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RESEARCH NOTE

VIRTUAL PILGRIMAGE: AN IRREALIST APPROACH

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In this reflective essay I revise the relationship between travel as an embodied secular journey and pilgrimage as a sacred ritual via examinations of websurfing as a form of virtual pilgrimage. My main premise is that virtual travel facilitated by the internet and through various digital platforms and collaborative social media should be considered as a novel secular form of metamovement we can approach as a pilgrimage. This pilgrimage produces multiple versions of reality ("world versions"), both in collaboration with corporate internet design and independently from it. Because such non-embodied secular engagement with other places and cultures produces online "travel" communities, digital pilgrimage prompts us to revisit John Urry's "tourist gaze" thesis and Keith Hollinshead's "worldmaking authority" in a critical fashion. Critical reconsideration of these two influential theses involves a closer inspection of metamovement for its aesthetic parameters, as well as their affording of creative connections between the mind (internalism) and the world (externalism) as a form of travel. Such connections can also assist in the production of conventional tourism mobilities.

Key words: Irrealism; Virtual pilgrimage; Popular culture; Travel; Worldmaking

Popular Pilgrimage, With and Without Religion

The recognition that new media, especially those embedded online, maintain a link to travel and organized tourism, has been articulated in several publications dating back to the very start of the 21st century (Prideaux, 2002). However, such early analyses focused mainly on the materialities of tourism, including the internet's infrastructural facilitation of conventional tourism, not what Molz (2012) later flagged as a question of "networked sociality" that acts as a form of "novel interactive travel" (Molz, 2012, pp. 2–4). Molz's reflections included little elaboration on the phenomenologies of such virtual connectivity beyond an analysis of travel affordances and the production of alternative socialities. This conspicuous gap invites reflection on what it means to use the internet to travel, not just in terms of community making, as Molz's excellent analysis attests, but phenomenologically, in terms

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of the quality of this movement. Several decades before Molz's analysis, Graburn (1978) called for a "cross-cultural aesthetic" approach to tourism as a sacred journey, promising a break from ordinary life in "a spiritual quest for the ultimate truth" (p. 24). Such analyses of tourism as a psychic "metamovement" propelling individual and collective changes (Coleman & Eade, 2004) encouraged further study of the intersection between tourism and pilgrimage. Anthropological classics of an obvious Eurocentric flair, such as Turner and Turner's (1978) *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, further prompted scholars to consider pilgrimages as both religious and secular, tourismified forms of mobility. These analyses were based on notions of the social world as a Heideggerian picture-postcard, ready to be experienced, apprehended, and consumed. Yet continuums between experience, apprehension, and consumption are not to be taken for granted. This is also the case with pilgrimage as an image-based ritual and a worship of deity icons. Studies of religious pilgrimage in Islamic contexts stress Islam's aniconic or nonrepresentational nature (Tzanelli, 2011), whereas contemporary popular pilgrimages (e.g., film tourism, music tourism, forms of dark tourism) of iconic nature prioritize the pilgrims' ritualistic emotional investment in the practice itself (Beeton, 2006; Couldry, 2003; Tzanelli, 2013). If anything, secular and religious pilgrimages are morphologically connected: they both look to the subject's break from ordinary (profane) time; demand personal commitment or investment to an idea shaping the subject's perception of the world; organize this perception with the help of ritualistic repetition of worshipping practices; and promise some sort of psychocultural transformation of one's inner self from afar.

In this essay, I focus on postmodern transformations of pilgrimage into a secularized, popular culture, in virtual environments. This type of pilgrimage invites macrosociological analysis. It involves more than an anthropological focus on collective and individual appropriation of cinematic and literary stories, as well as accompanying artefacts, architectural structures, and geographically demarcated sites and landscapes. It is more associated with the organization of metamovement within a virtual *system* of services. This creates ever-expansive realities for the pilgrim subject as an ideal

type: not only does it open up new possibilities of performing travel as an imaginative/imagined form of movement, it also pluralizes the ways such travels are relayed to others. It is not limited to a "simulation" in consumerist ideological contexts, but also involves pluralizing representations of existing landscapes, heritages, and cultures of actual sites and increasingly tourismified destinations. Hence, we must treat the classical political economic approach propagated by Baudrillard (1994) as only one of many prospective epistemological frames in the study of such digital journeys, today usually commercialized by tourism enterprises.

There will be likely objections from tourism scholars and practitioners to a scholarly approach that proposes virtual peregrination or "websurfing" of cultures and landscapes as a form of touristic pilgrimage. Such objections tend to ignore some issues. First, that a reading of popular cultural pilgrimages of the *Lord of the Rings* or *Pokemon Go* type as generic "consumerist packages" tends to reproduce the old normative divide between serious travel for pedagogical purposes and "pop" tourism for brain-waste consumers (McCabe, 2005). Second, clinical separations between "virtual" and "embodied" pilgrimage are discriminatory in the most real sense, as they confine the true, "authentic" experience of mobility to those who can move physically. Third, websurfing is now the first phenomenological window that tourism systems open to other world cultures, thus producing a prospectively embodied (tourist) clientele. Finally, it is noted that, when virtual pilgrimage is viewed as just an early "phase" of mobility, leading to more "accomplished" experiences of "being there" in the flesh, it never acquires the status of an independent case for study epistemologically and methodologically. Each of these observations reintroduces a discussion on interconnections between reality (what we apprehend, consume, visit, and relay to peers), subjectivity (how we produce our own subjective status as "tourists" and "pilgrims"), and identity (how both tourists and popular pilgrimage destinations come to be named and claimed, as well as by whom). They prompt an examination of aesthetic engagement with the world "out there," as well as what constitutes the world within our mind. This has been expressed by philosophers as the "externalism" and "internalism" divide.

Virtual Worldmaking and Variations of Irrealism

It is worth reaching back to Graburn's (1978) early work. Virtual peregrination typically exhibits a *particular* aesthetic texture, because it can be both episodic (we visit places online whenever we have time), intimate/personal (we can do this completely alone), and labor intensive (we do this in early or late hours, or even during work times, but still with immense emotional investment). It is aesthetic because it enables (a) sensory (think of *aesthesis* in terms of senses) (b) formations of what is beautiful (aesthetics as appreciation of beauty, harmony and coherence) that (c) lead to apprehensions of the built and natural environment around us (Tzanelli, 2018). If these three aesthetic dimensions sound suspiciously European/Kantian, a fourth may be added: the subconscious hybridization of sensory inputs and outputs that feed into aesthetic appreciation, which differ from culture to culture. In any case, the permeation of touristic-like pilgrimage as a practice by images and texts (we visit places through their online photographic, auditory, and textual descriptions) shapes our engagement with the represented or simulated social and cultural worlds. Methodologically, we can think of virtual pilgrimage in two analytical stages. In the first stage, we may explore the extent to which the material immediacy of the world exists independently of the websurfer's comprehension during their virtual journeys; in the second stage, we may consider pilgrimage online as "irreal," in that it encourages the human mind to produce several world versions, each of them valid in its own right, and thus methodologically productive. Although this proliferation of worlds crosses paths with a specific version of reality produced by cyber experts in tourismified pilgrimage business, it is ultimately irreducible to their dominant, let us say, imposed "reality."

The irrealism that I propose reexamines understandings of "worldmaking" as a force that shapes tourism around the world. Hollinshead defined it as "the creative—and often 'false' or 'faux' imaginative processes and projective promotional activities—which management agencies and other mediating bodies engage in to purposely (or otherwise unconsciously), [thus privileging] particular dominant/favoured representations of people/places/pasts" (Hollinshead, Ateljevic, & Ali, 2009,

pp. 430–431). Borrowing from Goodman's (1978) predicament that we are neither able to encapsulate the "world" as such, nor know that it exists as a uniform or fragmented totality, or as plural totalities, Hollinshead et al. (2009) developed a novel take on tourismification. His "worldmaking" is notably more "closed" than Goodman's, because it stresses that tourism experts select a singular world version. As business agents, they stabilize cultural reality in tourist destinations. Theoretically, outside tourism studies, Hollinshead's worldmaking is not based on Goodman, but on Putnam's (1996) and Rose's (1999) takes on Goodman. Simply put, what is ultimately "real" in tourism contexts, as the revered (by pop pilgrims) landscape, artefact, or narrative, is what some "finished science" will eventually say is real and thus ready for us to experience or consume. Within tourism theory, this resembles Urry's thrice revised "tourist gaze," which was originally defined as the gaze of "experts" that make tourism (see Urry, 1990).

Hollinshead et al.'s (2009) work has commonly emphasized the ways in which tourism worlds are structured by industries and experts. It leans towards the ways through which reality closes in on us from someone's perspective (from the scholar, the professional, or the state). This trend informs his more recent collaborative work, which, borrowing from Nünning, Nünning, and Neuman (2010), explores "how social scientists themselves conceivably compose the vistas through which they make the very constructs that they deploy to carry out these worldmaking inspections" (Hollinshead & Suleman, 2018, p. 209). Such observations strengthen Hollinshead's communication with Putnam or Rose. Their variations of "irrealism"—the proposition that worlds proliferate all the time and experts step in to tame this process by selecting one version—and the adjacent debate on whether or not one or many versions of the world exist independently from our thinking of them are *technical* through and through. "Sorting" the connection between externalist and internalist world versions informs the reality making of the technocratic planner and of the policymaker. Although blends of tourism, pilgrimage and work do exist, they do not inform the disinterested tourist or pilgrim of leisures, as we know them. While Hollinshead et al.'s (2009) thesis outlines the "discursive" power of the

tourism business à la Foucault, it is less effective for virtual touring as an individual practice and a collective, popular cultural ritual of the "pilgrimage" range. We must then revert to Goodman's (1978) original suggestion to acknowledge that, as human beings in our digital journeys, we may create and inhabit different worlds. These may or may not cross paths with those of digital tourism and business experts: capital holders, advertisers and web designers. This version of worldmaking is closer, though not identical, to what is promoted by tourism scholars working within earlier hermeneutic traditions (see Caton, 2013). A few examples may be helpful.

Studies on "gamification" as a motivational experience that leads to visiting places are a case in point. I will not be confined by the discourse of "incentivization," which reduces online engagements with landscapes, cultures, and customs to a money-making strategy. Playing a computer game, so that we familiarize ourselves with a remote real (physical) site, certainly follows a "script" devised by designers. However, the involvement of designers in knowledge making about place and culture is ontologically conducive in a pluralistic sense. It produces versions of the world(s) that it represents in the minds of game players and these were not necessarily part of the designers' script. A notable example is the Brazilian Tourist Board's (EMBRATUR) introduction of the "Brazil Quest"—an entertainment game intended to "educate" prospective (digital-to-terrestrial) tourists in Brazil during the 2014 FIFA World Cup (Corrêa & Kitano, 2015). Such gamifications feed into initiatives pertaining to the "festivalization" of the city and straightforward urban tourism, emphasizing popular pilgrimages to heritage sites and postmodern entertainment and consumption hubs (cinema complexes, bars, galleries, stadiums, local markets) alike. Such pilgrimages are, in the original sense, peregrinations, urban *flâneries* that separate the game player from ordinary time, prompting an investment in a cognitive metamovement.

The proliferation of digital itineraries connected to cinematic adaptations of "swords and sorcery" literary genres is another case in point. Whole websites are now devoted to the reproduction of such fantastic worlds in a map-making fashion and with various adventurous plots. Independent subcultural universes emerge and spread from such corporate design of sites (usually linked to the movies' production companies), with their own plots, rituals, and connectivities. *The Lord of the Rings* and now the *Hobbit* trilogies were pioneers, with ever-expanding international fan groups, which now "move" online and share in blogs, online diaries, and via digital game making. *The Game of Thrones* franchise prompted the design of several websites advertising landscapes from different countries that were used in filmmaking, suggesting more online visitations of remote, beautiful places by digital flâneurs. There are also less industrially regulated examples of digital pilgrimage, such as those originating in the release of a series of memes based on a promotional image for the film *Joker* (2019). In this example, the nominal character appears dancing on a real staircase located in the Bronx. This prompted film fans to visit the site and take selfies, which they upload on Instagram (hash-tagged #jokerstairs). It also prompted Google Maps to feature it among "religious sites" (Mahdawi, 2019)—a staggering development in the space of just a few months. In this case, visiting the popular site physically is a means to an end: to travel with others in the mind, by posting their performance on Instagram.

These initiatives are digitally productive and reproductive of worlds, in which some form of community emerges. Examples include variations of digital pilgrimage connected to *The Da Vinci Code*, with Louvre tours sitting next to genealogical searches in Scotland and "new age" cult sites promising the retrieval of pan-human roots from Dan Brown's story. A second is *Avatar's* connections of real environmental activism in the Amazon, Brazil (one of the movie's inspirations). It involves simulatory journeys into fictional Pandora's natural environments, which have now acquired a global pool of pilgrims. The cybersphere of popular pilgrimage is a sphere of several lifeworlds, often coexisting uneasily and at the expense of each other. However, one thing is sure: the design of such digital universes does not merely allow for endless transformations of leading narratives of place and culture in a "popcultural placemaking loop" fashion (Gyimóthy, Lundberg, Lindström, Hexhagen, & Larson, 2015, p. 18). It also does the unpredictable cultural work of community building, which shapes real human connectivity "from

afar" and in a peculiar neocosmopolitan fashion open to more people around the world, with an internet connection (Szerszynski & Urry, 2006). In this respect, several worlds from every online "popcultural pilgrimage" by digital pilgrims/ flâneurs may emanate independently from those designed by technical experts.

Conclusion: Virtual Pilgrimage as Artistic Worldmaking

It would be problematic to conclude that digital worldmaking involves only the management of reality in a rational and technocratic sense, with individual digital tourist/pilgrims as the true experiential world travelers and the makers of cyber pilgrimage as "armchair technocrats." Still, in my analysis of popular cultural pilgrimage online, I do not espouse Urry's traditional split between romantic and mass tourists. Nor do I maintain, following Urry and Larsen (2011), that gazing at real and fictional places or celebrating ideas and artefacts in tourismified contexts, instantiates terrestrially and socially existing practices, divides and identities (e.g., the "Romantic gaze" is possessed by middle-class tourists). On the contrary, I argue that, when in the cybersphere, we arrive at fortuitous blends of the two types of tourist/pilgrim, with the possibility of arriving at a third: that of a sort of "popcultural worldmaker." The popcultural worldmaker traverses the world of digital designers while making new worlds, both alone and in unison with other websurfing pilgrims, with whom they can join forces in forming a community. These "popcultural worldmakers" can be romantic in their pursuit of personal sublimation through online travels, but also mundane in their fusion of work with virtual mobility. They are prone to hybridization of ideas, rituals, and practices, because no world narrative remains completely stable, but is always subject to alterations on the move. In this respect, popcultural worldmakers may be viewed as popular artists of sorts, in constant dialogue with the technocraft of touristified digital business.

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