**Perspective**

Of gods, tricks and weirdos—A perspective related to content, practices and aims in the usage of AR for touristic experiences and spatial storytelling

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**ABSTRACT**

The complicated and interwoven relation of the tourist as an explorer and in the same time as audience of digital content is the background of this perspective. The topic is strictly based on the work, and its impact, made in 10 years by the group “Komplex” in the field of creation of augmented reality experiences in urban space, mainly for social enterprises funded by cultural agencies. The transformation of citizens in tourists able to discover “further experiences” hidden in the urban environment and also the bridging of this experience with specific imaginary diffused in the web is the scenario that this perspective wants to highlight in order to achieve a multilayered set of impacts such: i) slow tourism, ii) cultural and technological activation of neglected areas, iii) twisting narratives related to specific neighbors, iv) inclusion of slices of the urban society far from the touristic hot spot.

**Keywords:** augmented reality; slum; slow tourism; analog horror; creepy pasta; counter cultures; audience; urban exploration; neglected areas

1. Introduction

The case of THELEMAAbbey the derelict house of Aleister Crowley in Cefalù (Sicily). The most discussed figure of the modern magic, which inspired music, arts and movies was living in Sicily exactly in the period in which the Fascist party was taking control. He was expelled but the small rural house in which he lived became legendary, a strange kind of tourists for decades trespassed the threshold to explore it and to take pictures of the sultry and spine-chilling frescos that the Crowley’s crew painted inside the small rooms. Even international rockstars were secretly interested in that unique location\(^1\). Quite weird scenario considering that in Cefalù are not missing traditional touristic attractions; the small town was recently the location of the last Indiana Jones. The Abbey of Thelema became in time a secret place for incredible pilgrimages occurring even in the night and involving not only tourists but even Sicilian boys and girls interested in catching a thrill out of that place.

2. Perspective

The perspective here extended is based on the results, impacts and monitoring related to 30 projects of augmented reality set in urban space across 10 years (2013–2023\(^2\)) in cities like Rome, Turin and many
others. These AR projects were funded by Italian social enterprises in very peculiar cities having huge touristic assets and attractions and even peculiar problems out of that: overcrowded areas. The topic of these projects are various and in some case spooky.

The AR is a computer vision application where a digital content (video, audio, interactive object) appears on the screen of the user if the users follows specific instructions: i) go in a place, ii) install application, iii) visit the google map, iv) frame a specific surface. The discovery of the content and its narratives is the prize of the user, a revelation out of urban surfaces. In Italy is present a very huge amassed of touristic hot spots but out of those location the rest of the urban areas are completely neglected, they don’t exist in the perception of the tourist and in the perception of the citizens are interfaces more than places to visit.

I can easily observe in Rome the aims of the “slow tourism” are completely unattended, together with the UN Dev Goals linked with those ambitions to slow down the tourism and to reduce consumption. The Italian context is filled of extraordinary attractors and it is indeed a unique lab from where to transform citizens in tourist and tourists in a new kind of explorer of what I define: “Further touristic experiences”, FTE. That definition takes some hints from the “creepy pasta” and the cornucopia of urban legends flooding unthwarted in Internet and moving a global audience very eager in the discoveries of impossible and weird scenarios. That rich and pulsating arena is represented by content where the attitude to explore liminal areas in urban space and even in rural areas, is the main challenge for people searching the “Thelema’s thrill”. Once this kind of video documentation was possible to be found only in the deep-web, now is a regular posting activity in you-tube, without any censorship. The audience is composed even by NON-Tourist, even by cinema goers which are enticed by the viewing of a real adventure in a real place which resonate like a movie seen.

Outside the official touristic maps and thanks to smart technologies (BYOD approach) is possible to insert and activate in the physical space specific narratives and so taking advantage from the liminal spaces present in every city.

The trick of the tail is to structure narratives in the wake of pop/weird/nerd cultures and so in order to activate un-touristic places through content and genres which are already in the imaginary of the people: the bogeymen, ghosts, slender man and other oddities. The business of ghost tourism in Wales is an official offer of the Welsh Government. The no-man’s-land where we have active tourists and people not interested in traditional touristic experiences is getting very thin and indeed they use the same tool to catch a more compelling experiences: their smartphone. The strategy I stress here is aimed to expand the behavior of the tourists and to blur this genre of consumer/audience. Through that kind of audio visual production we could be able to face specific kind of crisis like pandemia and climate change: there are locations able to interest people which are not tourist but they will have a touristic behavior. The traditional attractions will stay in their place, somehow even empowered by immersive technologies (AR XR VR). But with the same technologies we can open the “stargate” to further experiences in neglected, unvisited places where are thriving special telling. The liminal narratives are creating and moving new kind of tourists in a realm where are thrilled powerful emotions like the sense of discoveries, the pure adventure, the astounding feeling of the unexpected. On you-tube the exploration content related to such kind of tourism is burgeoning and the same v-loggers offer to the audience special services to enjoy special excursions even in dangerous zone (like Centralia or even more dangerous places). Randonautica is in fact “further tourism” and it invokes even quantum technologies, quite in a philosophical way, to entice the “tourists” in getting the app and starting the journey guided by random coordinates. In the case of Randonautica the experience of the participant is simply documented by the participants itself and then the video it is shared as a pure storytelling in social
video platform; there are Randonautica tellings even in podcast available in Archive.org.

My practice is to probe and study the counter cultures thriving on the web and even the traditional mythology of a place, to expand the palette of the touristic entertainment and its content. The impact of my work consists in an essential fact: it is finally implemented the slow tourism in areas which are not touristic at all. Analog horror, backrooms series, folk horror AI assisted, 4n0maly series and the dozens of urban legends transformed unknown places in location of the imaginary, places to be visited. Exactly like the humble rural house of Cefalù that became place for mystical pilgrimages. In the same time, as well as my professional experience demonstrated across 10 years, the neglected areas, touristless areas, are the interzones of the cities where the presence of such kind of experiences is activating an awareness which twists narratives, often not positive, related to those neighborhood. The AR project “Stalker 451”, twisted the narrative of an area of Turin famous for the drug-labs and not for immersive technologies opened over the urban surfaces.

The transformation of the cities in “cyberpunk” districts, where even the brutalist architecture became essential in the narratives for FTE is highly needed to reach the aim of a slow tourism sustainable but also to activate process of inclusion of the population that cannot afford for disabilities a real trip. Special narratives and cultural awareness are activated, in the AR project 61MITO (it sounds like: You are mighty) I have imagined through the apparitions of young gods of the ancient Latin myths. The user could discover the real mythical Gods in urban places in Rome and those places are out from the touristic spots, that discovery is not only grounding mythology out of museums but it is also revealing that superheroes are coming form that lore. In another case I used the ancient myth of ASTARTE, a goddess very popular across the whole Mediterranean sea in the ancient times, she makes her appearing in the nightscape of Sant’Antioco island in Sardinia and she is tall like Godzilla. The overcrowd of tourist in many cities of Italy is creating situations unsustainable and recently the climate change made these areas very crowded in every period of the year. To offer other experiences from the classical colosseum standing is a way to reduce the environmental impact and to spread the people in much more vast areas.

The final picture I work for, it consists in a fresco where an accurate content production and dissemination is able to make TOURISTIC every place on this planet, activating even small economies and human relations otherwise impossible to be triggered, again including people having some sort of disabilities. My aim is to create exits from the tourist cages and from the bridles of the tour operators and so to reveal a new kind of tourist which already is exploring on the web weird scenarios and liminal mysteries: the searchers of the “rabbit hole”. More than a gamification of tourism, I work for a rabbitification of the tourist, giving to everybody, even the citizens, the power to explore impossible places hidden in the liminalities of the cities. Using some the best trick of Lacan we could imagine a sphere where all the impossible objects and sensation are waiting for a fruition and my work is to trigger the jouissance of the audience which is going to probe that sphere to reach unexpected discoveries.

People having limited chance to trip and to have regular vacations can afford and make it viable an urban mystery experience set in their neighborhood, simply following the “rabbit” next door using their smartphone.

3. Conclusion

In my personal opinion and considering my experience on the ground, NOVELTISM is the new paradigm to be considered in this strange land of the content for the Tourists of the 21st century. We are in an uncharted territory, it is an Interzone between videogames, alternate reality games, AR, VR, literature, urban/rural lore and we wander in it scanning with our smartphone to discover what lies “behind” the surface.
of our journey. In the book “The official guide to Randonautica”[13] it is carved a sharp definition of Noveltism: “... is the paradigm of exploring the hidden corners of human awareness to find new potential.” Despite the weird assumptions of Randonautica founders to bend space and time dawdling around, the horizon of their intuition is really inspiring in the creation of new content able to transform normal citizen in tourists and normal tourists in a new kind of “citizen”: the one of the Rabbit Hole Nation. But probing in the endless cradle of the past century what is evident is that Alfred Jarry and his Pataphysics together with Walter Benjamin are embedded in some way in the Randonautica’s theories.

Reading the aforementioned book using the glass of Alfred Jarry and the definition of the flaneur[14] by Walter Benjamin it is quite evident that a parody of science evoking also the free mindset of the flaneur could lead to new content to expand the digital content thread. It does exist indeed a flaneur in our digital age, an idler, a free, aimless wanderer of spaces and often we call Internaut, web surfer. So, at the end of my essay what matters is the pleasure, or even the thrill of the flaneur and it does not matter if he/she is a tourist or not it’s the narrative that will build up the “universe”.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. The crew of Komplex is composed by Paolo Bigazzi Alderigi (Iter-Research publishing) and Luca Liggio (video producer).
3. There are very few authoritative analysis on the phenomenon but this is quite complete. Available online: https://www.proquest.com/openview/f02313dbaf63dfc3c79b3d419ef139c8c1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y (accessed on 6 July 2023).
8. From the literary creation of William S. Burroughs set in Tangers.