

‘It all depends on the story...’

Medial construction of mega-events on the example of the ‘European Capital of Culture RUHR.2010’

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In this paper¹ I will analyse the discursive construction of mega-events and draw a model of the trajectory of event-construction. The realisation of big projects like mega-events generally involves a big number of players, carrying out multiple activities and being involved in a complex structure of multi-level interactions (Larson/Wikström 2001; Getz/Andersson/Larson 2007; Larson 2009). My point of view is that of the mega-event-organisation ‘RUHR.2010 GmbH’, which was responsible for the realisation of the European Capital of Culture in the Ruhr-Region, western Germany, in 2010. The mega-event consisted of more than 5500 cultural events and can therefore be considered the most extensive cultural project in Germany for decades. In a first step I will present a brief timeline of the event, then analyse the work of RUHR.2010 and finally summarise my findings. I am presenting some results of an ethnographic case study executed from 2009 to 2011.

1. Impressions of RUHR.2010

The Ruhr Region is one of the youngest metropolitan regions in Europe. The basis of the development was coalmining and iron industry in the 19th century which reached its peak in the middle of 20th century and then experienced a rapid recession and structural change beginning in the late 1950th that is still going on. Today more than five million people inhabit the area of about 4400 km² in more than 50 municipalities. The biggest challenges of the region today are its weak economic structure, high poverty-rates especially in the northern part of the region, the false image of a shabby industrial landscape with little quality of life, overlapping administrative borders of regional institutions and a diverging identity within the region. Nevertheless multiple efforts have been made in the past decades to tackle these problems through implementing structural action programmes, investing in infrastructure and higher education, restoring old industrial sites for the use of culture, constructing a broad net of cycle tracks and green spaces and establishing cultural events. (Kunzmann 2004)

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On January 9th 2001 the deputy mayors in charge of culture of six big Ruhr-municipalities met in the editorial office of the regional newspaper 'Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung' to present the plans for a new festival of the arts. The story of RUHR.2010 began (Betz 2008). The next morning the first medial orchestration could be read on the front page of the newspaper: the story of the six politicians in harmonious talk with spontaneous ideas as the starting point of the initiative. Five years of candidate-status followed, constantly geared towards the media – as during the campaign '100.000 faces for Ruhr' seen on this picture, during which the RAG-building in the centre of Essen was covered with photographs of inhabitants. This process finally ended in April 2006 when the region was officially entitled 'European Capital of Culture 2010'. In December 2006 the company 'RUHR.2010' was officially founded and started to hire its staff from January 2007 on. Official goals of the Capital of Culture initiative were the development of the metropolitan area "both in the awareness of the population of the Ruhr and in the external perception". Further aims were to develop the political integration of the region, to strengthen the regional identity, to set economic impulse and to trigger an image change from industrial region to cultural metropolis. RUHR.2010 expressed its expectation to be a sustainable development project rather than a mere one year festival.

In 2008 the first draft of the programme named 'book 1' was presented to the public that claimed precise information. At that date more than 2200 project proposals had been screened, evaluated and a selection of 300 projects was chosen for the official programme. 'Book 1' was criticised by many people in public because it was not readable. By pointing this out people did neither mean stylistic weakness of the 160 pages book in perfect marketing German neither the size of the font. They rather complained about the abundance of projects sorted in overly-intellectual categories without any prioritisation.

One year later, in autumn 2009, the 'book 2' in much clearer and precise structure was presented during a press conference. During the previous two months the members of RUHR.2010 had focused all their attention on this day. To ensure that all 150 journalists expected could receive a hot off the press copy of the 'second magnum opus', two staff members had driven to the printing plant over night just in case the logistics company failed to deliver in time. All 100 staff members were assigned to come to the press conference for a crowded spatial impression, but were kindly asked not to eat any appetizers which were reserved to the journalists. During the next management meeting the responsible for public relations underlined the nationwide coverage; the national newscast 'Heute' had mentioned the capital of culture three times during that day.

Finally on January 9th 2010 came the big opening day. The organisation of this day was the greatest challenge to the people responsible of RUHR.2010. In innumerable brainstorming and strategy meetings numerous drafts were discarded and producers replaced. Three main criteria had to be balanced out. Rather as a side condition the impression of an opening event without including the population had to be avoided. Not all drafts achieved this criterion. At the end the people responsible decided for a public festival on the compound of Zollverein World Heritage Site, furthermore a couple of 'normal residents' were chosen by lot to participate in the official opening ceremony.

In fact the target audience were others. On the one hand the persons in charge focused on the guests invited that were grouped into VIPs and VVIPs. Part of this group of dignitaries, political representatives and celebrities also were journalists. The press enjoyed a special treatment, they were provided with a high-comfort 'press-lounge' in an architecturally spectacular building whereas the VIPs were only accommodated in heated tents. Representatives of the project partners and people of

the office of culture of the 53 Ruhr-cities were however only considered after massive complaint. The most meticulously kept and daily updated database of the whole company was the list of invitees.

As important as the guests of honour were the producers, editors, cameramen and technicians of the ZDF-TV channel. Unique pictures were supposed to be broadcasted live around the world to entertain millions of enthusiastic spectators. Top-class staff of ZDF attended the numerous meetings; the main parameters were set between the ZDF director and the entire RUHR.2010 management team. The opening show should contain nothing conventional or familiar, should be extraordinary and spectacular and should of course outgo all Capital of Culture opening shows hitherto. The opening weekend was expected to be the big takeoff in public which was meant to unfold a powerful drive for the entire year. And indeed they succeeded producing spectacular images. Within the impressive setting of the snowy coke oven of Zollverein World Heritage a grandstand for 1500 people was built, from where the one hour show with dance, rhythm, music, light, fire and emotional pictures could be marvelled at. The speeches of the President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, the Federal President Horst Köhler, the prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia Jürgen Rüttgers and an especially composed song by rock-pop-star Herbert Grönemeyer were integrated into the show.

The opening weekend was followed by a year with many highlights: the theatre journey 'Odyssee Europas', the historical project with 300 balloons on former coal-mines 'Schachtzeichen', the mass picnic on the main Autobahn 'Still-Leben Ruhrschnellweg', the 'Symphony of a Thousand' by Gustav Mahler et cetera. The content and course of the projects were seldom discussed in the management meetings. Instead the press review was analysed. The page number of the daily media monitoring-file by a professional agency served as main criterion and daily sensorium for the ongoing success of the organisation. In a document named 'Worth knowing on RUHR.2010' that was prepared for the final evaluation press conference in December 2010 the work of the company was summarised. On the first of 18 pages, before the first project was mentioned, it says: "65.000 media reports on RUHR.2010 adding up to an equivalent of 90.303.117 € (only print national). 225 hours (= nine days) (...) TV report only on Still-Leben in television – in more than 200 countries! 396 press releases published (in 2010); 698 in total since 2005). 135 press conferences (in 2010)." Further figures mentioned were 30.000 fans on Facebook, 11.000 subscribers of the bi-weekly newsletter, 4.100 Twitter-Follower.

On December 18th the European Capital of Culture RUHR.2010 celebrated its closing ceremony – again in snow and ice. The organisers chose the main building of the Nordstern coal-mine in the city of Gelsenkirchen as venue, which was encased as steamboat 'Ruhrtopia' through LCD screens. During the show with plenty of light and fog effects about 20 actors and dancers on the roof of the building (or better: on deck of the ship) played scenes of the mega event. A big LCD screen was clamped as a sail above the actors on which impressions of the year were shown in fast motion. In spite of the amazing scenery the approximately 3500 freezing people in the audience rapidly realised that the show was not staged for them. The show was too far, the acoustic was too bad and the screen was too small for the audience. The target group of the show was – besides the VIP-guests hosted in heated tents – again the television viewer in there warm living rooms.

In 2011 the activities of RUHR.2010 were not over yet. Besides accounting, up winding and sustaining activities several elaborated publications were released. On the one hand there are several project documentaries as the illustrated books 'A day as never before!' on the mass picnic 'Still-Leben', 'SING – Day of Song: The documentary' on the choir project and 'Schachtzeichen: Stories. Peoples. Bal-

loons' on the history project. On the other hand three publications were edited that recapitulated the year: A 240 pages programme documentation entitled 'RUHR.2010. The impossible capital of culture', the 180 pages brand documentation 'Ruhr. From myth to brand' and the evaluation report 'With culture to metropolis?'

2. Pre- and Reconstruction of the work of RUHR.2010

Let us now leave the practical level and analyse the work of RUHR.2010. Organising Events include the implementation of diverse tasks (Ferdinand/Kitchin 2012; Hitzler et al. 2013). The technical requirements must be fulfilled, necessary personnel for safety and realisation must be made available and the content of the event – whatever it may consist of – must be prepared and put into a presentable form and sequence. Without question the technical, staffing and substantial questions were worked on by RUHR.2010. Nevertheless the main focus already years before the opening weekend was to raise expectations towards the Capital of Culture. By mantling the RAG-building in Essen, the multiple press conferences, the programme book, later on through Facebook and Twitter an arc of suspense was purposefully set up. The opening show was the peak of this first phase of raising expectations. Not the audience of the show as persons were the main target, but there function as multipliers and advertising medium as well as exclusive supernumerary of the show. The leading structure of the show was determined by the media logic (Altheide and Snow 1979) of television in terms of technical feasibility, viewing habits of TV audience and 'telegenity'. The orientation on media of the responsible people increased over the years, the protagonists veritably incorporated the media perspective and oriented their acting towards it. Besides choosing projects and accomplishing the (technical, financial and staff concerning) requirements the RUHR.2010 company resembled to a large extent a media and communication agency. In contrast to organisation charts and company profiles, where they exclaimed their emphasis on project management, they more and more oriented themselves towards public relations.

During the year of the capital of culture the organisers mainly focused their attention on ensuring broad media coverage on the events. Especially the excitement level had to be kept high and the expectations to be raised for events to come. The implementation of the events or in other words the immediate experience of the visitor on-the-spot were in great extents left to others. The focus lay upon what I call 'secondary experiences': to let people participate in and experience events through media perception. Everything else would not have been realisable: The implementation of 300 projects in 53 cities with desired more than 10 million visitors could not have been realised by a single organisation with 100 employees. Therefore RUHR.2010 centred itself on public relations which became more and more professional and artful. Thus the responsible people lost track of the 'event logic' of immediate experience and at the same time elevated the 'media logic' of secondary experience to the guideline of their work. Furthermore the page count of the daily media monitoring-file suited much better to present success and to legitimise the own work towards public than descriptions of the artistic quality and avant-garde status of 5500 events in 300 projects.

The third and final phase of the capital of culture consisted of framing, glorifying and integrating of all events and experiences of the year. This already started with a first résumé in summer 2010 and had its climax in December 2010, when the press was invited to the final evaluation and when the 'big finale' was celebrated. The one and only capital of culture experience could not exist as every visitor had 'bricolaged' its own experience sequence out of the vast programme. By looking back at

the multiple events during the final show RUHR.2010 reacted to this. The multiple experience fragments were merged, given emotional appeal through the awesome setting, the fireworks and emotional statements during the show and thereby integrated to a spectacular and final overall experience. Further framing activities were the 2011 publications mentioned.

3. Trajectory of event construction

Let us now abstract from the work of RUHR.2010 and look at the collective construction (Berger LuckmannXXX) of events in general. Leisure worlds as events promise a unique, extra-habitual experience (Hitzler 2011: 12; Gebhardt et al. 2000; Betz/Hitzler/Pfadenhauer 2011; Betz 2012). This has to be taken literally. Only if the providers of an event succeed in communicating this promise through marketing and public relations and achieve evoking curiosity and an experience expectation in advance people will actually attend the event. If the expectations evoked in advance are too high, however, the actual experience will shift to boredom and banality. The success of an event therefore depends on the balance of a fragile dialectic between (media evoked) expectations and actual experience on-site through which events are collectively constructed as experiences and later on glorified, framed and stabilised.

Based on these insights we can outline a trajectory (Glaser und Strauss 1968; Corbin und Strauss 1991) of event-construction. As a precondition the technical requirements, the necessary personnel and the content of the event must be arranged *beforehand*. Furthermore the organisers have to evoke expectations and curiosity within their target groups. This means initiating a self-perpetuating dynamic, which cannot be controlled by the producers. Will the press print the release? Will people like the Facebook-site and invite their friends to join? Will the word of mouth spread? Will people not only be attracted to the concept but effectively integrate it in to their day's schedules? Which attitudes and moods will people have beforehand? This process of expectation-building implies that people anticipate (implicitly) the use of participation in terms of experiences, emotions, status-consequences etc. Only if people were emotionally tied to the event and connected to it positive expectations, they attend. This process highly depends on medial discourse on the event. The event producers have to trigger and enliven the medial discourse through clever orchestration and professional press work.

Then the event takes place. The producers of the event implement their plans and try to react to unforeseeable occurrences by improvising if necessary. The producers however cannot *make* the event on their own; they depend on visitors that get involved with whatever is presented to them. Visitors have in general an open-minded consuming attitude. They expect to let themselves drop into the vibes and overstimulation of the occasion without overly reflecting on situational consequences. Time should spin away and create positive emotions. If this state of satisfactory entertainment succeeds depends on the relation between the expectations of the visitor and the real experience on-site. If high expectations were disappointed, beforehand enthusiasm and pleasant anticipation switch to boredom and frustration. Only if the organisers succeeded in exceeding the expectations of the visitors and surprising them, visitors will undergo the feeling of extra-habitual, euphoric and unique experience. Many details can influence this experience. How was transportation to the site? How long is the waiting queue? Are there enough cloakrooms and toilets? Is the event too crowded or not

crowded enough? How are sight and acoustic? Did the superstar awaited appear? Media plays – as seen on the example of RUHR.2010 – a role of enabling secondary experiences to media consumers.

As important as the real experience is the retrospective framing. After the event visitors will talk to each other and tell others about what happened. Thereby emotions in the one direction or the other are reinforced and again a self-perpetuating dynamic unfolds. People influence and literally infect each other as well as themselves with their narrations. Positive or negative highlights are enforced whereas banal moments fade away. Through this process of remembering, narrating, glorifying, reflecting, comparing, mystifying, highlighting and evaluating an overall impression is collectively drawn and stabilised. This again happens in relation to the expectations of the visitor in beforehand. Media can also influence this reconstructing-process. Is the coverage enthusiastic or critical? Are the experiences of the visitors reinforced by media or is a different picture drawn which diminishes retrospective impressions and emotions?

4. Conclusion

RUHR.2010 shifted its focus towards medial presence. They did not produce the mega event in terms of technical and substantial organisation. Due to the amount of projects this would not have been possible. The practical implementation of the projects laid upon the project partners and were therefore predominantly externalised. In some cases the responsible of RUHR.2010 were even surprised about the mediocre quality of events. Nevertheless the RUHR.2010 stakeholder had to ensure success and legitimise their work. They therefore focused on one main goal: to declare the extraordinary, extra-habitual, spectacular character of the events to come, to be or to look back at – no matter how intense the experiences actually were. The producers aimed at transforming whatever happened into publicly as spectacular perceived events. Following the slogan 'it all depends on the story' all projects that would take place or that had taken place were declared and glorified as events and all together unified to a magnificent mega event through medial communication.

5. Literature

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