Serving 'The Guest':

Günther Anders at the Grand Seaside Hotel

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Abstract

Drawing on data collected during 14-months of ethnographic research in an Australian Coastal Hotel, the paper describes the management of service encounters. Hotel staff used meetings and training sessions to simulate service scenarios, hypothesizing 'customer wants and needs'. In order to do this they constructed the image of an ideal 'Guest', an image that was collectively evoked in order to shape the conduct of service encounters. We claim that these imaginary service encounters mean that the 'creators' of this imaginary object become increasingly subjected to its demands. The object, 'The Guest', attempts to dominate its creators. The traditional demarcation between subject and object is blurred, and perhaps reversed. Drawing on the neglected work of Günther Anders, the paper inquires into the status of this object and addresses the process of its production and consumption. It demonstrates how subjects and an (imaginary) object become entangled.

Key Words: customers; production; consumption; service marketing; hotels; Anders.

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> 'Dear Guest, we are on a journey to give you **Great Service**. We would love
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> you to help us by nominating any member of our team that has given you really
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> **'Great' customer service**. Please post this card in the box at reception. Thank
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> you.'
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> ('Guest Nomination Card' from Accor Hotels group, 2007.)

Introduction

In this speculative paper, we will address the issue of the ontology of the customer in

the context of service encounters within an Australian Coastal Hotel (1). Broadly

reflecting the 'interpretive turn in consumer research' (Sherry, 1991) and a relational

account of marketing (e.g. Baron, 1996; Gummerson, 1993), the paper concerns both

the ontological status and the interpersonal ambivalence of service encounters in an

era supposedly marked by widespread expectations of excellence and exceptionality

(Peters & Waterman, 1994). We intend to contribute to what has recently been

dubbed 'consumer culture theory' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), but seek to question

a concern with the human subject as prime object of investigation. We do this in part

by refusing to split the processes of production and consumption (Firat & Venkatash,

1995) and instead focusing on service encounters as sites for the *mutual* constitution

of identities. We argue that they can do this by constructing the image of a phantom

that we call 'The Guest' which has an ontology which challenges conventional

classifications of reality and fantasy. In order to argue this, we employ the work of

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Günther Anders, a German critical theorist who has not figured in consumer research, but whose analytical thrust provides important insights and extends considerations about the fundamentally relational and political ontology of the service relationship (Bagozzi, 1995; Hochschild, 1983).

In the Grand Seaside Hotel, the staff claimed to be attempting to meet (or even exceed) customer expectations, but it appeared that this was a matter that could not merely be confined to the management of technical parameters (Price et al., 1995). For example, when consumers seek mythical, fantastic, or extraordinary experiences, the *affective content* of service encounters becomes critical. Thus, when experiencing 'River Magic' during river rafting trips (Arnould & Price, 1993); when consuming 'The American West' at Rodeos (Peneloza, 2001); or when re-creating 'the Mountain Man Myth' with fellow mountain men and women in the 'Rockies' (Belk & Costa, 1998), consumers playfully, imaginatively, and collectively connect to nature, mythology or fantasy. In fact, such experience is socially constructed in direct opposition to the profane world of daily routines and role definitions. Importantly, the construction of a shared exceptionality is a collective endeavour (Greissman & Mayes, 1977) but its evaluation is a subjective matter (Denzin, 1983). Triggered by unusual events, 'extraordinary experience is characterized by high levels of emotional intensity and experience … [and] … implies neither superior levels of effort nor an independent relational mode.'(Arnould & Price, 1993: 25). This means that 'satisfaction may have little to do with whether the experience unfolds as expected'; rather, it results from an entire 'narrative of experience' in relation to 'an array of culturally informed, preconscious scripts' (Arnould & Price, 1993: 42). In other

words, to experience exceptionality personally, the subject requires a prior relation with a wide range of objects and narratives.

The fact that the experience and evaluation of extraordinary experience can not be entirely determined through bureaucratic mechanisms which ensure predictability constitutes a formidable challenge to service providers (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000). Customers who 'expect the unexpected' could only have a vague understanding of what it is that they desire, and are presumably not capable of articulating these expectations. This would then seem to demand high levels of sensitivity, empathy, and creativity as well as social and emotional competence from those who design or participate in the conduct of service encounters. Yet when it comes to actually producing the extraordinary, it is not only service providers' ingenuity and imagination that is put to the test when seeking to 'give their customers something they do not know how to ask for' (Arnould & Price, 1993: 25). In addition, 'to be effective, it must transcend the purposive, task oriented, and commercial nature of the ordinary service interaction' (ibid: 27). Spontaneity and the breaching of scripts are indispensable and hence the responsible autonomy of service providers is vital. At the same time, however, their imagination must be tamed and directed at goals and actions that contribute to customer satisfaction and sustain corporate norms and values – something that, as we claim, that ultimately amounts to a '*corporate colonization of fantasy*' (Bunzel, 2007). Thus, there is a fundamental tension between the supposed indeterminacy of service encounters aimed at providing extraordinary experiences, and the corporate prerogative to manage such encounters. The participant (provider or customer) must believe they are acting as an autonomous human, even if non-human structures are shaping their action.

Drawing on vignettes selected from data collected during fourteen months of ethnography by the first author (2), we will describe the strategies and practices employed to manage such encounters and to provide service 'beyond customers' expectations'. We will see how staff at the hotel use meetings and training sessions to simulate service scenarios based on hypothesised customer wants. In order to do this they devise the image of an ideal guest that is recurrently evoked to both inform and shape conduct. Drawing on a small selection of the data, the first part of the paper elaborates the processes by which hotel guests are constituted as objects of knowledge. We try to show how information routinely gathered about guests' perceptions and preferences is practically enhanced by simulated service scenarios intended to improve service provision. The knowledge thus established is then fed back into the actual conduct of 'real' service encounters, where staff are asked 'to expect the unexpected' in an attempt to 'exceed customers' expectations'. It is this ideal guest, or imaginary customer, that provides the mediation between autonomy and constraint. A non-human fiction, with endless potential demands, solicits conduct that can be understood to be authentically human.

Within this continuing simulation of service encounters there is a blurring of the lines between the 'actual' and the 'hypothetical', between 'presence' and 'absence'. As a result the (ontological) status of the object constructed is not obvious. Using the work of the German social theorist Günther Anders we will identify the simulation of customer service as implying a de-materialization of service encounters and will term the product of this process 'The Guest'. We, and Anders, argue that The Guest is neither real nor imaginary, but a non-human 'Phantom' which has real consequences

(Anders 1956/2002). We go on to address in more depth the process of producing

Phantoms and scrutinise the relationship between producers and (their) product. We

will see that Phantoms emerge from a process of simulation which is marked by a

fundamental reversibility of subject and object. Contrary to the idea that it is the

subject who is in charge of production – shaping, forming, and possessing the object

according to its will – The Guest allows us to see this process in a different light. The

object might well be submissive, but it is certainly not passive. Simulations grant the

object a special power; one that allows it to overthrow the apparent dominance of the

subject and to direct the relationship in its own favour.

Having established the seductive power of the (imaginary) object, we will move to

investigating that power in more detail. Can (imaginary) objects dominate subjects?

We shall see that, in part, any power that they have is grounded in the condition of the

contemporary subject. Its feeling of insufficiency in the face of the objects it has

produced induces a sense of what Anders calls 'Promethean shame'. At the societal

level, this leads to a mass-individuation – a detachment of modern people from their

various social worlds. For both Anders, objects play a pivotal role in this

individuation. As the encounter with a mirror might trigger identity-formation in early

childhood, contemporary objects (as quasi-mirrors) provide a reference for the

creation of (collective) identity. So the image of The Guest contributes to the

generation of a Grand Seaside Family. We conclude that it is The Guest, rather than

the subjects, that appears to be sovereign. According to Anders, such a development

is to be expected. He argues that we have moved from a modern society rooted in the

ideas and values of enlightenment – with a sovereign subject at its centre and

production as the foundation of society – to a stage that is governed by objects and codes.

Of course, these are speculative concepts. We are not suggesting that there is no resistance to Phantoms, because in the Grand Seaside there was (Bunzel *et al* 2002). Neither are we suggesting that that this is an inexorable development, because that very much remains to be seen. And we are certainly not suggesting that this is a neutral process that is in some way independent of the management and organization of capitalism (Parker 2002). But these issues lie in the background here, because what we are trying to do is to use some empirical data, and some theory, in order to begin a rethinking of the *ontology of the customer*. Like the 'implicit reader' (Iser, 1972) that any author conjures as they write, so is the figure of the imagined 'customer' becoming more important in organizational life. When something becomes important, even if its ontological status is unclear, it begins to shape the trajectories of the subjects who surround it. We will begin by looking at the birth of The Guest.

Making Little Things Count

Let us visit the Grand Seaside Hotel – a five-star luxury hotel, located in a small town on the Australian East Coast. At the time of our arrival, the hotel has just undergone a change in ownership that instigated a comprehensive reorganization (3). Its aim was to streamline operations and turn the hotel into a more profitable organization. Tim Chang, the newly appointed General Manager, focussed on improving the provision of customer service within the hotel. Tim's concern with service excellence derived from his conviction that:

'Nowadays, customer service is the key to survival in an ever more competitive market. I have to do more than the other competitors; I have to provide service-excellence, really outstanding service. I can only do that by listening to what the customer says and by listening to my staff. But, actually, it's about more. It's not just meeting customers' expectations; that's what all do. It means exceeding them, providing service beyond the customer's expectation, that's my philosophy. And you can only do that by training your people properly.'

Tim did everything to get his philosophy across to management and staff. In addition to the regular management meetings (the 'Morning Briefings') and events such as the annual All-Staff-Meeting, he used the monthly hotel newsletter, the notice board, and even the walls of the staff canteen. Moreover, he introduced a customer service program that was designed and run by Di and Leo, two members of the management team. This programme was called 'Make the Little Things Count' and the trainers used their sessions to raise staff awareness of 'little things' in service delivery. These days, they told their audience, merely meeting customers' demands was no longer enough. Top-class companies have to go beyond that stage, and must deliver 'service that exceeds customer expectations!' It is precisely those little things, the trainers explained, the anticipation of customers' needs and wants, that determine the quality of service delivery and which ultimately define service excellence.

To make their message clearer Di, Leo, and another employee performed a short role-play at the beginning of their opening training session. In this scene – based on an encounter that had taken place just a few days ago – a room cleaner on duty discovered a young mother trying to feed her baby with a bottle. The baby was crying and the cleaner suspected that the milk in the bottle was too cold. With the mother

appearing rather inexperienced and needing help, the cleaner offered to warm up the

bottle. The mother agreed, and when the cleaner returned with the warm milk, the

baby calmed down and drank his bottle. The trainers explained to staff that the mother

was 'over the moon' and went to the General Manager to thank the cleaner for her

effort. This was precisely the sort of proactive approach that is expected and that

would be appreciated and rewarded. That is why management had introduced the

'Make the Little Things Count' reward programme. Each employee was eligible to

nominate other staff for a reward and management would decide the winners (4). The

trainers concluded the session stressing that winners would be announced on a

monthly basis. They would receive a gift-voucher, one hundred Australian dollars and

a T-shirt carrying the newly designed logo of the programme on the front and the

sentence 'I Made a Little Thing Count' on the back.

Imaginary Service Encounters

The customer service training program was partly informed by results from

questionnaires left in guests' rooms. Elsa, Tim's secretary, entered the information

gathered from the questionnaires into a database and announced the latest responses at

the Morning Briefings. Managers would also commonly report on their own

experiences, acting as a surrogate for guests' evaluation of the service. These latter

imaginary service encounters rested on the projection of hypothetical wants of equally

hypothetical guests and constituted a sort of climax in Tim's efforts to create a culture

of service excellence. Effectively, staff were being encouraged to employ the gaze of

an imaginary customer and point out deficiencies in the provision of customer service.

The following sequence, taken from one of the Morning Briefings, is illustrative:

Tim: 'Just a reminder to you that the front-desk is a public area for customer service and not for socializing of staff; even if they are not busy with a guest at that moment. Sometimes when you pass by there, the guys from concierge are chatting with each other or hanging around. This does not lead to a good impression, if guests are passing by. This morning I saw even Celine [*an administrative assistant*] standing around there having a chat with some of the guys. I mean, she is not even from reservations; so what does she have to do there? So, please inform your staff: The front-desk is not a staff room! It's not a chatting area!'

Often, Tim would also point at the aesthetic dimension of the service experience, sometimes rather bluntly.

Tim: 'Where is Housekeeping?' (He gazes around the table.)

Elsa: 'She's not in today.'

Tim: 'Okay. Then tell her that the area around the hotel looks like (he hesitates for a moment.) well, it really looks like shit! So, they have to clean it regularly!'

On another occasion, Tim criticized Amanda, a cleaning staff supervisor.

Tim: 'I just wanted to remind you that you have to put the slippery sign away. It's such a nice gangway from The Garden Terrace to the pool and then you have this ugly sign there.'

The reference to imaginary service encounters was by no means Tim's prerogative. Other managers also adopted this formulation in order to more or less explicitly remind their colleagues of certain responsibilities. One of the Security Managers, for instance, claimed that the car park 'has become the most messy place in the whole hotel – an insult to our guests'. As far as we know, no guest had complained. On other

occasions, participants in the meeting reminded Bill, the maintenance Engineer, that some light bulbs had to be changed or that one of the toilet flushes was not working properly. Others informed the meeting about dirty carpets, empty bottles around the pool area, or the inappropriate dress code of staff members. Although such comments were mainly uttered in a rather helpful voice, dropped in as a 'by the way, I just wanted to let you know that...', the people addressed often seemed embarrassed and usually responded apologetically.

The Grand Seaside Family

The simulation of imaginary service encounters was complemented by another element: the simulation of 'community' as the Grand Seaside Family (see Parker 2002: 66 *passim*). This was most impressively invoked during the annual All-Staff-Meeting which marked the end of the financial year and was usually the occasion for communicating achievements and honouring exceptional performance. On this occasion staff were assured of their value to the hotel, somewhat concealing the recent history of dismissals during the re-organization. Tim was keen to stress that the recent increase in profits ultimately resulted from the extraordinary performance of the staff. Hannah, the Director of Marketing, even suggested that there was a communal bond between management and staff that was also visible to guests.

> Hannah: 'We had some focus groups throughout the year, which is basically a get-together with our guests, and it's a very useful marketing tool. So we talked to some of our return guests about what they like and why they come back. And guess what they said why they are coming back? It's not because of the location or the beach or whatsoever. It's because of you! It's because of the staff and the

service they experience here! And, do you know what else they want? They like to be informed about us, about what's going on here. They like to be in touch. They want to be part of the family: The Grand Seaside Hotel Family!'

The cosy image evoked was visualized by a slide that Matilda, the Director of Human Resources, presented at the end of her presentation. The slide showed a cartoon in which two groups of three people were engaging in a tug of war. The whole scene is located on a tiny island, which provides just enough space for the six people to stand. This small island appears like a platform above the water; a platform surrounded by huge crocodiles with widely opened mouths. The rope on which both groups are pulling is already tearing apart, so that each group is about to fall into the sea and get caught by the crocodiles.

Matilda: 'Yes, this makes it clear. We are a great team here, and only by working together will we succeed.'

These sequences were symptomatic of the powerfully 'staged' character of collective life at the Grand Seaside. For example, consider the way that the Human Resource Department handled its work. Apart from turning the Human Resource Office into an informal meeting place for staff and for the general exchange of hotel gossip, the Human Resource managers sent out cards for birthdays or anniversaries, organized social events, and made inquiries into the well-being of people on sick leave. Tim claimed that all staff were considered members of the same family. Hence, he and other senior mangers usually took their meals in the staff canteen surrounded by receptionists, waitresses, and cleaners. Tim founded the Hotel's Social Club, which organized events such as outdoor activities or theatre visits. Even the supply of free

meals to staff and the provision of training were seen to be part of that sense of familial care and understood to underline management's dedication to staff.

Anders: Industrial Platonism and De-Materialization

> 'The subjects of freedom and un-freedom have been exchanged. Things are free: men are un-free.' (Anders, 1956/2002: 33) (5)

At first sight, the object constituted within this discourse of customer service at the Grand Seaside, 'The Guest', seems somewhat elusive. It does not seem to have particularly corporeal or specific qualities because in most cases The Guest does not refer to any particular guest, or time, or place. The Guest could be virtually anyone, anywhere, at any time. In fact, its elusive omnipresence grants The Guest a somewhat Panoptic quality. Constant submission to the gaze of The Guest structures life at the Grand Seaside. In their desire to please this ghostly spectator, staff subjugate themselves to virtually limitless demands, as stipulated by the doctrine of service excellence (Bunzel *et al*, 2002). So while The Guest seems more than a passing idea, or a turn of phrase, we would probably hesitate to call it a thing. And, while our Guest is not corporeal, it is certainly the manifestation of a certain strategy. It is an object of human intervention and manipulation. Further, while seemingly a product of human imagination, it is nonetheless quite 'real' in its consequences, having a profound impact upon organizational life. The chocolate you found on your pillow in the hotel room is the end result of the demands of The Guest. It thus assumes a certain form of agency – being something like a 'subjectified object'. In other word, this imaginary

but subject-like object is, what Günther Anders would call, a *Phantom*, as we shall now see.

Anders' writings have gone virtually unnoticed outside the German-speaking academic community, despite his close intellectual relations with the Frankfurt School (6). Born in 1902 in Breslau to the famous child-psychologists William and Clara Stern; he was a student of Cassirer, Panofsky, Heidegger and Husserl, and was briefly married to Hannah Arendt (7). A self-proclaimed 'occasional philosopher' (*Gelegenheitsphilosoph*) and winner of the Adorno prize; he was also a vigorous peace-activist, particularly involved in anti-Vietnam protests, and an icon of the anti-nuclear movement in Germany. He died in 1992, and was arguably among the most original and certainly the politically most outspoken and significant theorists in post-WW II Austria and Germany. Based on his philosophical studies and inspired by various jobs he held as an emigrant from Nazi-Germany to the U.S., he aspired to provide a theory of the human condition in an era of Fordist production and mass consumption. His concern with the social consequences of technology and mass-media has produced a considerable body of writings containing a rich reservoir of ingenious insights and prefiguring (almost literally) Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality by two decades. Perhaps it is the somewhat fragmented, thematically and stylistically diverse character of his writings – comprising of philosophical essays, collections of aphorisms, novels, and even poems – that has contributed to his neglect. Hence, without being able to do any justice to his work, we will introduce some of the concepts that we think are relevant for this paper.

Anders saw the emergence of Fordist mass-production and consumption – most notably the emergence of modern mass media – as hallmarks of an era in which reproduction has become the central value of society. The ever-increasing complexity and efficiency of modern technology provoke very ambiguous consequences. The power that humankind derives from the technologies it has produced, including its potential to destroy the earth, turns against it culturally, economically and psychologically. Culturally and economically, our relationship to the object world has been turned on its head with the emergence of technologically induced mass-production and consumption. For Anders, technological artefacts become the true subjects of history, while humankind becomes a supplement to the world of objects. Psychologically, the speed of technological development induces a fundamental imbalance between the human capacity to produce technological artefacts and our capability to master or even imagine the consequences of their application. As a result, human existence becomes rather outdated, and humans become characterised by a certain sort of inadequacy, or shame.

With the advent of Fordism, our affiliation with objects has gained prominence over our relationships with human beings. The status of these objects, however, is in doubt, as the prevalence of serial reproduction and mass consumption renders the idea or blueprint more important than the thing itself. Planning and simulation have become pervasive to the extent that any enactment amounts to a mere replication of whatever was already designed for that purpose. Modern warfare, with its meticulously planned and its computer simulated and orchestrated forms of 'engagement', seems the most dramatic example of this general tendency. Today

'... ideas are primary and real, because effective, these minutely drawn and calculated blueprints and ideals [*Vorbilder*] (8). These ideals will then be replicated with the material of reality.' (Anders, 1970/1994: 115)

In other words, we are witnessing an ontological shift, with ideas beginning to outweigh their incarnation. For example, as many people have suggested, intellectual property and the ownership of knowledge have become a crucial form of capital within the economic sphere. Anders here identifies the advent of what he calls a second Platonic age, where 'the idea' becomes pivotal to (what we would call today) the knowledge economy.

Corresponding to this new Platonism, serial existence becomes the credo and the criterion of modernity, as reproduction turns into the ultimate purpose of production, and the objects thus (re)produced – e.g. TV images, newspaper reports or photographs – render the ultimate proof of truth and reality. 'Today, the only objective statements are those made by objects' (Anders, 1956/2002: 60). Faced with the ontological and social authority granted to objects, the human condition becomes problematic. For Anders, human beings suffer from a double inferiority when compared to the serial product. Humans cannot be preserved nor can they be reproduced as clones. Serial production, in this sense, is no less than 'industrial reincarnation', a claim to immortality, the attempt to prevent decay and death by being (infinitely) reproduced. Consequently, Anders suggests, humans begin to desire to emulate mass-products, to have a serial existence just like all the other products. The object can not die until the idea of it dies (Anders, 1956/2002: 52). *Industrial Platonism*, as Anders puts it, grants immortality precisely because of the primacy and endurance of ideas.

Industrial Platonism also implies a de-materialization of social relationships – ideas or images replace substance and matter. This is exemplified in widespread iconomania: an obsessive desire for the production, consumption and adoration of images (Anders, 1956/2002). Today, most people derive their knowledge about the world from media that pretend to give us virtually instant access to information about events in places unfamiliar and remote to us. This pseudo presence that TV bestows upon us – Anders uses the example of the live-coverage of a football-match – passes for a 'first-hand impression' when it is just a series of images, an electronic reproduction of the real event. Our access to the world (reality) has become so mediated that Anders suggests:

> 'Once, there were *images in the world*; today there is the *world-in-image*; more correctly: the world *as* image (1980/2002: 250 emphasis in original).
> In other words, 'reality turns into an image of the representations made of it' (1956/2002: 179).

What is presented to us, Anders claims, is a *Phantom*. This is an image of real events that is no longer a mere representation but has instead gained supremacy over reality, gradually but persistently supplanting it. Using the example of the football match, a goal that is broadcasted around the globe in the form of its various replications – first, as a 'live' TV picture; then, again and again, from various angles; yet again, zoomed in and out; eventually decelerated in slow motion and frozen – assumes a reality of its own that seems, indeed, superior to what the spectators saw in the stadium. Hence, Phantoms are neither real nor (entirely) fictitious. They represent reality as much as they shape it. They are 'moulds' that shape the world (9), and this is a world in which reality and the reproductions made of it are indistinguishable.

'Reality is produced only through reproduction; only in its plural form, as series, does 'Being' exist' (ibid. 180).

Against the alleged materialism of our time, Anders suggests that we are witnessing the dawning of a new sort of idealism. We are facing the menace of a de-materialized world comprising of images and ideas and where substance and matter have become ghostly.

Anders at the Grand Seaside

If we think about what Anders might make of the Grand Seaside, we find that the organizational world might have partly become de-materialized in the way he suggests. The omnipresent image of The Guest seems as ontologically elusive as one of Anders' Phantoms. The Guest, as staff and management imagine it, carries a strong claim to represent the reality of service provision. If this was built upon the characteristics of 'real' hotel-guests, such as complaints about the dirty towels or unfriendly staff, it might not surprise us. However, the claim to represent reality also applies in instances when – as in the case of the slippery floor sign or the dirty parking lot – the service scenarios established are purely fictitious. Even though no guest has actually complained, The Guest's view is accepted as authentic and valid, as representing the reality of service provision at the hotel (10).

Yet, the image of The Guest does is not confined to representing reality, to being merely a depiction of events at the hotel. By being presented at the Morning Briefings, the claims of The Guest are incorporated into the strategies and conduct of service provision at the hotel. Organizational life at the Grand Seaside carries a strong

imaginary element. This image, or imaginary, both reflects and shapes organizational life, a Phantom with the power to mould everyday life. This represents a de-materialization, a tendency to ground conduct in an idea of service provision, of what customers may or may not want, need or desire. The peak of this organizational Platonism could be imagined to happen when the hypothetical demands of The Guest become more important than the wants, needs, or desires of real guests. After all, one could argue that The Guest does not authentically represent the wishes or demands of real guests. If no guest actually complains about the slippery sign, it might be because no guest perceives it as a problem. Yet the representational claim becomes even more forceful, dramatic, and perhaps absurd when staff are congratulated or admonished based on hypothetical service scenarios – as it is common practice during the Morning Briefings. The Guest and its imaginary demands are granted a level of authority that even outweighs the real. In a Hegelian twist, the subjects that created this object have now been subjected to its demands (11). The power of the (imaginary) object has turned these subjects from Master into Servant. The object has become liberated (Anders, 1956/2002).

Manufactured Needs and Tamed Fantasy

Yet the very idealism that characterizes the second Platonic age has another, socio-economic, dimension; one that is equally relevant to the Grand Seaside. In a historical excursus in his later work (1980/2002), Anders identifies the *first* industrial revolution as evolving around the production of commodities (products of a first degree), while the *second* stage concerns the manufacturing of needs (as second-degree products) corresponding to these commodities. It does this with the help of an industry,

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advertising, deliberately designed for that purpose. In fact, Anders envisages the emergence of advertising as a hallmark of the condition of the modern person:

> 'Our present day finitude is not constituted by the fact that we are, *animalia indigenia*, needy beings; but, as we actually need too little, (…) by our lack of lack' (Anders, 1980/2002: 17)

But he does not stop here. The *third* industrial revolution, he claims, is marked by a tendency to constitute the possible in the form of an individual and social obligation to assume 'that we always must (do) what we can (do)' (Anders, 1980/2002: 17). This tendency includes even the possibility of human self-destruction through the production of atomic weapons. Thus, nuclear energy is the symbol of the third and, to Anders, the final stage of industrial revolution.

However, this tendency to render everything that is possible desirable, or even mandatory, implies that the whole world is turned into a resource. This applies equally to humankind, which is rendered into a resource for the creation of new means of production. Hence, for Anders, the whole world turns into an asset to be exploited and is no longer a 'world-in-itself' but a 'world-for-us'. This is a world in which:

> '…we chase products that we actually do not need. In fact, we know neither their use nor the corresponding need – both have still to be invented and created' (ibid.: 33).

At the same time, all 'beings become correlates of their usefulness' – a tendency that Anders treats with hostility, warning that '[a]nalogous to the Nazi-term "life unworthy of living" we have created "beings unworthy of existing"' (ibid.: 33). Effectively,

'being a resource has become *criterium existendi*', unless you are useful you should not be (ibid.: 33).

The third industrial revolution is therefore a contradictory era. The incessant (re)production and satisfaction of infinite needs thrives on a ruthless and relentless exploitation of the very conditions of their reproduction. This is what grants this third revolution its, ultimately, self-destructive quality. For Anders, (capitalist) *reproduction implies destruction*, as any product we produce must be destroyed (i.e. consumed) as quickly as possible to generate a need for yet another product. From the perspective of industry, he claims, 'there should be no usage, only relentless consumption' whilst everything must be turned into a consumer good (Anders, 1980/2002: 44). This is what grants consumer goods – and we may want to add, services too – their ephemeral quality. They can only exist when being consumed. The ontology of the third industrial revolution is then a *negative ontology* (ibid. 46), a form of being that is continually searching for its own annihilation.

Such a negative ontology also constitutes life at the Grand Seaside Hotel. Incessantly, new needs and wants – even those suspected of hypothetical guests – are invented and created to fuel the process of service (re)production. Any potential need, want or desire; any physiological or mental condition is subjected to this cycle of production and consumption by the very ambition to 'exceed customer expectations'. Neither staff nor guest are allowed to be complacent, as both are asked 'to expect the unexpected' within the imaginary of service excellence. Nevertheless, not every want and need is equally met; not every possibility to please the guest is realized. Guest complaints about the weather, about the opening hours of the hotel bar, or about

prices for food or beverages are regularly rejected. Further, not all guests carry equal weight when expressing their wants or needs. Children, for example, are commonly perceived as 'trouble makers'. Their desire to stroll around the hotel, to play in the lobby or to sing and shout in the hotel restaurant are seen as illegitimate, as they impact upon the service experience of other guests and thus threaten the smooth flow of service (re)production (12). Hence, limits to the creation of wants and needs are defined by what can be controlled by the system of service reproduction itself. This is also where the general obligation to anticipate, meet, and exceed guest expectations stops; where the 'cult of the customer' (du Gay & Salaman, 1992) loses its spell.

To Anders, such limits results from an imagination that is encapsulated into an closed system. Within the logic of the service encounter, the demands are potentially limitless, yet at the same time are entirely bound to the principles of reproduction. But, echoing Foucault, this not a form of power that actors perceive as simply preventing them from being free.

> 'As the gates are wide open, as the walls between us and the system have been removed, as we live in congruence with its content, it has become self-evident to us what we are allowed to imagine [*and*] to keep alive the illusion of freedom to us and all others – to what extent we may transgress the limits of the system' (Anders, 1980/2002: 186).

Thus tamed, our imagination loses much of its transgressive quality, its possibility for escape. Today, the 'role of fantasy is reduced to that of a cadence. Cadences are embedded into fixed note-textures and are placed at fixed positions. The tones that they modify are always pre-given, although we do not experience this fact as a limitation.' (Anders, 1980/2002: 186).

So, as grammar structures language, the logic of service excellence, as routinely outlined at the Morning Briefings, has shaped staff imagination to the degree that they do no longer recognize its limitations. The image of The Guest, and the authority granted to his desires, wants, and needs conceals the disciplinary character of his might. As Anders puts it:

> 'We obey all the more willingly, as we do not perceive the rules to which we have become subjected, as the latter are disguised through our inability to even conceive of any alternative to what we are supposed to wish … This conformist system … has conditioned us *avant la lettre*, so it can be generous and maintain its liberal outlook. Yet it is liberal (not in spite of but) because it is an integral system. It is terrorist (not in spite of but) because it is gentle. And, we are its victims (not in spite of but) because we do not realize our serfdom. If this system gives us authority for our doings, it does this because our authority is its doing.' (Anders, 1980/2002: 186f.).

It could be argued that the discourse of service excellence at the Grand Seaside Hotel has assumed a totalitarian quality, rather like a form of corporate culturalism that enhances behavioural controls with ideological ones. Staff, management, and guests are moulded into a system of service (re)production that passes 'slavery as freedom' (Willmott, 1993, Parker 2000). The Guest always wants something more, sparkling water in the room, free peanuts at the bar. Their demands must be imagined, and obeyed, even if no actual guest has asked for their toilet rolls to be folded into a point and sealed with a silver sticker. Effectively, service provision at the Grand Seaside Hotel thrives upon a *corporate colonization of fantasy*.

The Mirror of Collective Identity

So we might suggest that The Guest moulds staff, management, and customers (13) at the Grand Seaside, but we have not yet established where the power of that image derives from. Tentatively, we might suggest that The Guest is an example of an image that overwhelms with its sheer perfection. It is '*überschwellig*' (14), as Anders (1970/1994) puts it - it fills our senses, and inspires a sort of awe.

To appreciate this definition and grasp what Anders hints at with the term '*überschwellig*', we shall briefly explore some of the tenets of his 'negative anthropology'. With this designation Anders – inspired by German philosophical anthropologists Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Plessner – wishes to convey that 'the essence of a person is precisely in not having any' (van Dyjk, 2000: 29). In contrast to animals, humans are a '*Mangelwesen*', a species characterized by a lack of instincts and inborn traits, ill equipped for survival and adaptation to the world (Gehlen, 1986). In that respect, a (wo)man is a stranger in this world. Yet, this primary deficiency also gives rise to human freedom, and not the dominance of instinct that we find in other animals. Consequently, human 'nature' develops through encounters with the object-world. This is the human condition: both being in the world and being detached from it. Being 'free from the world in the world' (Anders, 1956/2002).

With the second and third industrial revolutions, and the massive and speedy advance of science, technology, and (capitalist) production, human products are now so much faster, stronger, and more accurate than humans that we cannot possibly hope to match them. In the face of the sheer perfection of its objects, the subject diminishes.

It marvels at its objects while at the same time is thrown back upon its own deficiencies. From that results a sense of insufficiency – a 'Promethean shame' for Anders. This is the shame of not being like the things that we have made (15), the shame of being born flawed and not being produced perfect. For Anders, human beings attempt to eradicate their deficiencies by 'deserting into the camp of the objects', by using clothing, make-up, plastic surgery, genetic manipulation and so on. So human beings inhabit the world, but only vis-à-vis the object-world. Their 'nature', their identity, thus develops in uneasy relation with this object-world, marked by the *Überschwelligkeit* perfection of that which we have made and the Promethean shame that they cause in us.

For Anders, our partial separation from the world of objects is an inescapable part of the human condition. Individuation results from 'dividuation'; or vision from division as Cooper puts it (1997). Identity requires detachment from the world, an initial separation from that which grounds our sense of who 'we' are. For example, in his collection of essays titled *Glance from the Moon* (1970/1994), Anders – drawing on selected notes from his diary during the period of manned space-travel and the first moon landing - identifies a form of dividuation as constituting the implicit but most important aspect of modern space travel.

> 'For the first time – and this is a historical development of a new kind – the earth, standing in front of a mirror, has become reflexive, has gained self-consciousness or at least self-recognition. Since it saw itself from the outside, as an object, as it would appear to someone from afar, this first act of self-recognition found the thing perceived as utterly alien.' (Anders, 1970/1994: 90).

The interpretation Anders offers, which follows Lacan's description of the mirror-stage in early childhood, sees space travel as triggering the formation of collective identity within human kind (16). The earth gains self-consciousness by seeing itself from the outside, as an object. Within the images broadcast and published, human kind – after initial bewilderment – recognizes itself. The moon (as a separate place to stand) provides the mirror for the reflection of the image of the earth. In a more specific sense, with Anders we can envisage individuation, the birth of the individual, the development of the subject, as originating from an object. Or, more precisely, from the image of the subject as seen from the outside, from somewhere or something that is not the subject.

Returning to the Grand Seaside we can, once more, draw on Anders' interpretation to identify the image of The Guest as constitutive of a process of *dividuation* which creates The Grand Seaside Family. The Guest encourages staff, management, and customers to reflect upon themselves, to look upon themselves from the outside, so to speak. Members of the Grand Seaside Family recognize within The Guest their own image. When evoking The Guest, they also evoke their own desires, their own habits, their own values. After all, it is them who have gradually constituted this image, who have – in an act of Promethean creation – made this Phantom. But The Guest is demanding, since it reflects members of the family as they want to be 'seen'. The Guest has been ascribed all those features that management, staff, and guest would display in an ideal world of customer service. In that respect, The Guest is less a mirror-image than a perfect golem, a creature born out of management's imagination. The Guest is always raising new demands to be met; it requires continual attention; it is omnipresent and constantly expects higher levels of customer satisfaction and

service quality. The Guest seems to 'incarnate' desires that are insatiable and demands that are unlimited. The cry, 'It's not enough!', produces a situation in which the ambiguity of what The Guest wants leads to endless and fruitless attempts at satisfaction that are always doomed to fail. In this sense, the very idea of service excellence appears like a form of (organizational) sublimation that directs organizational members towards a compulsive game; a game that implies the recurrent invention of new demands and the endless failure to exceed them (see Munro 1995).

We will not speculate about the psychoanalytic interpretation of (imaginary) objects any further (17), but we have perhaps gained a sense of the possible relevance of such (mirror-) objects in the process of identity formation. The Guest has a double role to play. Firstly, it overwhelms us with its perfection and as such it is an icon, an ideal shaped by the management imaginary, as it reflects the limitless demands of capital. But it also raises the voice of authority, simultaneously asking members of the Grand Seaside family to achieve the impossible and to understand the impossibility of achievement. The Guest brings members of the Grand Seaside family together by presenting them with an image of what they 'should' be like. The Guest offers a grounding for a sense of identity, inviting members to play the role of a hero in the organizational saga that sustains the family. But, crucially, it is precisely the indeterminacy and elusiveness of this image that grants it its 'seductive' power. Here, Anders meets – actually anticipates – Baudrillard.

> 'It [*the object*] is not divided with itself – which is the destiny of the subject – and it knows nothing of the mirror phase, where it would come to be caught by its own imaginary. It is the mirror. It is that which returns the subject to its

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mortal transparency. So if it can fascinate or seduce the subject, it is because it radiates no substance or meaning of its own' (Baudrillard 1983/1999: 114f).

The Revenge of The Guest

This paper began with some vignettes from a much larger piece of ethnographic work. Using them as speculative inspiration, we have argued that The Guest is an imaginary object that incarnates the principles of service excellence and that is recurrently invoked to steer the conduct of service encounters and to reward or sanction staff for their performance. This is the imaginary addressee of the Accor Hotels 'Guest Nomination Card' that we used as our epigraph. Employing some ideas from Günther Anders we have identified the imaginary object as being a Phantom. The image of The Guest is neither real nor entirely fictitious. It has assumed a sense of ontological and social authority, even supremacy, and has blurred and perhaps even reversed the order of simulation and actual conduct. The Guest is thus the icon of a new organizational Platonism that inverts creator and created, subject and object, and that de-materializes organizing. The seductive power of the imaginary object derives from its aura of perfection and elusiveness. It is precisely its indeterminacy, the fact that it projects limitless and insatiable wants, that gives it its power over staff, management and 'real' guests. Caught in its mirror, the subjects of the Grand Seaside find themselves, both individually and collectively as projections of The Guest. The object has become subject, and we have become objects.

Whilst Anders' work can be compared to that of critical theorists such as Foucault or Baudrillard, we think there is something else here that deserves to be brought to the

attention of marketing theorists. Much of the emphasis on the fundamental

relationality of service encounters is entirely justified, particularly since it then

embeds questions of satisfaction and exceptionality in a social context (Arnould &

Price, 1993). However, such a reframing still stays within a largely humanist, or

social constructionist, account of agency and subjectivity. But what if the results of

such a relationality were systems and structures that constrain agency and shape

subjectivity? Both Foucault and Baudrillard provide us with a sense in which

practices of surveillance and simulation can become ends in themselves, but Anders

goes further. He suggests that there is a sort of teleology here, a movement towards

humans being dominated by their creations. Yet, unlike the Sorcerer's Apprentice or

Dr Frankenstein, here the creations are ideas, not things. W. I. Thomas famously said

that 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences'. This is the

humanist view. For Anders, the consequences, the objects, are now defining what it

means to be human. This is because the very emptiness of human beings makes us

ceaselessly produce a world that dominates us.

The implications of this diagnosis are profound. We could ask whether we have really

become slaves to our creations, be they assembly lines, computers, or images?

Paradoxically, individual creativity, ingenuity, and imagination are often said to be

key to service and knowledge economies, but (following Anders) what if this is just

another form of object-domination? The attempt to colonise the imagination in the

name of service excellence, quality or whatever, appears not to result in liberty, but

the subtle shaping of individuals' identity and their possibility of community. After

all, only those members of the Grand Seaside Family who perform well are good

members. Both identity and community are only possible if The Guest permits, if The

Guest's demands are translated into individual and collective conduct. So this sort of collective identity is provisional and contingent upon the expressed dedication to and the demonstrated mastery of a particular practice, in this case 'service excellence' for customers, patients, citizens, students and so on (Munro, 1999). Anders' philosophical anthropology suggests a paradox. The more that an empty species like ours externalises itself, the more it becomes emptied of self, and subjected to corporate fantasy.

For Anders this is a state of alienation, an estrangement from being. In marketing theory terms, it moves us from a social constructionist view of service encounters, to a critical theory of the subjects and objects produced by encounters within consumer capitalism. Anders shares with Foucault and Baudrillard a bleak view of industrial society. However, though he is sceptical about an easy liberation from our object-world - from TV images, atomic-bombs, and branding - he is not despairing. His life-long political engagement in the anti-nuclear and peace movements were not predicated upon resignation. Anders certainly denounces our desire to desert into the camp of objects; our relentless yet fruitless attempts to denying mortality through industrial reincarnation; our shame about being incomplete, impure, imperfect; and our compliance with the world we have created. But this does not mean that we should simply renounce our own agency in these matters. Anders, the stubborn activist, espoused an obstinate credo 'If I am desperate; why should it bother me?' He reminds us that:

> 'It is not enough to change the world. That, we do anyway. And most of the
> time it happens without our direct intervention. We also have to interpret these
> changes. In order to change them. In order that the world does not change

without us. And eventually turns into a world without us' (Anders, 1980/2002: 5).

Perhaps it is an increased awareness, a sense of responsibility for our objects – be they material or imaginary – that Anders is calling for. Most of the time The Guest is not visible to us. We only see its traces in the smile at the reception desk and in the carefully folded bedsheets in our room. All too often, we mistake these signs for signs of ourselves, and not of the dominance of the discourse of 'service excellence' as a corporate colonization of fantasy. Anders wants to remind us that we, customers or workers, are not the same kind of beings as The Guest. Further, The Guest is a dangerous object because we begin to mistake its demands for our own. Our fantasies, our demands for the unexpected, become reduced to customer service management, and the impossibility of expecting the unexpected. Perhaps we should make The Guest less welcome.

Endnotes

(1) An earlier version of this paper by the first author was presented within theme 43 (The power of objects in shaping workplace practices) of the 2004 EGOS Colloquium in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Many thanks to the participants – in particular to Silvia Gheradhi – for their helpful comments. Grateful thanks also to this journal's referees and editors.

(2) During the fourteen-month research period, the first author conducted formal and informal interviews with management and staff in the hotel and worked together with, or followed, managers in the conduct of their daily routines. He also regularly attended formal meetings, training courses run as part of the hotel's customer service

programme, and several social events. Most relevant for the context of this paper, he observed regular management meetings, 'The Morning Briefings', and recorded observation notes of thirty-seven of these meetings. These notes were subsequently coded and entered into a NUD-IST database.

(3) During the restructuring, several parts of the hotel business were outsourced or subcontracted. Other departments were merged and the restaurants were reorganized into profit centers. Most managers, if not made redundant, found themselves in unfamiliar situations, often having to cope with increased levels of responsibility and work intensity. The restructuring was also accompanied by the dismissal of numerous staff, which induced an atmosphere of underlying anxiety and distrust among employees. All the details of the study are pseudonyms, but see Bunzel (2000) for full details.

(4) Of course, such nominations were a double-edged sword. For a discussion of peer-surveillance and Panopticism at the Grand Seaside see Bunzel *et al*. (2002).

(5) All translations from Anders are by the first author.

(6) To our knowledge, the only systematic discussion of Anders' thought that is available in English is van Dijk (2000).

(7) He changed his name to Anders after being told by the editor of a Berlin newspaper that he must change his name because there were already too many people called Stern on his staff. Anders responded by saying 'then call me 'different' (*anders*).

(8) Anders plays here with the connotation of the German word *Vor*bild (literally: *pre*-image), translated as 'ideal', but that effectively *pre*cedes the actual enactment.

(9) Anders uses the German word *Matrize*; a term that does not easily lend itself to translation and that carries the connotation of a form that is both shaped and capable

of shaping. Perhaps the term corresponds most closely to the English 'mould' or 'matrix'.

(10) This is not always the case. There were instances when such claims were rejected. The grounds for these rejections are outside the scope of this paper and are discussed in Bunzel *et. al*. (2002).

(11) For a Sadistic twist on this idea, see Fitchett (2004).

(12) For a more comprehensive discussion of legitimate and illegitimate needs and wants see Bunzel et al. 2002.

(13) Though not all three groups in the same way, and with the same consequences.

(14) *Überschwellig* is a neologism which means the opposite of *unterschwellig*, or subliminal. That is to say, something that fills the senses.

(15) In the case of Prometheus, his creation was mankind.

(16) In *Glance from the Moon* (see page 102 ff.), Anders establishes this process of individuation based on his interpretation of Freud (particularly *Totem and Taboo*). However, his overall argument that space-travel (the moon) represents the mirror-stage of humanity clearly derives from Lacan.

(17) For that you might want to refer to Anders (1970/1994) or Baudrillard (1983/1999).

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