

# Inside and insight into the County Fair „Pützchens Markt“

Part 4 of the series on design and psychology of amusement parks



**Pützchens Markt, the greatest county fair in the German Rhineland region, captivates people every year in September for five days. This folk festival lacks many of the outstanding features of our favorite amusement parks, but this is precisely what creates space for completely different qualities. These can be summarized in two ideas: "Expressive form instead of subtle content" and "subjective experience instead of collective entertainment"**

*by Harald Molina-Tillmann*

*Pictures by Claudia Schulz*

## **The god of wine**

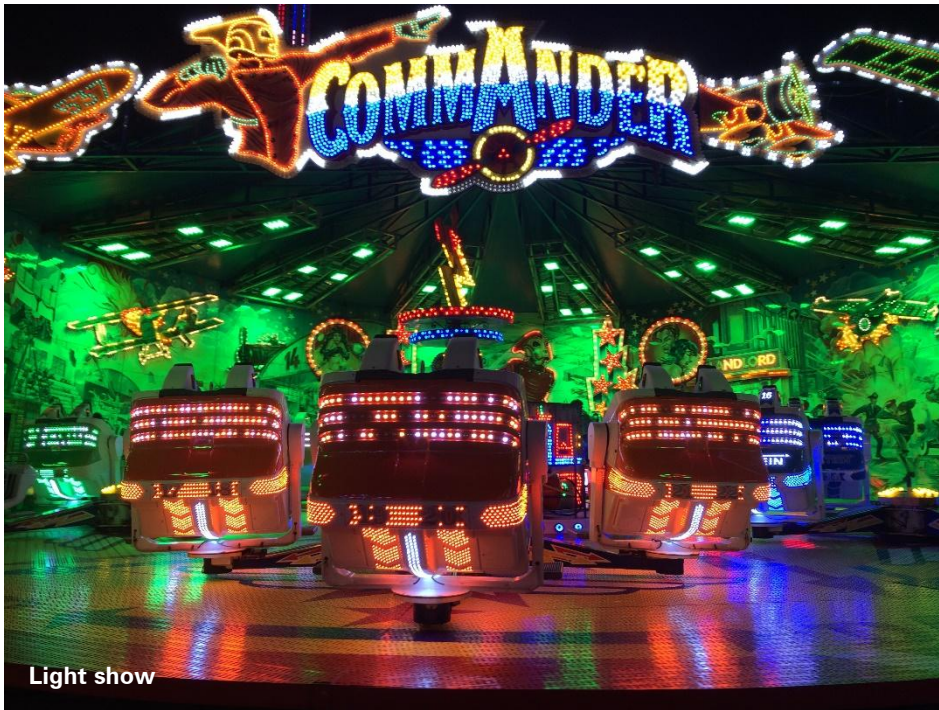
In the previous parts of this series of articles, three examples were used to show how different aspects of the psychology of amusement parks are reflected in their attractions and themed areas. In the "Flying Dutchman" ride at Efteling in the Netherlands (Part 1), we experience a legend of tragic love, longing, and the will to survive. At Legoland Germany (Part 2), we see frozen moments of exciting or touching events. The "Ghost Town" area at Knott's Berry Farm in California (Part 3) invites us to linger within its historical ambience and romanticized family unit. As different as these three concepts are, they have something fundamental in common. They always involve tangible and imaginable content such as stories, characters, and images. This is particularly evident in theme parks. When we visit a theme

park, we enter a fantasy land or a dream world. We switch from our everyday lives to a world of completely different content.

When entering Pützchens Markt, there is no comparable leap in content. Individual rides often have a (limited) theme, but the county fair as a whole has no connection to a topic, a story, or any other content. Instead, it is powerful clear form – fascinating, frightening, and primordial. In ancient Greece, amusement parks would probably have been valued by worshipping Apollon, the god of aesthetics and creativity. More fitting for Pützchens Markt would be Dionysos, the rough and unadulterated god of wine.

The triumph of form over content is evident at Pützchens Markt in many aspects. However, the objective, sober form is never left to its own devices. It is

always accompanied by a second and completely different point of view as a counterpart, namely the inner and purely subjective experience. I am not talking about the deep emotion we can feel, for example, at a magnificently staged show or the breathtaking backdrop of a theme park. Rather, it is about the spontaneous and small experiences that are only significant for ourselves and our own life's journey. Consequently, there are no stand out performances or world sensations at Pützchens Markt, although this is often and loudly touted. Whether it is a boxing booth, adult variety show, or ghost ride, the external presentation always promises more than what we actually get to see or hear inside the attraction. Although this is primarily due to the showmen's business acumen, it also makes sense from a psychological point of view



Light show

because the function is always to overcome and master a personal challenge. It is all about the fact that as a child, you dare to go on the spooky ride, or that as a sixteen-year-old you sneak into the 18+ show, or that as a couple you have your future told by a mysterious woman. What exactly is presented to us and in what quality is not decisive in the world of county fairs.

One of the first and most obvious consequences of the lack of content is the extra loud music, which often competes with that of the neighboring ride. This is coupled with intense and garish lighting effects which in some respects even outshine Las Vegas lights. Decades before the age of media, colors and sounds were already established at Pützchens Markt as effective means of filling the void of content. The omnipresent and varied alcoholic beverages and the delicious but cholesterol-raising meat dishes fulfill a similar function. Even this simple example of the many opportunities arising from the principle of "form over content" brings back personal memories. I think, for example, of the inner amusement I felt when my father expected my agreement when he complained about the volume of the beats. I also remember my fascination with the flickering lighting effects of the new carousel "Südseewelle" after it has replaced the outdated "Raupe" one. And just recently, I was delighted to observe

how my American wife was finally convinced of the quality of German beer while "beer-stand-hopping" through the fair.

### The eye-healing spring

The sole content that distinguishes Pützchens Markt is the legend of its origin in the drought year of 1003. In the German version of Wikipedia, we read (translated by the editor):

*"Pützchens Markt originated from the pilgrimage to the Adelheidis Spring. Abbess (female leader) of the Vilich monastery was the later canonized Adelheid von Vilich. During a procession on the lands*

*of the monastery, she thrust her abbess's staff into the ground and created a spring (known as a Pütz or Pützchen in the Rhineland). Since Adelheid had also taken care of the poor and sick, people soon began making pilgrimages to her grave and the spring after her death, where numerous miracles are said to have occurred."*

It would be tempting to compare this story with themes of amusement parks and thereby classify it as fantasy or symbolism, were it not for two fundamental differences. First, the miraculous event is said to have taken place at the very spot where the fair is now held. Second, despite its thousand-year history, the magic is not purely a relic of the past. Every year, shortly before Pützchens Markt opens, the parish of St. Adelheid organizes a well-attended pilgrimage in honor of St. Adelheid. I have seen many people who have combined their visit to this county fair with the pilgrimage and have moistened their eyes with water from the spring to improve their eyesight. The legend is not just an old story that we regard as a museum piece. Rather, it exists in the "here and now."

### In the heart of our neighborhood

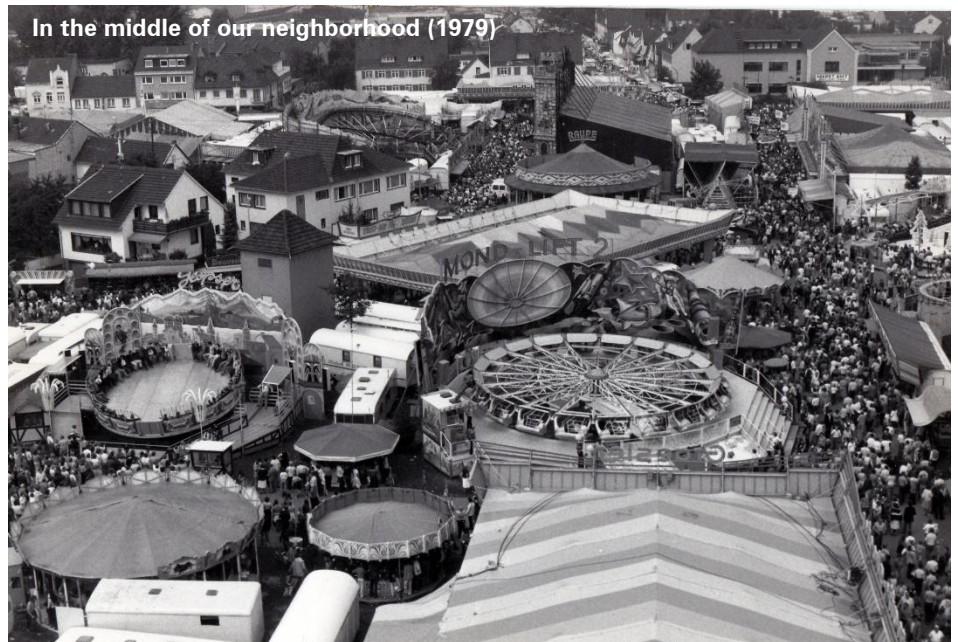
The concept of "here" in the legend invites us to compare amusement parks more closely with the county fair of Pützchens Markt. Modern amusement parks are almost always designed as islands of imagination. They are detached



The spring

from normal life not only in terms of content, but also in terms of location. Amusement parks are usually located outside the city center. You can only enter an amusement park during the opening hours set by the operator. Amusement parks have claimed the location for themselves. Pützchens Markt, on the other hand, is the center of the town's district that is accessible daily by the public. These are the same streets that residents use to drive to work in the morning or go to St. Adelheid's parish church on Sundays throughout the year. This is the large square reserved for the yearly fair, where I learned to ride my bike as a young boy during summer. It is the football field where the members of the local sports club otherwise regularly engage in athletic activities. When an amusement park closes its gates in the evening, we as guests have to leave the park and stay outside, even if we had a day that could not have been more beautiful and exciting. Pützchens Markt, on the other hand, is our psychological home and, in a sense, our identity. There are also comparatively few international tourists. I would also go as far as to figuratively say: "We are Pützchens Markt."

Naturally, there was originally no curfew at Pützchens Markt. If we wanted to, we could literally dance the night away in the festival tent until the next day. (In 2010, the city unfortunately bowed down to the bourgeois Zeitgeist in this regard.) There is no admission fee, no fences, and no official entrances still. How could anyone charge admission for something that already belongs to us? Who could justify fences when there are numerous streets and alleys leading to the supermarket that we use every day?



How could there be organized entrances when there is not even a clearly defined beginning to the fairground because of the jumbled placement of beer stands and kebab booths in front? This also opens up new opportunities, and the lack of an entrance fee leads to a colorful array of alternative business models: a touch of the exotic with spice sales at the traditional "Pluutenmaat", games of chance at lottery booths, proving your manhood at the "Hau den Lukas" strongman contest, physical activity with pony rides, or self-awareness by palm reading. Although I did not grow up directly in the town of Pützchen but in a neighboring district, the place was filled with much meaning to me. When I returned home with my family after a long trip anywhere, we had to take the highway exit to the town "Pützchen". Every time, I felt an emotional wave inside of me. In my case, the reason for this was

not the town Pützchen but the county fair Pützchens Markt. Perhaps this was because I subconsciously associated the fair with freedom. The lack of entrance fee and fence allows us to go to the fair at any time and as often as we like without feeling obligated to do or spend anything.

#### **Weeks of saving, seconds of fun**

Several aspects of Pützchens Markt have something to do with time. The first remarkable observation is that this yearly county fair "has always been there." Mind you, this is not an objective fact, because historically speaking, there was of course a first Pützchens Markt. This may have been the first fair documented in writing 650 years ago. There may also have been preceding events to the documented fair. They may have started as early as the legendary miracle of St. Adelheid about 1000 years ago. In





any case, there is a factual founding year of the fair in terms of history. However, in the subjective world of someone who grew up with Pützchens Markt, there is no such date. One cannot remember a first visit at all. In this respect, one is lost in the timeless unconsciousness of early childhood. This becomes more significant when combined with another temporal characteristic. Pützchens Markt always takes place over the second weekend in September and only lasts for five days. Anyone who misses these few days of exuberance cannot make up for it. With eternity, a fixed time in the course of the year, and a brief period of time, combined with the extraordinary and mesmerizing attractions in this familiar location, we have the important elements of a ritual. Amusement parks also try to establish rituals as part of their ongoing offerings. Pützchens Markt, however, is a ritual as a whole and has always been a ritual. One could even say that this county fair exists ONLY as a ritual. Such a lived and authentic ritual provides orientation, security, comfort, and meaning. So, in addition to fun and enjoyment, Pützchens Markt also has another important psychological function. The prosperous local ride owner Rudolph Barth, who passed away in June 2020, must have felt this somehow. Although the many days spent setting up and dismantling his looping roller coaster for running it just five days did not seem financially viable, he rarely missed an opportunity to contribute this

largest attraction and centerpiece of the county fair.

Another consequence of the brief yearly runtime of Pützchens Markt is that it does not have a specific target audience and cannot afford to have one. During the few days it is open, it must appeal to as many people as possible. The sheer number of visitors and profits is what counts. This financial and structural constraint means that Pützchens Markt cannot have a specific theme, as any theme would limit the circle of potentially interested visitors. This brings us back to the "form over content" approach described at the beginning of this article.

### Temptation

As a young teenager at Pützchens Markt, a glance at the inconspicuous sign "Junger Mann zum Mitreisen gesucht" (Young man wanted for travelling fair) made me dream, for a short while, of experiencing the big wide world. Here, my childish mind saw what I would now call a chance to overcome the barriers of my local school and my middle-class parents' home. In parallel, I realized that this would come at a high price. Am I really the right person for this ever so tempting but probably unstable, modest, and perhaps even aggressive way of life? For a few seconds, each time I have read such a sign, I lived in a subjective conflict before seeing the next attraction made me forget my melancholy as

quickly as the dream of boundless freedom had entered my thoughts and feelings shortly before. This is another example of the kind of emotion evoked by the form of the fair as depicted in the "here and now". The situations and our roles in these are real. The emotions are not projected onto heroes, princesses, or wizards, but relate directly and outrightly to ourselves, what we do, and who we are. Amidst the hustle and bustle of the fair and the collective fun, the fairground environment triggers individually emotionally touching experiences. This is precisely the psychology of Pützchens Markt.

I would therefore like to share a few more personal memories: As a young boy, I learned at the ghost ride that outward appearances in the form of horror figures which you can see from the outside sometimes promise more than what is hidden inside, and that the "small" ghost ride can be much scarier than the "big" one that you did not dare to try out at first. As an adult, now living in Munich, I was able to enjoy the irony of the guests in the Bavarian tent singing "Zieht den Bayern die Lederhosen aus!" (Take off those Bavarians' Lederhosen!). The band joined in and sang in chorus, "No one takes off our Lederhosen!" Years later, I was able to experience at the Christian mass "in the beer tent" how for many believers religion and joy are two sides of the same coin. During the last hour on the last day of the fair, the cheerful and cunning flower seller taught me with his reverse auction technique that really good business models are based on mutual benefit. While playing ring toss, I had to admit that sometimes you win something else instead of the object of your desire, something you did not even expect. Looking into the petrified face of the first test driver on the just assembled looping roller coaster, I realized that even adults can be afraid. After knocking loose my tooth a few seconds into my first bumper car ride when it came to an abrupt stop, I had to recognize that enthusiasm and caution go hand in hand. When the saleswoman who had been selling me delicious licorice for many years suddenly started selling dried flowers, I had to accept that time does not stand still, even at Pützchens Markt.

Claudia Schulz (board member of the German club of funfair fans), whose grandparents lived right next to the town of Pützchen, recounts her memories (translated by the editor):

*My first memory of Pützchens Markt is not of the fairground itself, but 100 meters away. As a child, I used to sleep at my grandparents' house in Pützchen on the weekend. When I stood on my bed, I could see the Ferris wheel with its lights through the skylight and hear the sounds of the fair. I would fall asleep with these sounds in my ears. Full of anticipation and excitement for the next day, and at the same time feeling safe and enveloped in this special fairground atmosphere. I still love the sounds today and often walk around the grounds several times just to enjoy the atmosphere.*

*When I was 8 years old, I rode the Ranger carousel for the first time with my cousins of the same age. The ride stopped while we were upside down, the lights went out, and an announcement came over the loudspeaker: "We have a power failure." In my memory, we stood upside down for several minutes. My cousins panicked and cried. I found it exciting and at the same time had butterflies in my stomach from nervousness, wondering if everything would really be okay. After the ride, the butterflies turned into excitement, the fear I had overcome made me feel happy, and I wanted to take another turn right away. My cousins never rode the Ranger carousel again. The same experience can have different effects for different people.*

*The triple loop was my first favorite roller coaster. At the time, I tried to be there every day and ride it. In my family, all the relatives gave the children "Pützchengeld" (pocket money). That added up to a nice amount. After my first ride on the triple loop, I had spent all my pocket money that year and did not go on any other rides. And when the money was gone, I was happy, even though I am usually a rather thrifty person who thinks twice about every expense.*

*The police and emergency services operations center is located in the Marktschule, the elementary school in the Pützchen district. The school is right next to the fairgrounds. The students have the entire Pützchens Markt period off from*

*school. The way from my grandparents' house to the fairground always took me across the schoolyard, and I was always fascinated that a school would be closed for a fair, and at the same time envious of the pupils who had time off during what I considered to be the best time of the year.*

*The "Pluutenmaat" (Pluuten is regional dialect for clothes) is a market where all kinds of clothing and household goods are sold and is an integral part of Pützchens Markt. Unfortunately, the area where this takes place is shrinking a bit every year, probably because there are fewer regular shoppers. Even my grandmother can no longer go there, although it used to be a regular activity of her life to buy her annual supply of socks, spices, and vacuum cleaner bags at the Pluutenmaat.*

## 2020

Pützchens Markt was a constant in my life. Although I was no longer able to visit the fair regularly after moving away from the Rhineland, I remained loyal to my local county fair in my heart and mind. Until 2019, nothing had changed in terms of the feeling of timelessness. However, the cancellation the following year due to the coronavirus crisis was a break in continuity. Historically speaking, this is not the first time this has happened. In addition to the interruptions during the world wars, there was also a

cancellation in 1892 due to cholera outbreak. Clearly, the fair can survive both destruction and disease. In the subjective experience of our generation, however, the cancellation in 2020 was the first. It was a break that cannot be reversed, because interruptibility is now no longer just intellectual knowledge of the past, but a lived emotional reality. Psychologically speaking, however, this does not have to be a bad thing. As we know, we value what we have regained. On the other hand, we take things that are always there for granted. But now that it has restarted, we may take a closer look, enjoy the small but fine experiences a little more consciously, and be a little bit more kind towards ourselves and the showmen. With this in mind, I would like to conclude with the last verse from Hans Waldeck's PüMa poem:

*Wenn mer noch jet em Jeldstrump  
han, es et och nur e Rötze,  
fahre mer morje noch emol op de  
Maat noh Pötze.*

*(If we still have some money in our  
money sock, even just a bit we put aside,  
then let's go to Pützchen tomorrow  
for another ride.)*

