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Autor: Di Falco, Daniel
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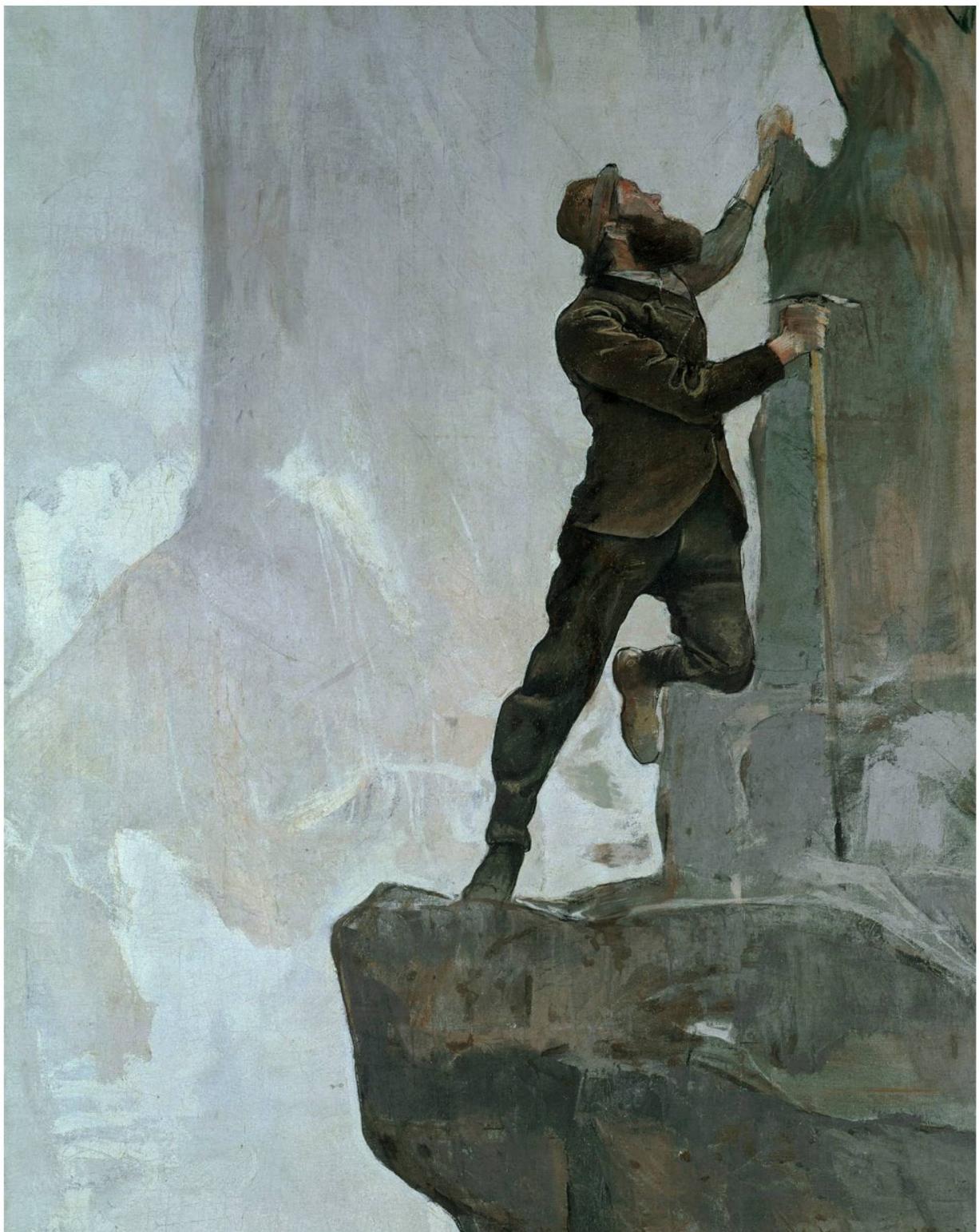
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With Rousseau on his “Thrill Walk”

Whenever a new suspension bridge or summit viewing platform is planned in the Alps, objections are soon raised about commercialising the mountains and selling them out to the events industry. However, tourist experiences require complex technical infrastructure and the pioneers of alpine pursuits also sought thrills and spills.



“Ascent III” from the
“Ascent and Fall”
series, painted by
Ferdinand Hodler in
1894. Photo: Keystone

DANIEL DI FALCO

It doesn't have to be a drive-in chapel for skiers on the piste, a penguin zoo on a 2,500-metre-high peak or the longest staircase in the world. Even far less outlandish projects provoke discontent. Rigi Plus, an organisation representing two dozen companies in the tourism sector, unveiled its master plan last summer. The 200-page document focused on the Rigi as a location for experience-based activities and its "sustainable positioning". It aims to provide more appealing offers for visitors to the mountain that boasts panoramic views and a rich history as well as better economic prospects for operators. Its proposals include a new website, a booking system for all destinations in the area and a uniform brand identity.

But that is not all. "Travelling up to the peak, looking down and enjoying the view are no longer enough today," explained Stefan Otz, Managing Director of the Rigi Railways, the biggest company on and up the mountain. He was brought in from Interlaken where he was the Director of Tourism. His task is now to provide fresh impetus on the Rigi. Otz is talking about "exciting projects", a tree-house hotel, a pine-cone-shaped viewing tower and an alpine hut with a cheese dairy for visitors and a schnapps distillery.

"We're certainly not planning the kind of sterile facilities that lead to mass tourism," added Otz. "We won't implement any projects on the Rigi that don't belong there." But his assurances were not enough to prevent the storm that blew up shortly afterwards. It started in the readers' letters columns and then spread to the wider public. With an online petition, alpine conservationists, politicians, architects, business people, scientists and prominent figures, such as Emil Steinberger, fought against the "insidious transformation" of the Rigi into a "Disneyland for over a million tourists" a year. The Rigi Railways already transports three quarters of a million passengers today. The petition said: "We don't want artificial experiences which represent a sell-out of the Rigi."

"An enormous influx of outsiders"

Sell-out? Can a mountain that has been used for tourism for so long really be sold out? The Rigi was in fact already a fashionable mountain destination two hundred years ago. A covered viewing point was built in 1816, a viewing tower in 1820 and finally Europe's very first mountain railway in 1871. The "queen of the mountains", as it is known, was overrun with tourists, and this was in the supposedly more sedate period of the 19th century. The "influx of outsiders" was "truly enormous", reported the "Echo vom Rigi" during the first season of the mountain railway, with visitors even sleeping in the corridors of the hotels which provided

over a thousand beds at the time. Three years later, the railway transported over 100,000 visitors up the mountain for the first time.

Mark Twain gave an account of what could be experienced there besides the legendary sunrise and the no less infamous hordes of tourists eagerly anticipating it. In 1879, the American writer climbed the Rigi on foot from Weggis and soon heard "for the first time the famous alpine yodel



From the exhibition
at the Alpine
Museum in Berne
Photo: Keystone

in its own native wilds". His joy was nevertheless short-lived as "after that we found a yodeller every ten minutes" and they all wanted people to put money in their hat for performing. After the fourth, fifth or sixth time "during the remainder of the day we paid the rest of the yodellers a franc apiece not to yodel anymore. There is somewhat too much of this yodelling in the Alps."

Thrills and spills on the mountain

This raises the question as to where the line between selling and selling out lies. For the critics of the latest master plan for the Rigi, the answer is where the experiences become "artificial". The symptomatic word for this is Disneyland. This is the nightmare scenario and a byword for the synthetic, interchangeable schemes of an alpine events industry. This is not just restricted to the Rigi either. The evils of "Disneyfication" were also highlighted when Europe's highest suspension bridge was built on the Titlis and the first one between two peaks was constructed at Les Diablerets. There was a similar response when the Schilthorn railway opened the "Thrill Walk" beneath its middle station – a steel bridge with a latticed and glass floor built into the vertical rock face beneath which lies a 200-metre abyss. "Thrills and an exhilarating mountain experience," proclaimed the advert. While such ideas enable tourist destinations to remain attractive and take on the competition, conservation organisations complain that the Alps are being transformed into an adventure playground. For example, Mountain Wilderness – a group founded by winter sport enthusiasts – is calling for "more

peace and quiet in the mountains, more space for authentic mountain experiences" and an end to the expansion of tourist facilities.

But what actually is an "authentic mountain experience"? Those promoting new suspension bridges, viewing platforms, walkways built into the rock, climbing parks, biking trails, zip wires or summer toboggan runs are saying exactly the same thing. They also want "authentic" (Stefan Ott, Rigi Railways) and "unique" (Christoph Egger, Schilthorn railway) experiences.

Haller and Rousseau – the instigators

One thing is quickly forgotten in the battle over what is "authentic" in the Alps: even in the earliest, most innocent days of tourism, the development of infrastructure, charged-for activities and artificial paraphernalia enabled what seemed like the most authentic experiences. And they were no less contentious than they are today.

This was the age of hobnailed boots, stagecoaches and strolls beneath parasols. Switzerland was perceived as the beauty of the mountains untouched by civilisation and inhabited by wholesome shepherds and farmers. At least this is how they were seen by Albrecht von Haller (in his poem "Die Alpen" written in 1729) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (in his novel "Julie, or the New Heloise" in 1761). These two thinkers and poets were the leading instigators of international enthusiasm for Switzerland and its mountains at the time. The promise of the original purity of its natural environment and people attracted visitors. They sought authentic experiences.

However, shortly afterwards a guest at a spa resort from northern Germany complained about the profiteering of the tourism industry and about reality being flooded with tacky souvenirs. There were no postcards yet in the Biedermeier period. But the spa guest recounted that he had seen over 30 images of "a single spot in the Bernese Oberland": sketches, engravings and watercolours. He went on to say that "there are perhaps even more of other famous places that are marvelled at". It may soon be necessary for "nature to create new mountains or for old ones to collapse" to provide "fresh inspiration" for the business of landscape painting and copper engraving. In short: "People no longer want to publicise the country but instead just artistic impressions of it!"

That was in 1812. The German was in fact just an artistic creation himself, namely the first-person narrator of the novel "Die Molkenkur" by Ulrich Hegner, a politician and author from Winterthur. There was nevertheless a real background to Hegner's satire on "Swiss natural and artificial products" – the widespread anxiety about the artificiality of tourist experiences.

But then not everyone possesses as much romantic sensitivity as Rousseau or Haller. And these people are assisted by tourist organisations. These organisations began developing the mountains early on with technical infrastructure: high-altitude trails, benches, terraces, open areas and panoramic information boards – "viewing aids", as historian Daniel Speich calls them. These are facilities that guide the view of the visitor towards the landscape and its attractions so that everyone gets the impression they anticipate. Even the simple view of the mountains is therefore calculated and standardised thanks to an "artificial" experience. But this does not tarnish it.

The mountains in picture frames

"You might think everything in the Alps is nature. But it is only ever thanks to infrastructure that people can see and access this natural environment in the first place." This is the view of the cultural scholar Bernhard Tschofen. He was involved in the "Beautiful Mountains" exhibition through which the Alpine Museum in Berne is currently displaying the typical perception of the Swiss Alps in paintings. This perception is an ideal, a popular cliché, and romanticises the Alps as an unspoilt alternative world to modern civilisation. Tschofen also points out: "Booms in mountain railway construction were also followed by booms in painting of the mountains." The artists generally removed the very infrastructure from their paintings which had actually provided them with the panoramic view of the mountains.

Let's take Ferdinand Hodler, for example. This painter, who died exactly one hundred years ago, regularly took

Vitznau's steam-powered cog railway up the Rigi on a colour postcard, circa 1900
Photo: Keystone



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The Hotel Pilatus Kulm beneath a starlit sky in an advert for the Pilatus Railway
Photo: Severin Pomsel

holidays in the Bernese Oberland from 1879. Many of his paintings of the Alps were produced here and he often used the same routes and viewing points as the tourists. He explored the area around Interlaken on transport links which were new at the time. The cog railway up to the Schynige Platte took him to the "view of Lake Thun and Lake Brienz", and when the mountain railway from Lauterbrunnen up to Mürren opened in 1891, it provided access to a new attraction not just for tourists but also for the artist – the postcard subject of the "Jungfrau". Hodler paid his first visit here in 1895 and then returned in the summers of 1911 and 1914. During those two seasons, he painted the Jungfrau massif in a total of thirteen different works. There are, of course, differences in terms of colour, contrast, texture and atmosphere. However, one thing does not change in the thirteen versions. Hodler stood in the same spot as the tourists and painted different paintings from various railway stations. He used the railway to frame the Jungfrau as he wished.

This is the paradox that has always dominated not only the painting of mountain scenery but also tourism. It promises unique experiences but at the same time inevitably transforms them into a technically mediated and staged product. This irrefutably casts doubt over the difference between "authentic" and "artificial" experiences which is contested with such zeal in the current debate on new attractions in the mountains.

Events and thrills do not receive good press today. But that is precisely what the Alps have been about from the outset and since the earliest fervour for the mountains: exhilaration and thrills. Shortly after 1700, the English essayist Joseph Addison went on a journey through Europe and when he stopped at Lake Geneva and took in the giant

mountains before him – this world of rock and ice – he was filled with a feeling that would later become a key selling point for the tourism industry: a kind of quivering sensation, "a pleasant sort of terror" at the force of nature.

Finally, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who through his "Return to Nature" became famous and the benchmark for an authentic, deep soulful experience of the mountains, gave an account in his "Confessions" in 1781 of a remarkable hike in the Alps of Savoy. At Chailles the route took him into a rock face and "far below the road cut out of the rocks a little stream rushes and foams in some fearful precipices, which it seems to have spent millions of ages in hollowing out". The road itself is modern and "along the side of the road is a parapet to prevent accidents", wrote Rousseau, and then the great philosopher was overcome with the same desire that people seek today in the steep face of the Schilthorn. He was exhilarated and looked into the abyss. "Leaning securely over the parapet" he could "be as giddy as he pleased". Rousseau's path is a "Thrill Walk". The parapet is the structure that makes his experience of adventure possible – comfortable and without risk: "I am very fond of the feeling of giddiness provided I am in a safe position," he wrote.

Swiss Alpine Museum, Berne: "Beautiful Mountains: A Point of View" runs until 6 January 2019.
An accompanying postcard book with texts by Bernhard Tschofen and other authors is available to buy. (Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess)

DANIEL DI FALCO IS A HISTORIAN AND CULTURE JOURNALIST WITH THE "BUND" NEWSPAPER IN BERNE

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