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ABSTRACT

Venice bears the distinction of being the most touristed city in the world. Way finding in Venice is a substantial challenge to those unfamiliar with the city. Interviews of tourists to Venice indicate that all but two became lost at least once during their visit. Interviewees reported that they were never scared or frightened. Indeed, most indicated that getting lost was "part of the fun." We argue that research by Urry, Graburn and Esposito are useful in understanding how a normally frightening experience, getting lost in an unfamiliar place, can be understood as enjoyable when on vacation.

Keywords: *Venice, way finding, collective gaze, communitas, Lacan*

INTRODUCTION

Venice bears the distinction of being the most touristed city in the world (France, 2011). Tourists are both the city's economic lifeline and a source, along with water pollution and rising sea levels, of its most serious environmental problems. Significantly, the city itself is best thought of as an archipelago – but one interconnected by bridges, water buses and water taxis. Because of its geographical situation, the city's layout makes sense from the water, but once on land, it does so only with considerable practice. Maps of the city, while available, are of little help and signage in the city is minimal and largely is limited to arrows pointing the way to San Marco, the Rialto Bridge or Santa Lucia (the location of the train station and automobile parking lots). Once away from the inverted "S" pathway that connects these three points, crowds fall off precipitously (Davis & Marvin, 2004). Map in hand, the tourist is on her or his own in attempting to navigate the city on foot. Way-finding in Venice is a substantial challenge to those unfamiliar with the city and getting lost is a common experience among tourists (Davis & Marvin, 2004). Contrary to everyday life at home, tourists consider getting lost in Venice as simply part of the tourism experience there. In what follows I explore this using work by Urry, Graburn and Esposito.

INTERVIEWING TOURISTS TO VENICE

Interviews with eleven tourists who visited Venice within the last decade were conducted in fall 2012 and spring 2013. While Pearce, Kim & Lussa (1998) note that "the cultural experience of many visitors is akin to being physically lost (p. 361)," these interviews suggest

most tourists to Venice are both culturally and physically lost while in the city. Three examples provide a sampling of the extent of experiences of tourists with the city:

> Venice was our last stop. I was there with my family. Venice was very different, less Italian, almost otherworldly, like a big theme park but with an old world quality. It was more touristy and also really unusual… It was architecturally unusual, more old world, more primitive than Florence or Rome… We mostly walked around. We did take one gondola ride. On the gondola, it wasn't crowded and you could see things better, you could look at the city… In St. Marks Square it was really crowded, a lot of people, and more pigeons than I have ever seen! You couldn't see the ground!... We didn't get lost, but we did have some Australians ask us for directions because we were wearing Port Douglas t-shirts. We couldn't help them, but we would have if we could have (Subject 4)

> The whole time I was in Venice, I walked everywhere, unless it was really late, then I would take the [water]bus… The maps of Venice they give you are impossible to use, so I got lost a lot… There were always mobs of tourists around… After a few days I knew where I was most of the time. Then I would try to get lost. I would go down a street just to go. [Being lost] was incredibly pleasurable. At a few points I might have been slightly frightened, but I felt safer there than I do here [in the US]. (Subject 1).

> Venice was the last stop on our trip. We spent two half-days and one full day there. We stayed on the Grand Canal. It was really hard to get your bearings there…We mostly walked around the city. It was easy to lose your bearings. You'd wind your way through the tiny streets and the street names would be hard to follow. It took some getting used to – there were no landmarks! If we got to the Rialto Bridge, I knew where I was... San Marco was amazing!... I never worried, I felt fine. I never felt unsafe. We just took our time. We never felt scared there. I guess we felt we'd figure it out and if we got really lost, we'd ask. The map wasn't very useful, though… Venice is just so different from anyplace else (Subject 3).

Of the eleven subjects interviewed to date, all but two became lost at one point or another in their visit. Of those who became lost, all were walking and were following a map. Each indicated that the maps they were using were of little help in navigating the city, only two asked for directions and only one became frightened. All noted the crush of tourists. Indeed, six indicated that getting lost was fun or synonymous with "sightseeing."

At face value, such narratives support the cynicism of Davis and Marvin (2004) captured by Frances's (2011) phrase "Veniceland Atlantis". This would seem especially the case given the by interviewees concerning the "unreality" of the city or that it has the feel of "an old world theme park." One can easily succumb to the impression that the city has become simply a playground for tourists who are totally ignorant of the lives of the inhabitants of the city. And that may, in fact, be true.

However, I'd like to focus on another aspect of the tourist experience in Venice – that of being lost and liking it. Being lost anywhere is generally frightening, yet that is not the case in Venice. I'd like to suggest that being lost and liking it has to do with two other things that surface in the interviews – that Venice is unreal and that the city is crowded. Critically, it is crowded not by Venetians themselves, but by other tourists. Thus it is the Veniceland Atlantis

phenomenon that enables being lost in Venice to be not only nonfrightening but, indeed, fun. To understand this we must turn to Urry, Graburn and Esposito.

TOWARDS AN EXPLANATION

In John Urry's germinal work *The Tourist Gaze* (1990) he distinguished between the romantic and the collective gazes. Both gazes speak to the notion of the satisfaction one gets from touring. The first has been identified as stemming from satisfaction embedded in the aesthetics of the sublime (Brady, 2003). The other "necessitates the presence of a large number of people…Other people give atmosphere or a sense of carnival to the place. They indicate that this is *the* place to be and that one should not be elsewhere" (p. 43; italics in the original).

The use of the word "carnival" here is critical, for carnival is a time of ritual "making strange" -- when people are not what they normally are in everyday life (Turner, 1969). Carnival is a liminal period. Indeed, Graburn (2010, see also Turner, 1969; Chambers, 2012) has suggested that all tourism is secular ritual and thus a liminal experience. In the limn, we are not ourselves and things are not what they seem. In the limn, our usual defenses are cast aside. Once caught up in the carnival, we become part of it and are subsumed into the whole without socioeconomic or political organization or distinction (Bakhtin, 1965). Carnival is a time of heightened sensuality and sense of community, of exchange and renewal. This is, I think, the first part of the answer to the puzzle of why being lost in Venice is fun. The crush of tourists coupled with the feeling that the city "floats" upon the sea creates a limn, a fantasy city occupied by many others like us wherein we gaze, we act and interact, and we perform (Edensor, 2000).

Additionally, there is another reason for our feelings of safety despite being lost – a reason that moves beyond the explanation of Venice as liminal space. In acting and interacting within the carnival that is Venice, we garner considerable enjoyment precisely because humans are social animals (Urry, 1990; de Botton, 2002). While the social nature of humans and our propensity to form communities is hardly news, the sense of community or *communitas* that the formation of communities engenders has traditionally been explained as having a basis in shared attributes or properties, be they real or imagined (B. Anderson, 1983; Smith, 1991). Such work would argue that, in the case of tourism, *communitas* stems from the fact that we are all tourists (Turner, 1969; Bauman, 1996), wherein *communitas* is defined as a feeling "of equality and togetherness" that "emerges when people step out of their structural roles and obligations, and into a sphere that is decidedly 'anti-structural'" (Sharpe, 2005, p. 256). In times when we experience *communitas*, we are enveloped in a "homogeneous totality," an "ethically superior human condition where equality, humility, and unselfishness spontaneously prevail" (Sandall, 2011, p. 483).

The role of *communitas* in tourism has been examined extensively (see Di Giovine, 2011 for a recent review), most commonly with regard to the interaction of hosts and guests (Pearch, 1990; Pearce et al., 1998). Within this literature "researchers have too frequently overlooked the role of tourists in influencing each other" (Yagi & Pearce, 2007, p. 28). Existing literature (Wu, 2007; Huang & Hsu, 2010) suggests that tourist-to-tourist interactions that generate feelings of *communitas*, while not of paramount importance (see McGinnis, Gentry, & Gao, 2008), enhance tourists' experiences. Conversely, both the literature on authenticity (for example, Waller & Lea, 1998) and tourist angst (MacCannell, 1989; Dann, 1999) argue that tourists not only dislike having other tourists around, they are subject to self-loathing because they are tourists. This

suggests that another approach is needed, one that focuses on the duality between the *need to belong* and the *obligations such belonging entails*. Esposito has offered such a theory.

Esposito (2010) constructed his theory of *communitas* using Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. For Lacan, the process of subjectivization involves the fashioning of social *reality* (that which can be symbolized and imagined) and the repression of an incomprehensible, traumatic *Other* (*The Real*) which nevertheless remains, surfacing in reality as a "hole, a gap" (or in Marxian terms a contradiction) contained within social reality itself (Žižek, 1989; P. Anderson, 2010). To fill this gap or *lack*, we fantasize – we believe "as if," trusting that someone, somewhere, some leader (e.g. father or mother, the president, the Pope, the mayor, etc.) some "subject [that is] supposed to know" *knows* (Žižek 1989, p. 183).

Belief in community is one such fantasy, a fantasy that, like all others, structures and organizes our sense of social reality. It is a fantasy that "takes its own failure into account in advance" (Žižek, 1989, p. 142) in that it organizes otherwise shifting (and therefore ambiguous) symbols into a coherent totality thereby fixing their meaning. Second, community organizes *jouissance*, the pleasure/pain enjoined by the sublimination of desire to the will of the community. Belonging to the community is pleasurable precisely because it is the denial of its terrifying alternative. Yet it also is painful because it involves obligations that foreclose individuality. Esposito (2010) noted that in this way the sense of belonging to a community or *communitas* resembles a gift, a benefit that entails an unspoken obligation that, while perhaps never called in, remains as a force, as an affect.

Thus we can say that what binds tourists together is our need to belong coupled with our obligation to render assistance to others in the tourism community precisely because as members of that community we are obligated to assist. Put another way, to belong is pleasurable and to assist, while an obligation that may or may not be pleasurable *per se*, produces pleasure because it reinforces that we do indeed belong – it furthers our sense of community, our *communitas*. The utility of this approach is that it problematizes tourism and tourists in pointing out that other tourists both make our touring less enjoyable because they remind us that we are tourists and also more enjoyable because they both reify *communitas* and ensure our safety in a strange place via the obligations *communitas* entails (Bauman, 1996).

CONCLUSION

Urry's (1990) categorization of the various gazes employed by tourists has proved a useful starting point for the further contemplation of the tourist experience. Building on Urry's (1990) notion of the collective gaze and Graburn's notion of secular ritual, I have argued that the tourist experience is best characterized as a highly interactive performance where the draw is less an object to gaze upon than the *communitas* originating within the context of social interaction stemming from the act of touring. But *communitas* itself must also be better understood. It does not originate in the shared experience of touring, but rather from both the need of tourists, like all human beings, to belong and from the obligations to our fellow tourists that re-enforce that we do, indeed, belong. I suggest that it is this that, in some respects, drives tourism in Venice and in countless other tourism venues from Disneyland to cruise ships of Holland-America. That this should be the case in Venice, itself a city that both signifies a world largely lost to us today, and a city that by virtue of its slowly sinking into its lagoon is becoming quite literally lost itself, is both hardly surprising and ironic.

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