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Appreciating the views: how we're looking at the social and visual landscape

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Session 28 – Virtual/Imagined Landscapes

Visual Sociology 2.0: Imagined and Travelled Landscapes in SL

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(draft)

This paper is about a research¹ conducted in Second Life as a new and interesting point of observation of the communicative dynamics of virtual imagined landscapes. Therefore, Second Life has been seen as a particular place for the communication of the territory, a space built as social relationship, able to involve the new travellers of the “second life” in new ways in connection with the “real” places of the “first life”.

The study background of this research is based on three linked areas: the communication theory, the theory of collective imagery, the sociology of tourism.

On this background SL has been seen as an ideal place to observe an evolutionary process concerning with the imagery of travel and its communication.

Now we can try to make this background clear using just some concepts of our analytical framework.

From a communicative and media point of view we know that the old forms of travelling, and in particular the Grand Tour, are characterized by the picturesque (formalized as a peculiar technique of painting by Gilpin and Price for example), by the (quote unquote) “panoramic” gaze, according to Walter Benjamin until the sightseeing theory (Burgelin, Boorstin, MacCannel and others). Here travelling has been seen as experience of images.

However, from the alternative point of view by Edgar Morin, sight (and vacation) are the access to the magic kingdom of imagery and travelling is a natural visual relevant phenomenon, according to the main point for using visual methods of research.

The question is: how can we travel and explore new landscapes?

Our point is that today the virtual experience, that is the journey in online worlds, adds the performing body dimension of travelling to the iconic one, due to the iconic character of mass media communication.

¹The team of the research LaRiCA is composed by Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Laura Gemini and Valentina Orsucci, Committed by the Apt – Agency for the Touristic Promotion of the Region Basilicata (Lucania is a part of Basilicata).

From the sight of a landscape to the embodied experience (according to the cognitive biology by Maturana and Varela) of the exploration in the three-dimensional and metaphorical worlds. SecondLife is a persistent online world characterized by the practice of travelling. It is a place which must be explored by travelling in order to be known and inhabited. At the same time travellers are the users/residents who experience images through their body/avatar involved in a cognitive and perceptual way in the online space. The landscape is not only an image to be seen but an image built and penetrated by users/builders, seen through by travellers which can cover it in newer and newer ways (for example thanks to the flying gaze or from inside the matter, keeping on experimenting the virtual art). On these ideas the LucaniaLab project – Lucania is a region in the south of Italy – was launched in order to understand logics and practices of the journey in SL and, as a consequence, to experiment and analyse new ways of the territory communication. As an experimental form LucaniaLab suggests a different pattern for the communication of a real territory inside Second Life. This pattern focuses on the relationships between avatars around the brand “Lucania” and tries to promote a participative culture with the involvement of virtual tourists and locals. As researchers we try to understand how it is possible to communicate a territory inside Second Life. For this reason the research involved a group of tourists/travellers/SL-goers to understand the ways of this new kind of touristic gaze. That research – carried out in November 2007 – January 2008 and restarted on April 2009 – involved a panel composed of a number of male avatars and female avatars, experts and newbies, aged up to 34 years, 35-44, 45 years and more (because these are the ages of the users in Second Life). In a first step they were asked to visit a SecondLife land, a land chosen on their own, which could represent a real territory. Moreover they had to take 10 snapshots of the land that could tell a story about the travel experience. The visual technique of this step was the native image making. In a second step – still in progress – our avatars were asked to tell their travel experience in more general terms. In other words: not necessarily a journey in a “real” land but a tale about a journey in itself. Thanks to the pictures about some real territories as Cuba, Assisi (Italy), Mantova (Italy), Dublino, Yamato, Atomium Belgio, La Mecca, Siena, Milan, Tourin, Paris, and pictures about fantasy land (Svarga, Aden, the Chakryn Forest, Trilogy, Empire of Nod, etc.) the avatars have been interviewed into ad hoc built lab-room in Second Life with photo-elicitation. From a methodological point of view we would like to underline the chance for the avatars/researchers to focus new ways and possibilities of making research. For example the second order observation dynamics (an observer who observes the relation between the observer and the observed: human observer -> towards Avatar observer/avatar observed). Moreover is also interesting to analyse specifically the use for the visual methods in Second Life: projecting images during the interviews, visualizing soon the text of the interview in a chat-form, and so on.

Anyway the first goal of the research is the way the landscape is imagined and lived by travelling where the journey is an experience of knowledge, communicative competence and performance and, last but not least, relationships with the others.

Among the main results:

1. SecondLife fulfils the “need of elsewhere” and the avatars claim to experiment forms of travelling in the landscapes like in real life;
2. The Postmodern tourist, inside SL, looks for an effective mix of simulated reality and new reality, based on the peculiarity of a virtual space (just think about new time and space forms for example).
3. An effective touristic communication in SL has its “killer application” in the relationship and sociability (better between “natives” of a land and avatars/travellers);
4. A virtual tour in a SL land based on a real place in RL, in a land that represents a real town, region, etc., reinforces the real travel desire, to visit those real places and lead to take information about that real places in web sites, books or tourist guides.
5. At the same time, and in relation with the more fantastic land, we can find new landscapes that reinforce the “real” wish of travelling in itself, as an experience based on the “real” body involvement.

Imagined landscapes are, for our interviewers, places for an authentic experience of travelling, based on an important qualitative aesthetics and aboveall for a performative experience, based on the passage from the thing to be seen to the image to be seen through.

On these bases the land Lucania has been built as an evocative land – based on the spirit of Lucania not as its realistic representation – and made lively on the one hand through relational occasions as celebrations, for their ancestral and anthropological meanings and, on the second hand, through a museum called Continuous Cinema. It collects real images, taken from Flickr and uploaded by the Agency which sponsored the project, in a sort of film in order not to see only the images but to build a personal trip through images, going through them, in a subjective and hence authentic experience to share with the others, according to a new idea of travelling, communication and 2.0 logics.