, and you'll find that the slogan "making history come alive" is used by a city tour of Frankfurt's Römer, a castle museum in the Lower Lausitz and the Bourbaki Museum in Lucerne to woo tourists – and the list could be extended infinitely. Of course,

mansions, castles and panoramic views were never really alive in the same sense as those who lived in them or whose likenesses are displayed there. It's not difficult to see this slogan as a banal version of that educated promise with which more than five centuries ago Ciriaco de' Pizzicolti tried to alert wealthy patrons and sponsors to his special skill in dealing with the past. As we saw in chapter two, Ciriaco boasted of being able to raise the dead themselves from the underworld and make them speak – as part of the "happiest restoration of the old times."

Since then, the slogan has lost none of its suggestive power. There is a famous anecdote about the mechanism of speaking with the dead, from the twentieth, not the fifteenth century. Amidst the craze for the occult after the First World War, escape artist Harry Houdini met with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, who was firmly convinced that supernatural powers could allow people to make direct contact with the past. Houdini was a notorious skeptic, and Conan Doyle aimed to convince him of the reality of such supernatural contact. At a séance, with the help of Conan Doyle's wife, who had gone into a trance, Houdini was presented with a message from his deceased mother. 'Oh my darling, thank God, thank God, at last I'm through...," Lady Doyle wrote. "I've tried, oh-so-often and now I'm happy...My only worry was that my dear son didn't know how often I was near him." Conan Doyle was delighted. For his part, in an interview the day after the séance, Houdini said he had been deeply moved. But he hastened to add that he was the child of Hungarian immigrants whose real name was Erich Weiss, and throughout her life, his mother had only spoken Hungarian. He never knew that spirits learn perfect English in the hereafter.

The dead always speak English – or whatever language their audience speaks. Every repetition of what has been is the product of thoroughly real work that takes place in the here-and-now, for instance, that of Lady Doyle in our example. Dialogues with the dead always serve to make other much more alive figures disappear. That is true as well for the academic discipline of history, which has a long tradition of awakening and interrogating deceased witnesses as a rhetorical technique. As Gonzague de Reynold wrote, "Of my own free will I descend and call to them: will you answer me when I ask you?"

De Reynold wasn't the only one to pose this question, and his formulation leaves it open whom he was addressing. The conflicts surrounding the politics of history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are extremely heated struggles over who has the right in the medial present – i.e. the here-and-now – to speak for the dead of the past. The past is the equivalent – the cypher and emotional arena – of uncleared debts. The message is that the historian owes the dead, always "our dead," something. Anyone who claims to speak in the name of the dead and to understand mistreated people in the past assumes the position of those whom he and or she represents. It is an

act of substitution, somewhat like the humanists of five centuries ago, who put themselves forward as reliable translators of Antique authorities. You can approve of this, but you don't have to.

Experiencing Authenticity

Yet when the dead remain silent and absent, and the past is no longer there, what is meant by experiencing and the experience of the historical, as plays such a central role in travel brochures and travel literature? The verb "experience" stands for something that cannot take place anywhere but in one's own subjective here-and-now. What tourists take in most intensively are their own sensibilities. They are unashamedly their own travel destination, insofar as "experience" means putative access to events that happened a long time ago.

In the process, the relationship between the familiar world of the self and the alien world, imagined as genuine, raw and original, is organized so that they mutually augment one another. The ego is at its most intense in the genuine. In this regard, too, tourists are the heirs of the humanists who dismissed their predecessors as excessively gullible. At the same time, they ascribe to the Antique source as an "original" a maximum of authority and truth – and to themselves and no one else the ability to directly perceive, capture and pass on this authenticity. Contained within the concept of the experience is always the anxiety that one has now used it intensely and completely enough. Philosopher Mark Grief has called this "perma-adolescence." The longing to eternally repeat and expand the experiences of youth, he argues, goes hand in hand with the melancholy feeling of having once again missed what is genuine and especially intense.

Shall we take another example? Mani in the Peloponnese is a point of mountainous terrain that juts out into the Mediterranean, with small bays and serpentine roads. In the town of Stoupa, there's a sandy beach, frequented in summer mainly by sunburned tourists from Britain, who can be seen drinking beer at 10 AM. A thin, silent young man sticks colorful flyers, advertising a restaurant in the neighboring village, under the windshield wipers of the cars. "Experience the most authentic-traditional Greek cuisine!" they read. The picturesque landscape where the visitors already are is apparently not Greek enough. The superlative in the advertisement promises something more genuine and original. The vacation apartments that have been constructed in the villages and on the bays of the stark, wild mountains of Mani all are all built to resemble the ancient defensive towers for which the peninsula is famous. "By doing this," my companion quips, "they're making Mani more and more manic."



The use of history for tourism entails a whole series of magic spells, formulas and promises. "You are allowed to forget that the past has passed," is one of them. "Everything is here, right now." The second formula is only whispered because everyone knows it by heart. "What's truly genuine is for us and us alone" – infinitely reproduced in-group exclusivity amidst the empire of copiousness. "We never use the word authentic," proclaims a British travel agency advertisement targeted at well-educated people for vacations in Greece and Turkey in the *London Review of Books*. But the word authentic comes with an asterisk and the qualification down below, "Except on this occasion"