



“No one from the countryside possibly imagines how you feel in heavy seas”

Swiss people on their way to America

Extended Abstract

Sabine August

In 2013, the author Sabine August had the possibility to conceptualise and create an exhibit about the emigration of Swiss people from the two cantons of Appenzell (Appenzellerland). This exhibit focused on the individual, the emotional moments of emigration, and the character of transition. The visitor had the possibility to observe the historical lines and main destinations of emigration and got an insight into the individual story of the whole process (push and pull factors, which media helped for the decision, the farewell, the departure, the tweendeck for the third class passengers, the formal immigration procedure, the integration into the new homeland, and the transformation of Swiss traditions in the new Swiss society abroad). The exhibit showed the psychological dimensions of the migration process and the personal experiences of the emigrants. The history and personal stories of historical and recent individuals were combined. In the exhibit, the voyage as a form or experience of transition, could only really be shown by the use of visual effects. Between the two floors, in the middle of the stairway, the visitor could observe a blown-up photo of 1915 by the photographer Edwin Levick, which showed the arrival of an emigrant ship into the harbour of New York. All the passengers were on deck when the ship passed the Statue of Liberty – still on their voyage shortly before landing – a symbolic and an emotional moment of the beginning of a new life and a (his)story for all.

In fact the author shares the assumption that the sea voyage might be an experience of transition and that the ship was “the heterotopia par excellence”, to quote Michel Foucault. But as the author tries to show, the reality on board for the passengers was totally different. Their focus was not on that opportunity to look both backward and forward, even though it is a fact that the emigrants passed through a «suspended» time and space which would be perfect for considering their life experiences. In all letters, diaries, and reports from Swiss emigrants about the sea voyages which the author studied (especially the examples from Schelbert & Rappolt (2009), Hasler (1985) and *Der Kolonist*, a magazine about emigration for Swiss emigrants (1851-1857) and others, it is obvious that in reality, the emigrants had no time to deal with this transition or weren't even aware of it. Passengers have described and documented the sea voyage as



as a sequence of extraordinary situations which had to be immediately dealt with. Only in times of relaxation or during leisure hours was it possible for the emigrant to express his emotions, thoughts, and considerations about the past and the future. Because of the situation on board, which presented multifaceted threats, risks and challenges based on weather and sea conditions, sea sickness, hygienic circumstances, other sorts of illnesses, stress due to a lack of personal space, and other events, the author argues against regarding this EXPERIENCE as a transition. But it is possible to feel it in the moments of preparation for the voyage or at the farewell, and also later if the transition ends and a new state of being is achieved. The author asserts that the only chance to feel the transition in real time, is for it to be accompanied by rituals. The ritual process helps members of traditional societies in a state of transition to realise what is happening. The different stages of the ritualized procedure generate a consciousness of the transition. The ritual itself only symbolises the transition but is nevertheless not the transition itself.

References

- Schelbert, Leo, und Hedwig Rappolt (eds.). 2009. *Alles ist ganz anders hier. Schweizer Auswandererberichte des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts aus dem Gebiet der heutigen Vereinigten Staaten* (Zürich: Limmat Verlag)
- Hasler, Eveline. 1985. *Ibicaba. Das Paradies in den Köpfen* (Zürich: Nagel & Kimche)
- Der Colonist. Organ zum Schutze, Beistand und Belehrung schweizerischer Auswanderer*. Bern 1851-1853, weekly.
- From 1854 on: *Der Kolonist. Organ für die schweizerische Auswanderung*. Lichtensteig 1854-1857, weekly.

DOI:

10.25364/08.1:2015.1.9

Extended Abstract of:

Sabine August, '„Kein Mensch auf dem Lande kann sich vorstellen, wie es Einem zu Muthe ist, wenn die See hoch geht“ – Schweizer auf dem Weg nach Amerika', *Mobile Culture Studies. The Journal* 1, 2015. <<http://unipub.uni-graz.at/mcsj>>

Author's address

Sabine August MA, sabineaugust@bluewin.ch