

April 2022

## The “politics of inclusion/exclusion” in times of the pandemic

Florian Freitag

University of Duisburg-Essen, [florian.freitag@uni-duisburg-essen.de](mailto:florian.freitag@uni-duisburg-essen.de)



Part of the Environmental Design Commons, Interactive Arts Commons, Operations Research, Systems Engineering and Industrial Engineering Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jteas>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Special Issue is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Themed Experience and Attractions Studies by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Freitag, Florian (2022) "The “politics of inclusion/exclusion” in times of the pandemic," *Journal of Themed Experience and Attractions Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/jteas/vol2/iss1/4>

# The “politics of inclusion/exclusion” in times of the pandemic

Florian Freitag\*

University of Duisburg-Essen, Department of Anglophone Studies, Universitätsstr. 12, 45141 Essen, Germany

---

## Abstract

As commercial enterprises that depend on attracting a maximum number of visitors in order to be economically successful, theme parks have generally been careful to avoid unpleasant, sensitive, or controversial themes (or aspects of a theme) that might offend or alienate potential customers. Due to official regulations concerning e.g. the wearing of masks in waiting lines and during rides, however, the pandemic cannot simply be “excluded” from the parks and remains constantly visually present, thus seriously undermining the companies’ efforts to keep the park grounds rigidly separated from the rest of the world. Particular operational decisions by some theme park companies have further aggravated the situation by allowing heated public debates about the pandemic and the authorities’ reactions to it to “spill over” into the parks. At the same time, an even partial return to the traditional politics of inclusion and exclusion may also no longer have the intended effects on visitors, but quite the opposite: it is the pre-pandemic level of crowding that now scares some visitors. The article therefore suggests better visually integrating pandemic-related signage and equipment in order to create a harmonious and reassuring atmosphere as well as relying on environmental cues rather than explicitly formulated rules to manage and direct crowds.

**Keywords:** Theme parks; Europa-Park; politics of inclusion/exclusion; design; operations; COVID-19.

---

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only changed the ways in which theme parks market themselves (Freitag, 2020), it has also resulted in a failure of what critics have variously described as the sites’ traditional “politics of inclusion/exclusion” (Lukas, 2007, p.277) or their strategy of thematic “selection” (Carlà & Freitag, 2015, p.244). As commercial enterprises that depend on attracting a maximum number of visitors in order to be economically successful, theme parks have generally been careful to avoid unpleasant, sensitive, or controversial themes (or aspects of a theme) that might offend or alienate potential customers, notably work, sexuality, and politics, conflict, violence, and war, as well as sickness and death. Metatouristic theme parks, for example – that is, parks like Europa-Park or Epcot’s World Showcase that draw on popular tourist destinations as their thematic sources – seek to avoid themes (or aspects of a theme) that do not fit the particular tourism imaginaries of a given destination among the target visitors; just as the Disney parks’ various versions of New Orleans remain silent on interracial conflicts, slavery, segregation, the Civil War, plagues, and hurricanes, among other things (see e.g. Freitag, 2021; on Disney’s Port Orleans – French Quarter Resort at Walt Disney World), Europa-Park’s version of Greece avoids references to the Greek government’s debt crisis (Carlà-Uhink, 2020). It is precisely these traditional “politics of inclusion/exclusion” or this strategy of “selection,” however, that have been fundamentally upset by the pandemic.

---

\* Corresponding author. Email: [florian.freitag@uni-duisburg-essen.de](mailto:florian.freitag@uni-duisburg-essen.de)

## 2. The failure of the “politics of inclusion/exclusion”

Due to official regulations concerning e.g. the wearing of masks in waiting lines and during rides, the pandemic cannot simply be “excluded” from the parks – metatouristic or other – and remains constantly visually present, thus seriously undermining the parks’ efforts to keep the park grounds rigidly separated from the rest of the world. This is also what distinguishes the COVID-19 pandemic from previous (and ongoing) global disasters such as terrorism: following 9/11, many parks, too, remained closed, but quickly reopened with additional security measures such as bag screening stations. Crucially, however, the latter have been routinely placed *in front of* the actual park entrances: at Disneyland Park (Paris), for instance, visitors have their bags screened even before they reach Fantasia Gardens, the lushly landscaped area in front of the Disneyland Hotel building that also houses the ticket booths. Thus, the parks have sought to take concerns about terrorist attacks off visitors’ minds long before they enter the park itself. Similarly, at the time of writing, visitors to Europa-Park in southern Germany need to have their vaccination/test status checked *before* they enter the premises. But the masks worn by fellow visitors and staff, the newly installed plexiglass partitions, added signage, disinfectant spray dispensers etc., constantly remind visitors of the potential dangers of the virus during the entire time of their visit.

Particular operational decisions by some theme park companies have even aggravated the situation by allowing heated public debates about the pandemic and the authorities’ reactions to it to “spill over” into the parks. Seeking to make the process of entering the park more efficient, Europa-Park, for example, decided to give out differently colored wristbands to hotel guests who are vaccinated or convalescent on the one hand and to visitors who had tested negatively for COVID-19 prior to their arrival on the other hand. Since test results must not be older than 24 hours (quick test) or 48 hours (PCR test), the park had thus hoped to avoid having to check the “status” of all multi-day visitors on a daily basis, as only those with a “tested negatively” wristband would have to renew their “proof of authorization” during their stay at the resort. Especially visitors who were neither vaccinated nor convalescent, however, considered this practice an invasion of their privacy, felt publicly stigmatized, and voiced their concerns and anger on social media, with some comparing the wristbands to the badges of shame used in the Third Reich. A self-identified “satirical,” anonymous caricature posted in reply to one of the park’s Facebook posts on August 23, 2021, for example, shows an amusement park using separate entrances and partitions to classify its visitors as “vaccinated” and “unvaccinated,” with the “unvaccinated” entrance guarded by a park employee resembling Adolf Hitler; visitors on the “vaccinated” side are yelling and throwing bottles at those on the “unvaccinated” side, and an elderly man on the “unvaccinated” remarks “We’ve been here before” (“Ab sofort,” 2021).

Europa-Park’s wristband policy could thus be compared to previous instances where theme park visitors felt they were being categorized into separate groups (however justified these feelings may appear to others). For example, when in 2013-2014 Disneyland in Anaheim, California, renovated and expanded its private “Club 33,” installing huge picture windows that, especially at night, allowed Club guests and “regular” park visitors to observe each other, one angry reviewer commented: “If you’re not a [Club 33] member and can’t afford the dues, that fact is now shoved in your face” (DeCaro, 2014). Far from making “a determined effort either to erase, or at least render unimportant, our awareness of class distinctions in the park,” as Edward Harwood (2002, p.52) has noted of contemporary theme parks, Disneyland rather seemed, according to this commentator, to be deliberately reinforcing class distinctions. Concerning highly complex ethical decisions rather than class distinctions, Europa-Park’s wristband policy, a park spokesperson quickly asserted, was by no means intended to stigmatize individual visitors (SWR, 2021a). Nevertheless, the park changed its policies again, giving out the same wristbands to all hotel guests but changing the color on a daily basis, no doubt as it had realized that highly controversial public debates about compulsory vaccinations and reserving certain rights to those who are vaccinated or convalescent had started to crystallize around the wristbands – precisely those kinds of controversial debates that theme parks usually invite their visitors to leave at the entrance.

## 3. Changing criteria

At the same time, another example from Europa-Park also indicates that the criteria for theme parks’ “politics of inclusion/exclusion” or their strategy of “selection” may have somewhat shifted since the beginning of the pandemic in 2019. For in addition to its wristband policy, Europa-Park also received criticism from visitors for the large crowds in the park (SWR, 2021b). Officially, at the time of writing, the park is allowed to run at full capacity, although it has on its own decided to cap the maximum number of visitors at 25,000 (Europa-Park, 2021; SWR, 2021b). Nevertheless, some visitors accused the park of letting in so many people that it became difficult for some to

maintain the proper distance to fellow visitors. While overcrowding and pinch points or bottlenecks (Younger, 2016, p.298) have always been a concern for theme park operators and visitors alike, an “undercrowded” or even completely empty park has also caused visitors to feel uneasy, at least until the first year into the pandemic. On March 28, 2020, for instance, Europa-Park posted a 3.5-minute video entitled “Drohnen Emotionen” (“drone emotions”) on its YouTube account (Europa-Park, 2020). Taking viewers on a “flight through the park,” as the description reads, the video solely consists of long shots of the park grounds filmed using a drone. While the images are carefully framed so as not to show the park’s backstage areas, they show the site completely devoid of people and with the rides and even most of the fountains turned off. As one commentator noted: “Wunderschön, aber auch irgendwie leicht unheimlich, alles so ganz ohne Leute zu sehen” (“Very beautiful, but somehow it is also slightly uncanny to see everything without any people”).

Indeed, despite the epic soundtrack accompanying the images, the atmosphere is somehow eerie, as if something tragic had happened (which in fact it had!), and reminiscent of many documentary depictions of abandoned theme parks by urban explorers (see e.g. the material published by Florian Seidel on his “Abandoned Kansai” website) or fictional portrayals of theme parks in a post-apocalyptic world (see e.g. the video game *Fallout 4: Nuka-World*, 2016). By summer 2021, however, at least some visitors have apparently started to feel uncomfortable and unsafe in the face of crowds (crowds that must be, if we believe Europa-Park’s self-imposed maximum visitor number, even lighter than in pre-COVID peak times) – an emotional reaction from visitors that theme parks also seek to avoid (see also Williams, 2021, p.140). Thus, while the pandemic and the visible signs of attempts to fight it (masks, signage, etc.) have arguably disrupted theme parks’ traditional politics of excluding, as far as possible, reminders of outside, real-world concerns, an even partial return to these traditional politics may also no longer have the intended effects on visitors, but quite the opposite: it is the pre-pandemic level of crowding that now scares some visitors. Yet although the theme park has been described as generally rather conservative due to its reliance on well-established and easily recognizable themes (Carlà, 2016), over the course of its history its politics of theming have also proven quite flexible and adaptable in the face of e.g. changing cultural climates (Freitag, 2021). We may be in the middle of yet another such phase of adaptation.

#### 4. Designing for the pandemic

Indeed, with the pandemic continuing much longer than most had anticipated in 2019, the parks may wish to think about going beyond merely temporary (or temporary-looking) changes to their landscapes and operations. Generic masks worn by visitors and staff, temporary-looking signage warning visitors that they will be asked to leave the premises should they not comply with safety rules, non-themed hand sanitizer locations, and regular safety tape to mark out where visitors should stand in line may all reinforce the impression that something is off and “not as it should be,” rather than encouraging visitors to let go and immerse themselves into the park’s environments. In addition to better visually integrating such newly-installed signage and equipment in order to create a harmonious and reassuring atmosphere, the parks may also wish to start thinking about relying on environmental cues rather than explicitly formulated rules to manage and direct crowds. To use a well-known example, there is no sign at the beginning of Disneyland’s Main Street, U.S.A. that asks visitors to please proceed to Central Plaza in order to make room for those coming after them – they are intuitively drawn towards the center of the park by the tall spires of the castle. In the past, theme parks have thus succeeded admirably well in using subtle design to make their visitors feel and behave in certain ways – sometimes even despite themselves. Perhaps it is time to employ these well-established strategies to new ends.

#### References

- Anon. (2021, August 23). Ab sofort im Freizeitpark. *Facebook*.  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4447722518624403&set=p.4447722518624403&type=3>
- Bethesda Game Studios. (2016). *Fallout 4: Nuka World*.
- Carlà-Uhink, F. (2020). *Representations of classical Greece in theme parks*. Bloomsbury.
- Carlà, F. (2016). The uses of history in themed spaces. In S. A. Lukas (Ed.), *A reader in themed and immersive spaces* (pp.19-29). ETC.
- Carlà, F., & Freitag, F. (2015). Ancient Greek culture and myth in the Terra Mítica theme park. *Classical Receptions Journal*, 7(2), 242-259.

- DeCaro, D. (2014, July 29). Kool aid at Club 33, pt. 1. *Daveland*. <http://daveland.blog.blogspot.de/2014/07/kool-aid-at-club-33-pt-1.html>
- Europa-Park. (2021, August 15). @t.e.25.2002. *Instagram*.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CS160IPqVV0/c/17909593067001722/r/18225981799078155/>
- Europa-Park. (2020, March 28). Drohnen Emotionen. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64quLg-56r0>
- Freitag, F. (2021). *Popular New Orleans: The crescent city in periodicals, theme parks, and opera, 1875-2015*. Routledge.
- Freitag, F. (2020, October 20). Theme parks and COVID-19: The return of metatourism. *Studying Theme Parks*.  
<https://studyingthemeparks.com/2020/10/20/theme-parks-and-covid-19-the-return-of-metatourism/>
- Harwood, E. (2002). Rhetoric, authenticity, and reception: The eighteenth-century landscape garden, the modern theme park, and their audiences. In R. Riley & T. Young (Eds.), *Theme park landscapes: Antecedents and variations* (pp.49-68). Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.
- Lukas, S. A. (2007). A politics of reverence and irreverence: Social discourse on theming controversies. In S. A. Lukas (Ed.), *The themed space: Locating culture, nation, and self* (pp.271-293). Lexington.
- Seidel, F. (n.d.). *Abandoned Kasai*. <https://abandonedkansai.com/about>
- SWR. (2021a, August 20). Nach Kritik: Hotels des Europaparks ändern Corona-Kennzeichnung. *SWR aktuell*.  
<https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/suedbaden/hotels-europapark-rust-aendern-corona-kennzeichnung-100.html>
- SWR. (2021b, August 17). Kritik am Gedränge im Europapark. *SWR aktuell*. <https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/baden-wuerttemberg/suedbaden/kritik-an-gedraenge-im-europapark-100.html>
- Williams, R. (2021). Theme parks in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. In P. D. Keidl, L. Melamed, V. Hediger, & A. Somaini (Eds.), *Pandemic media: Preliminary notes toward an inventory* (pp.137-143). Meson.
- Younger, D. (2016). *Theme park design and the art of themed entertainment*. Inklingwood.