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Enter through the Gift Shop: The Rural Pauper Colony of Veenhuizen as a Tourist Attraction

Esther Peeren

Alongside the narrow country road leading to the car park, tourist information center and National Prison Museum in the former Colony of Benevolence of Veenhuizen there is a sign with a map. It bears the slogan “Veenhuizen boeit,” playing on the double meaning in Dutch of “boeit” as both “captivates” and “shackles.” The slogan is printed in florid blue script against a logo in green and pink that schematically conveys the Colony’s creation of a highly ordered rural landscape. What the logo omits are the paupers who were made to work the land. Through its lighthearted pun, the sign transforms the failed nineteenth-century attempt to edify the poor and reduce countrywide food shortages through agricultural modernization and intensification in the “wastelands” of the peripheral province of Drenthe into a site of leisure and entertainment.

Figure 1: “Veenhuizen boeit” logo. Esther Peeren, 2019.
The “Veenhuizen boeit” slogan reappears on the façade of the tourist information center and adorns the mugs sold there as souvenirs along with thimbles saying “Veenhuizen” and food products presented as coming from the “Garden of Benevolence.” The latter include tapenade and garlic paste, but also sambal, a condiment that constitutes a rare (and probably unintentional) reference to the link between the Colonies of Benevolence and the colonial Cultivation System in the Dutch East Indies, both set up by Johannes van den Bosch. More prominent than these souvenirs, however, is the center’s substantial offering of brochures and books providing information about Veenhuizen and its history, including critical accounts of its mismanagement and mistreatment of the colonists.

The National Prison Museum is located in the square building surrounding a courtyard that was the “Tweede gesticht” or “Second institute” of the Colony, which appears at the center of the “Veenhuizen boeit” logo. It, too, has a shop, located in the museum lobby so it catches visitors’ attention even before they buy their tickets. Like the “Veenhuizen boeit” slogan, the shop’s name – “Bajesklant,” which is Dutch for “jailbird,” but literally means “jail customer” – contains a play on words that is meant to be funny, as are the names of many items sold in the shop: t-shirts saying “hartendief” or “thief of hearts,” bottles of “landlopersbocht” or “tramp hooch” and “bajesbitter” or “jail bitter,” licorice in the shape of crayons to “count the days” (of imprisonment) with, chocolates called “little tramps” (“landlopertjes”) and cuddly toys in prison outfits that say “my little scamp” (“mijn boefje”). While such wordplay may seem innocuous, the lighthearted atmosphere the slogan and museum shop summon in relation to Veenhuizen’s dark history of criminalizing poverty and homelessness has serious implications.
In *Tourists of History*, Marita Sturken argues that the commodification of sites of violent histories through gift shops (and, I would add, marketing slogans) should not be condemned wholesale or opposed to commemorative authenticity, but should not be ignored either. What visitors can buy as a souvenir of their visit merits serious analysis, she insists, as what is on offer will encourage certain responses to what transpired there while excluding others. Michael Welch’s *Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment* similarly stresses that the prison museum gift shop “has cultural power capable of projecting potent messages.” There is, then, what I call a “gift shop effect” that contributes to the “museum effect” as “the overall effect the museum has on its visitors, society, and culture.” What does this gift shop effect consist of in Veenhuizen? What responses
to its history are prompted or pre-empted through the shop’s offerings? And how do the messages the shop projects relate to those conveyed by the museum exhibition, the Visitor Guide and the information booklet _The Colonies of Benevolence: An Exceptional Experiment?_

**Playing at Prison**

According to Welch, “prison museums tend to invert the ‘Disney’ experience, becoming the antithesis of ‘the happiest place on earth.’” The National Prison Museum, however, seems primarily invested in making sure a visit there is not too bleak an experience. By turning prisoners and paupers into puns, the shop already reassures visitors that fun can indeed be had in a prison museum. The first page of the Visitor Guide sets a similar tone by wishing visitors “veel plezier” (a very pleasant time) in the museum. Pleasure is mainly to be derived from playful participation: on almost every page of the guide, visitors are encouraged to immerse themselves in the prison experience, effortlessly switching between taking the place of prisoners and guards: “experience what it was like to be pilloried,” “travel with one of the 8916 orphans who made this journey between 1823 and 1869,” “what is it like to sit in front of the screens in a control room?”

The museum tour starts with an enforced immersion when visitors enter a sluice, used in prisons to “regulate traffic within the prison walls,” and find themselves closed in. Here, however, it becomes clear that the prison experience on offer is explicitly one of play. Visitors are kept in the sluice for only a few minutes and, rather than being left to contemplate what it feels like to be locked in, are distracted by slick vignettes about the history of the Dutch legal and penal system projected on the walls. When the presentation ends, a countdown of the number of seconds before the sluice will open appears, ensuring that visitors remain distanced from the experience of actual prisoners, who do not always know for how long they will be locked in. Equally, the tour of Veenhuizen in the “boevenbus” (crook bus) that the museum offers does not turn visitors into crooks in any meaningful sense. It unfolds as a tour bus experience with the occupants constituting not the spectacle (as would be the case were this a real prison bus and not a clearly outdated model) but the spectators.

Instead of generating the “visceral effect” that “interactive pedagogy” can produce, participation is primarily playful. Moreover, rather than being opposed to the “penal spectatorship” from a “safe social distance” often used in dark tourism to educate visitors, participation is combined with spectatorship. This combination works to distance participation from identificatory, empathetic, and ethical responses, and spectatorship from critical
and political ones through **spectacularization**. Elsewhere, I have used this term to denote how the National 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York encourages visitors to relive 9/11 as a spectacle in the present, an event to be shocked, saddened and angered by, and to be remembered in a compulsive, compelling, and spectacular way, but not to be considered critically in its historical context. The National Prison Museum, in its turn, promotes an immersive engagement with the exhibits that is first and foremost a form of **playing at prison**, designed to captivate and entertain. The gift shop reinforces this message by selling prisoner outfits, plastic police helmets and batons, as well as LEGO and Playmobil sets that allow visitors to continue playing at home. Significantly, this **playing at prison** is highly directed (by the Visitor Guide, the instructions accompanying the exhibits and the circumscribed scenarios proposed by the gift shop toys) and not designed to activate the creative dimension of play, which would imply a **playing with** (the idea of) prison.

Figure 3: Playing at prison items in the National Prison Museum’s gift shop. Esther Peeren, 2019.

**Playing at prison** is a spectacular activity (especially in the age of the selfie) and turns the museum building and Veenhuizen as a whole (as seen from the crook bus) into spectacles to be marveled at, even while taking on the pauper’s or prisoner’s role in reenactments of colonial and penal discipline. As Sturken notes, “it is precisely when kitsch, consumerism and reenactment aim to smooth over the moment in which grief and loss are powerfully present that opportunities for broader cultural empathy and new ways of response are lost.” Throughout the National Prison Museum, responses related to captivation and entertainment – of escapism and playing around in a normally “forbidden space” – are promoted. The general atmosphere of play – there is even a prison-themed playground in the courtyard – discourages the responses related to education and remembrance that Welch considers part of penal tourism as a form of dark tourism “posit[ing] questions and doubts about modernity and its consequences.” In the end, the National Prison Museum and its shop, through their spectacularizing effect, do not invert the Disney experience, but emulate it.
Decontextualizing the Prison and the Rural Pauper Colony

In addition to presenting the history of the Dutch penal system and that of Veenhuizen as playful spectacle, the gift shop also decontextualizes these histories. Significantly, while the police helmets on sale in the gift shop bear the logo of the Dutch police, the prisoner outfits feature black-and-white stripes and numbers, a design uncommon in the Netherlands. Baseball caps with Police, SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) and NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigative Service) on them also point beyond the Dutch context. What these items reference, moreover, is not just another penal reality but a US-based prison imaginary spread by globalized media, in which non-authentic uniforms proliferate and NCIS officers investigate crimes in ways that far exceed their actual remit. Whereas the exhibits in the National Prison Museum seek to tell “the history of crime and punishment in the Netherlands” (Visitor Guide) and to emphasize the country’s pioneering role in this history, not in the least through the Colonies of Benevolence, the gift shop dilutes its
specificity, again encouraging responses to Veenhuizen linked to entertainment rather than to education or commemoration.

Another element decontextualized by the shop is the role of rurality and agriculture in the social experiment of the Colonies of Benevolence. Many of the souvenirs on sale in the shop feature rural designs. There are puzzles showing countryside scenes of the past, coasters featuring cocks, napkins with grazing cows, boxes of “cow licorice” picturing a cow and its identification tag, and Ot and Sien placemats. Ot and Sien are the clog-wearing boy and girl protagonists of Het boek van Ot en Sien (The Book of Ot and Sien), a popular volume of children’s stories written by Hinderius Scheepstra (with Jan Ligthart) and illustrated by Cornelis Jetses, published in 1906. Although set in the province of Drenthe, the stories have no link to the history of Veenhuizen. Ot and Sien are not poor (their family has a servant) and they live an idyllic country life, very different from the hardships suffered by the colonists and the hand-to-mouth lives of most people in Drenthe at the time. The other rural-themed items, too, present images of the rural that do not accord with how the rural was shaped in Veenhuizen: there are no images of agricultural labor, even though this was central to the Colonies of Benevolence, while the prominence of cows and cocks belies the fact that the Colonies focused on the large-scale production of cash crops using the newest agricultural techniques.19

Figure 5: Rural-themed items from the National Prison Museum’s gift shop. Esther Peeren, 2019.

Situated in what was known as “Dutch Siberia,”20 the Colonies were far from the agricultural idylls in the pre-capitalist mode described by Mikhail Bakhtin, where “people consume the produce of their own labor.”21 Johannes van den Bosch’s original plans did to some extent rely on a “back-to-nature-ideal” in which the countryside and “honest hard work” on a farm were expected to elevate urban paupers22 and the Society of Benevolence long continued to promote the Colonies as rural and carceral idylls (see Stuit, this cluster). In the public eye, however, the almost immediate failure of the experiment and the transformation of Veenhuizen from “free” colony to closed prison village caused it to lose any idyllic connotations,
instead marking it as a site of oppression and lasting social stigmatization (see Bosma and Valdés Olmos, this cluster).

The gift shop's affirmation of a decontextualized idyllic and nostalgic image of a Dutch countryside populated by happily grazing cows and children like Ot and Sien renders invisible the erosion of the idyllic elements of Van den Bosch's plan, as well as the way it prompted the intensified colonial-capitalist-racist exploitation of the rural East Indies (see Bosma and Valdés Olmos, this cluster). As such, it reinforces the minimization of these elements in the Visitor Guide and the Colonies of Benevolence booklet: the guide refers to the plan's failure only very briefly and leaves out the colonial connection, whereas the booklet references both but in a way that severely downplays them: it calls Veenhuizen a "(partly) realized utopia" and notes that the Cultivation System came "to some extent at the expense of the indigenous population."  

Conclusions

Taken together, the gift shop's commodification, spectacularization, and decontextualization create a “gift shop effect” that pre-empts critical questions about Veenhuizen's dark history, instead encouraging visitors to respond to the site as one of entertainment and, rather ironically for a site steeped in confinement, escapism. As I have shown, this message mostly resonates with and reinforces one also present, although more implicitly, in the museum exhibition, Visitor Guide and booklet. Despite the presence of some references to historical and contemporary prison systems, the overall “museum effect” is to present the Colonies of Benevolence and Dutch penal history in a lighthearted, playful manner. This atmosphere discourages critical questions about the positive spin put on the histories of Veenhuizen and the Dutch penal system, which are presented as enlightened and exceptional – as histories to be proud of, even for (the descendants of) colonists. As the booklet notes with regard to the Colonies: For some time now the unease has been giving way to pride, respect and appreciation. The pride of families who have come up through the social and societal ranks. Respect for the natural and built heritage. And appreciation represented by the protection of the Colony landscape, which also continues to evolve. (...) Right now, the future looks promising.  

As noted, despite appearing innocuous, the lighthearted commodification of such sites of violence can have serious consequences. Indeed, the booklet is an abridged version of the 2017 UNESCO bid for the Colonies of Benevolence to become a World
Heritage Site. Clearly, this bid is not based on a sense that the victims of Van den Bosch’s plan, in both the Netherlands and the East Indies, ought to be commemorated and compensated, and the mistakes made in the experiment with the Colonies acknowledged and learned from. Rather, these mistakes are firmly placed in the past, even though there are likely still people descending from colonists who have not “come up through the social and societal ranks.”

Instead of a reckoning with the past, the UNESCO bid foregrounds the Colonies as a Dutch achievement “unequalled” and “unique in the world.” Highlighted are its uniqueness as a “national system of public-private partnership,” its emphasis on “enlightened makeability and utopia,” its “landscape of memory,” its “focus on productivity,” its “combination of free and unfree,” its “scale”, and its “progressive social facilities,” which are seen to have paved the way for the welfare state. This constitutes a blatant whitewashing of the Colonies’ history and ignores how the stigmatizing perceptions of paupers in Van den Bosch’s time, which legitimized their imprisonment and subjection to forced labor, are echoed in present-day neoliberal discourses that condemn those in need of government assistance as “scroungers.” In the gift shop, the presence of critical books on Veenhuizen and the prison system is easily overlooked as the eye is drawn to the abundance of police and prisoner toys, the punningly named food and drink items, and the mugs and coasters featuring idyllic rural scenes. Similarly, the Visitor Guide’s emphasis on having fun in the National Prison Museum encourages visitors not to linger on the more critical displays that are there, while the predominantly laudatory tone of the Colonies of Benevolence booklet – already apparent in its subtitle’s heralding of “an exceptional experiment” – makes it difficult to read Veenhuizen as anything other than a site of national pride. Furthermore, whereas the booklet, which has to be purchased, at least takes Veenhuizen’s history seriously, the fact that visitors enter this history of exploitation and oppression by way of the puns of the “Veenhuizen boeit” slogan and the gift shop creates a continuous possibility of escaping – through lighthearted laughter – from having to face historical facts.

Notes

1. This publication emerged from the project ‘Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World’ (RURALIMAGINATIONS, 2018–2023). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 772436).
5. Sturken, Tourists of History, 290.
7. Welch, Escape to Prison, 27.
8. Welch, Escape to Prison, 1.
10. Welch, Escape to Prison, 3.
11. Welch, Escape to Prison, 1.
15. Welch, Escape to Prison, 7.
24. The Colonies of Benevolence, 1.
25. The Colonies of Benevolence, 110.