

Hedonistic Heritage: Digital Culture and Living Environment

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Abstract. History is not anymore the prerogative of historians, nor is displaying heritage the exclusive privilege of museum curators. In the digital era, local interconnected amateurs commit themselves to the cultural circuit of heritage through the mediation of globalised images. In that circuit, heritage and social memory take a particular form: as resources for tourism and trade, but also resources for collective action, social engagement and cultural production. “Ordinary people” engage in playful leisure such as genealogy, local history, photography, walking, exploring, surfing on the Internet, self-publishing, etc. As do-it-yourself hobbies associating offline and online practices, these hedonist activities, which blend production and consumption, creation and transmission, tend to redraw heritage communities. What do they tell us about the change of commodity, space and time? What do they tell us about the contemporary process of heritagisation and the role of people as well as the place of institutions in it? We focus on the shifts induced by the emergence of empowered actors, the “prosumers,” who participate in various networks, institutional as well as non-institutional, combining amateurs and professionals. Their collaborative experiences lead to design spaces of inspirational actions that we highlight in the context of two post-industrial areas, Swansea (UK) and Saint-Etienne (France).

Keywords: post-industrial heritage, cultural circuit, digital mediation, living environment, amateurs/prosumers, playfulness, inventive practices

POPULAR CULTURE, CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND AMATEURS IN THE AGE OF THE DIGITAL

Nowadays, cultural policies are conducted by a great variety of actors who enact at different levels of governance and power, local, regional, national and supra national. As J.P. Singh noted, “State patronage sys-

tems are complemented or overlapped by other forms of institutional supports” (J.P. Singh, 2010: 11). New spaces of production, of diffusion and of consumption appeared thanks to the increase of the local in the public policies. However, locality is not the cradle of identity and culture. Every culture is hybrid¹ and embedded in all kinds of attachments with other cultures and spaces (Hannerz, 1994/2010). Hannerz emphasized that we can no more understand cultures from a local viewpoint. Culture has reached an increased place in globalization, and it strongly took part in the dematerialization of capitalism by the way of what Nigel Thrift called the “cultural circuit of capital” which may be read by observing “the new capitalist practices” crept into every corner of life (Thrift, 2008: 31). The “cultural circuit of capital” proceeds from the “new spirit of capitalism” described by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello as the ideology that emerged during the 70s “which promoted the personal commitment of the individuals in the capitalism”² (Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, 1999: 42). It is based on the two following ideas: first, capital is a real abstract good that is detached of the material forms of richness; second, each individual is personally responsible of the whole firm (or organisation). In that context, the form of the commodity is changing as well as the role of space and time that are turning into not only metrics but also resources (Thrift, 2005).

Then, the various Web 2.0 platforms play a major role in the transformational characteristics of culture and allowed newcomers to exert influence.

The self-publishing nature of these platforms diversifies the scope of modern cultural policy, as well as challenging some of the basic conceptual frameworks that cultural policy is accustomed to work with. (Valtysson, 2010: 64)

One of the main switching of this new cultural policy is the emergence of new players, the “prosumers,”³ who blur the lines between production and consumption. Another key stake is that Digital represents a new phase in human abstraction because “practically anything could be reduced to the same common element” (Horst and Miller, 2013: 5). Like money, digital favours universal abstractions and differentiated particularities. Exchanges become more distant from face to face transactions and focus on equivalence. Moreover, free software and open sources do not simply change coding. They lead “to analogous ideals of what (can be called) recursive publics, a committed and involved population that

could create fields ranging from free publishing to the collective creation of Wikipedia” (Horst and Miller, 2013: 8).

Early as in the 70s, several scholars perceived that cultural policies had to include non-institutional dimensions, particularly the cultural features of the everyday life of the communities and workers. Raymond Williams interrogated the Welsh culture as a personal experience located within the British context” (Williams, 2003: 9). In France, Michel de Certeau described the “ordinary culture” of the ordinary people, made of poaching and tactics (1980). The Brazilian sociologist Paolo Freire highlighted the importance of the sociological context in the local appropriation of the cultural industries, through that he termed the “cultural voice,” to say the ability of people to be able to “perceive the reality of their oppression not as a closed world form from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation they can transform” (Paolo Freire, 1970: 49, quoted by Singh, 2010: 13). Although Freire’s cultural voice is situated in a context of oppression, we can extend it to the situation of post-industrial located cultures and heritage when people aim to defend self-confidence by promoting what they consider as their cultural legacy. Those cultural voices pretend to continue the memories of workers’ oppression and aim to favor their recognition. Freire’s conception of culture is reminiscent of the British historian Raphael Samuel. According to him, collective memory could be considered as the way that “ordinary” individuals produce history and heritage, which they were involved in (Samuel, 1994). It could be a lever for people whose heritage is usually denied to take part into the collaborative writing of history.

Increased online sharing activities allow us to think about the opening of heritage studies in unprecedented ways. The diversification of cultural passions and the role of the Internet in broadening the access to cultural goods have been well acknowledged by sociologists (see, for example in Francophone studies Denouël and Granjon, 2011). However, the changes in heritage practices arising from such a context remain widely unexplored. Therefore we want to focus on the recreative and autonomous dynamics of heritagization, understood as “de-differentiated” (Lash, 1990) but still stimulated by powerful institutions. First, we assert that cultural heritage can no longer be examined from top-down and/or bottom-up perspectives in the complex “glocal” world we live in, particularly since production and consumption tend to blend into each other through the figure of the prosumer. Second, we maintain that it can no

longer be treated as a separate domain, but rather as scattered experiences embedded in daily living and related to ludic activities.

Thus, our task is to bring out playful heritage practices. Using and creating both material and symbolic resources, prosumers contribute to design new spaces of action in which digital mediation impacts the way they attach each other to their living environment. Based on a thesis research combining online and offline methods, we will describe singular situations by comparing two case studies drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the urban areas of Saint-Etienne (Rhône-Alpes, France) and Swansea (South Wales, UK).⁴ Severely affected by de-industrialisation in the second half of the last century, these two former industrial towns of nation-wide significance – nowadays depicted as shrinking cities – have known important working-class culture.⁵

ATTACHMENT TO THE WORKERS' CULTURE AND GLOBALIZATION

Laurajane Smith and colleagues defend that “working class people have a remarkable ability to avoid reactionary nostalgia and self-pity, and can build on their history, traditions and sense of place and community in novel ways” (Smith, Shackel, and Campbell, 2011: 1). Working class people “can speak for themselves” (Smith, Shackel, and Campbell, 2011: 3) even when they are embedded in larger projects. Heritage can be understood as a cultural process for committing in the society, a tool for collective remembering and collective acting while “it is also a performance involved in “working out” and asserting identity and sense of place and the various cultural, political and social values that underpin these” (Smith, Shackel, and Campbell, 2011: 4). The time is over when we asked heritage to tell the consensual storytelling of a national community. Heritage is diverse and heuristic; it requires embracing the dissonance and opposition that occur when it is brought into confrontation with Memory and History (Harrison, 2013). Also heritage cannot only shows diversity in order to display the complexity of workers’ life. It is heuristic when it puts on display the struggle of classes, the social inequalities, the dramas of the social conflicts, the harsh living and working conditions – above all when it exposes the process which conducted to exclude the industrial workers from the industrial epopee of Capitalism,

and also, too often in France, from the industrial heritage rescue operations.

What happens when the collapse from the closure of the factories is fading in the collective memories? What does the working-class memory and identity become when they are only more visible in museums, books, old movies and pictures? Is it to say that the working-class culture destiny is to disappear with the industrial capitalism that gave them rise? What place does the working-class culture and memory may have in our post-industrial societies? It is generally admitted that the collective “work of memory” (Ricoeur, 2000) and the process of heritagization are the first steps for recovering collective self-confidence and positive identity. A lot of scholars have documented the main functions of heritage in the global world: on the one hand increased tourism and emergence of a capitalist “global heritage system”; on the other hand defence of cultural richness, economical plus values, local commitment (Labadi and Long, 2010). Yet, far from posing a threat of homogenisation and standardisation to humanity, globalisation drives to the ceaseless reconfiguration of cultural values and resurgence of “the local” – the latter manifesting itself in de-territorialized forms (Appadurai, 1996). As well as culture does not lie in objects, heritage appears in situations, whenever meaning-making can be discussed, negotiated and challenged. In other words, it is about an ongoing relational process that continuously produces community settings (Dicks, 2000; McDonald, 1997).⁶

However, the global context of heritage has changed with the digital. According to Farouk Y. Seif:

[o]ne of the most interesting characteristics [of our digital age] is that the idea of culture is becoming less connected to geographical location. The relationship of cultural identity and heritage to physical place and regionalism has gradually weakened as mass digital communication extends beyond cultural boundaries. (2013: 286)

Following the commentator, we shall nevertheless qualify this assertion by stating that digital mediation also surprisingly brings people to better connect with their living environment. The multiplication of media has enabled to publicise countless reflections of social life that people can relate to. Given that now “the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records” (Manovich, 2000: 177), we freely appropriate, dislocate and associate them to frame our shared reality.

For all of that, rather than invoking the spectre of individualism, heritage practices must henceforth be questioned in the context of the need for “re-imagining the post-nation” (Hall, 2005), that is to say an inclusive and plural style that acknowledges diversity and hybridity. Meanwhile, heritage turned into a more democratic instrument likely to empower the mass and transform society (Samuel, 1994). Indeed, we witness a participatory shift that deserves to be looked at carefully. It can be rooted in the success of vernacular history, partly fostered by institutions such as ecomuseums. Also tightly linked to the entertainment industry and the rise of amateurs, this shift went another step further with social media technologies (Shirky, 2008; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison, 2009; Giaccardi, 2012). It should be stressed that the ease of access to unfathomable amounts of digital information, including the opportunity for users to interact each other with content, plays a decisive role in the growing number of “ordinary people” taking part in the heritage debate.

UNPREDICTABLE HERITAGE FLOWING AMONG DIGITAL SERVICES

How does cultural heritage circulate in the wake of “the Digital Turn” (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Viires and Laak, 2013: 7)? Is the expression “digital heritage” useful to understand what is really new? What does it mean beyond the self-evident notion? This problematical term is sometimes seen as “a paradox, one which refers to newly created objects or media and also to discourses of loss” (in Kalay, Kvan and Affleck, 2007: 173). In fact, we think it reveals an inherent logic of heritage which is not limited to the digital arena but certainly highlighted by it.

Preserving tangible as well intangible remains coming from the past is a human interpretative activity occurring through the gaze of the present, which requires the use of a range of existing and projected medium, tool and material – and so the new technologies – for transmitting values to the next generation. This ontological desire for sustainability unavoidably leads to change. In the sense that heritage is always a matter of movement and actualisation, there is no “new heritage” (Kalay, Kvan and Affleck, 2007) owing to digitalization. It is however questionable whether the awareness of rapid technological innovation might accelerate or

deepen the transformation of cultural heritage embedded within socio-technical devices and afforded by ICT commodities.

Digital contain the ideas of “availability” and “accessibility” for a lot of people we interrogated: “the whole world is available to old people now, infirm ill people as we will all be one day!”; “it makes it more accessible, because [you can] search for some digitised information and have it there on hand [...] So it’s gonna make it a lot easier for people.” It suggests that the so-called virtual reality would be a transposition of the analog world into graspable images. Obviously not everything is on “Google,” even if the monopolistic search engine of the giant company ensures a greater openness to valuable information. Anyway, we should focus less on criticising the alienating regime of simulacra (Baudrillard, 1981) than on striving to comprehend what kind of authentic lifestyle could be set up as a result of digital emancipation. Let us insist on the fact that digital interfaces are not mere means of communication that just make it visible what already exists in other spaces. They are not amplifier of reality but rather mediation “instigating performances” (Thrift, 2008: 43). That is to say, they show up unexpected inventions through the complex and unpredictable game of interactive exchanges between humans and non-humans. In that sense, we may talk of ever-new heritage practices, which mix existing and emergent ways of making meaning thanks to the appropriation of current technologies. We shall exemplify this point by quoting a comment from a participant in a heritage project based on the development of a Digital Trails application for smartphones:

The reason for the app and the reason... it’s possible! So these days you can start with something that’s possible. It’s possible to do it. If maybe because it’s possible to do it, is the first driving force now, cause people have the technology. We’re not looking for the technology.

New technologies would give inspiration and offer occasions to launch projects. In this respect, the purpose does not need to determine the action, but can be found in the realisation process, which consists in the cultural interpretation of a given technology. In moving towards the making of a digital heritage application, people produce desire and encounter sense en route: “intention is a journey, not a destination” (Seif, 2013: 295). Thus, the end is a work in progress that requires imaginative means.

Because neither the tool nor the product in itself is our concern, we prefer avoiding the restrictive concept of “digital heritage” that may induce the idea of a self-evident object. On the contrary, we consider debatable heritage practices that involve digital mediation, analysed as an enhancer of possibilities encouraging serendipity and strengthening attachments. In an increasingly digitised atmosphere, we should think about heritage as a collaborative art of seizing and sparking opportunities. The personal account below sheds light on the occurrence and implication of mundane digital practices in recycling leftovers from the past:

Having retired, we are doing all the usual things: family, travelling, a lot of travelling, around the world. And then, because my mother became aged, and with dementia, so we had to take care of all her affairs. So we found documents, and we found a particular document, about an ancestor, an uncle of my mother that we didn't know anything about, who was a victim of the First World War, the Great War, at the age of 20. And he was drowned on Trafalgar Day, the day we beat the French... Many times (laugh)! No seriously, two British ships collided, and he was drowned. The whole crew, the whole ship was lost in the North Sea. And we sat down and said well, we don't know anything about this guy, nobody ever talked about him, and we had children of about the same age... So we used [ancestry.com](#) to find my past, websites to try and investigate, and of course we found that an amazing amount of information about this guy was actually on here. So we started, we got the bug. (Timothy)

HOW PEOPLE COME TOGETHER

Some of the connections that we will trace now are actually invisible and often overlooked. Yet the latter seem fundamental to approach ordinary heritage making because they intervene as operators in the circulation process. While digital practices indubitably reconfigure the “social”, they do not embrace – even less replace – face-to face interactions and auratic experiences. It would therefore be inappropriate to undertake an ethnographic investigation exclusively on the Internet with the aim of studying the links between contemporary socio-technical uses and cultural changes in the field of heritage. To do this, we need to combine an understanding of online and offline interactions (Giaccardi, 2012; Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Viires and Laak, 2013; Vial, 2013). As will be seen, heritage communities we are interested in, result from the entanglement of leisure and working activities, practices and relationships that

connect amateurs guided by hedonistic motives. If they primarily seek some pleasure, they might unexpectedly experience a sense of place.

What's that past in our life?

The first case study deals with the White Rock project⁷, which is “creating self-guided digital trails in Swansea’s former industrial areas of White Rock and Hafod” – two pioneering metallurgical estates. In a more targeted way, it aims to reclaim a neglected industrial heritage park in White Rock, located on the east bank of the river Tawe – opposite to Hafod. This endeavour is one of the many local projects focusing on the history and heritage of the lower Swansea Valley. Supported by the Connected Communities⁸ Project coordinated by Swansea University, these community-led projects are expected to provide synergic benefits to a wider process of heritage-led urban regeneration: the Hafod-Morfa Copperworks Regeneration Project, which is a partnership between Swansea University and the City and County of Swansea.⁹

The White Rock team is composed of about fifteen active volunteers, mostly educated retired women and men from middle-class backgrounds, inhabiting in the area of Swansea – generally in privileged neighbourhoods of the city or agglomeration. Only a few are workers, students, or are retraining for a new career. The group members are more or less connected with the industrial past of the lower Swansea Valley, from living memory or family history. Many of them worked on the site and/or have relatives who did: they are “people of first time knowledge.”¹⁰ Some others discovered that they had remote ancestors who came down from distant lands to find a job and settle in Swansea. Janice and Timothy, for example, claim to be both descendants of metalworkers over at least three generations, from what they learnt largely by browsing on genealogy websites, as we saw above. In fact, people joined the White Rock group for many converging reasons that often have nothing to do with “industrial heritage”. We shall mention the example of Jack, the team manager, who inspired the project. Following his key interests on walking, photography, history, information and communication technology, he had been called out by a friend’s daughter, the coordinator of the Connected Communities Project in Swansea:

The reason I got involved in history is I’m a walker, and I wanted to develop the writing along with photography into digital walks. And somebody after hearing what I was doing asked if I would do it for the Connected Communities Project, and it

grew from here. And I came to it, not from history but from walking. And fortunately I have an interest for history, so it came to that.

From a career in Information Technology industry, Jack has been converted to teach adults at the University, notably Business Communication, On-line Marketing and Family History. He is also a walk leader with a local society; he writes a walking column for a local magazine and even published his own book. Additionally, he juggles with various community commitments; in particular, he is a pillar and the webmaster of the Roads & Road Transport History Association. Thereby, this multifaceted man has touched people from various walks of life. Having met in his course of family history, two female volunteers admitted that they get convinced to support the White Rock team for Jack's contagious enthusiasm. Both one-child and childless, they have found a tremendous interest in researching their ancestors with persons in pursuit of the same aspirations. Harbours a profound desire to explore their roots, they take great pleasure in connecting their stories with the stories of others, and so experience a sense of place that gives them the feeling of having a family.

Due to people's connections intertwining with institutional networks, we should give an overview of this intricacy to figure out how the participants have gathered. Indeed, Jack is vice-chair of the Historical Association's Swansea Branch that runs the White Rock Connected Communities project.¹¹ This organisation gained a Heritage Lottery Fund Grant in order to develop, with the assistance of post-graduate MEng students, an application for smartphones: the White Rock Digital Trails.¹² Thanks to his different activities, technical skills, institutional belongings, entrepreneurial spirit and networking abilities, Jack has been able to build relations with several influential or useful bodies, including partnerships with the two museums of the city so that they host the White Rock team meetings and publicise the project (the volunteers get together at least every month either in the collection centre of Swansea Museum or in the National Waterfront Museum). Moreover, community events and cross-links between institutions and organisations are particularly helpful to promote White Rock heritage initiative and attract new recruits. Several members of the team actually responded to a call for volunteers to rally behind Hafod-Morfa Copperworks Regeneration.

Depending on their own interests (walk, genealogy, photography and so on), the White Rock volunteers are usually enrolled in various clubs, not merely local historical societies – which are legion in the United Kingdom – but also outdoor associations. In return for subscription fees, these group memberships give access to activities such like lectures and trainings, while fostering sociability. So people invest money in their cultural, physical and social capital, but they also support the institutions concerned, economically and politically, through financial and human contributions. If pensioners initially devote themselves to hobbies for occupying their free time, they may thereafter get involved with passion and conviction in community projects. Thus, interests and engagements, both personal and collective, coincide with each other.

Despite that a digital device is at the heart of the White Rock project, the way these amateur retired persons have come together remains strongly correlated with analogic encounters and previous links with organisations, as well as places and people. Anyway, the website that Jack created for the project is regularly updated and the volunteers use Internet in daily life for all sort of inquiry. As one of them said during a team meeting, “the more Jack is developing the website, the more we’re getting contacts.” It seems then important to approve the digital slope in order to facilitate connections and fully engage in cultural change.

What’s that spot in your picture?

We move on to a digital way of coming together through the case study of amateurs photographing abandoned industrial sites in the region of Saint-Etienne, and displaying pictures in various locations on the Internet. Their practices are much more autonomous and independent of heritage institutions than the ones introduced above, even though institutions are never far away nor totally absent. Compared to the volunteers of White Rock project, they are younger, more comfortable with digital technology, all men, and do not necessarily relate to the industrial past. Most of them work in the cultural, educational or financial sector, mainly in the public service; a very few are unemployed or retired. They feel concerned about the local institutions promoting culture and providing images of the city which seek to redefine its identity. They willingly take a stance on urban policies implemented in the agglomeration of Saint-Etienne, more specifically on the treatment of industrial remnants.

First of all, these amateur photographers enjoy walking, meandering through the streets that they often know “by heart,” venturing into every corner of the city, being surprised by details, researching perspectives. They photograph urban furniture and landscape architecture, facades, people, shadows, leftovers objects, vestiges and residues reflecting days gone, such as old signs remaining, adversely affected by the passage of time. They excel in the art of practicing their inhabitant's point of view, avoiding canonical remnants to find other less coveted ones, trying to cast an outlandish gaze and give a poetic appeal to the chaotic aspect of the city. So they intentionally stop on its “defects” and sublimate the bleak banality of the urban atmosphere, transcending entrenched habits of mind. All in all, they reveal vernacular urbanscapes. Besides strolling and drifting through the city with their digital camera, they also go out of town in search of less-known or forgotten places. They carry out photography sorties in the urban periphery to shoot brownfields, which have become rare in the inner cities. “Conquering” the surrounding wastelands may proceed from a “natural” broadening of horizons since derelict factories have been part of their living environment, despite the fact that they disappear quite rapidly.

If these enthusiasts explore the urban space in a contemplative solitary way, they also look for sharing experiences, especially via online social networks. Self-publishing allows them to express their view, that is to say their voice, and to interact with their friends or followers. They may as well display their pictures on photo-sharing platforms and, for an even better customization, on their own blogs or websites – the latter commonly indicates a more professional activity. Some of them do not hesitate to email their contact list for keeping potential “fans” informed of the latest additions and updates; any feedback delights them. Likewise, they may follow the production of other ordinary creators, subscribe to content feeds, and navigate from page to page guided by inspiration enhanced by algorithmic recommendation. Automation is not synonymous of alienation and “the digital revolution works as a digital revelation” (Vial, 2013: 281).

In our case study, these digital interactions with humans and robots actually stimulate creativity and artistic emulation, which leads to co-invent authentic attachments to deprived area. It is now well established that Internet boosts individual opportunities to meet for those living in the same territory, and facilitates cultural convergences through the daily

invention of local virtual communities (Cardon, 2010: 29; Casilli, 2010). In Saint-Etienne, we have reached to sketch outlines of a little moving and growing cluster of adventurous hackers-photographers, exploring unknown lands, offline as well as online, knowing each other more or less digitally and/or analogically. Their paths crossed because they share similar living environment experiences, and also common global cultural influences such as urban exploration, which owes its promotion to the emergence of a myriad of Web forums and blogs dedicated to it.

Urban exploration – “urbex” by contraction – consists in infiltrating man-made structures that are not intended to be visited, whether or not they are abandoned, prohibited, or difficult to access. Among a wide range of sites (underground, hospitals, etc.), industrial ruin is one of the most popular. The activity is usually associated with photography, to keep records of expeditions and upload one’s favourite pictures. Urban explorers copiously display photographs and reports, but they normally conceal location details in order to preserve their cherished playgrounds (Rojon, 2014). As a result of digital media exposure, the amateur photographers of Saint-Etienne sometimes refer to this underground discipline turning into a trendy hobby – nevertheless they generally do not follow to the letter urban exploration’s precepts summarized by its acknowledged inventor in the catchphrase “take only pictures and leave only footprints.”¹³

Immediately after having created a blog consecrated to urbex photo report around Saint-Etienne, Marc – manager of a cultural facility – was contacted by quite a lot of Internet users living in the region. They came to him for different reasons: a journalist requesting an interview, a band of gothic music wishing to pose in brownfield, graffiti artists searching for spots to indulge their illicit passion, anonymous seeking to know the location of where the pictures were taken, the latter purportedly wanting to go there for doing photography or urbex, playing airsoft, and so on. Thus, local amateurs prospecting for industrial wastelands or abandoned buildings got in touch with him by means of digitally mediated images. Marc started to exchange information and tips with some of them that he judged trustworthy, including a history and geography teacher/explorer photograph in his spare time and a civil servant/street artist at night. Both already knew each other from another digital interface.

In the course of an outing with Marc, we came upon a graffiti painter who was operating in a vast brownfield. We got closer and greeted him.

For introducing ourselves and justifying the reason of our coming, Marc said: “we’re doing urbex.” The artist was acquainted with the practice and even directly recognised the urban explorer’s digital identity: “OK, I see, urbex ... right?” Marc nodded, not surprised that the man already knew him through his blog. In turn, the artist declined his pseudonym on Flickr. This anecdote illustrates well how amateurs get to know each other in the digital age. In fact, they extend their circle of acquaintances by connecting online and offline practices. They first encountered production on the Internet, not people. These prosumers discover each other before they possibly meet. On the one hand, the practices of urban space and imaginative curiosity drive some people to the wasteland; on the other hand, the mediation of globalized images flows into such inventive discoveries.

DO IT YOURSELF HERITAGE

Although we live under a regime of hyper-visibility, a very large part of the daily practices that proceed from “cunning intelligence” (Détienne and Vernant, 1974) remains unperceived, hidden and unforeseeable. This ability to adapt and to deal with uncertainty, acquired by repeated practices and feedback, embodies both *techné* and *teleos* (Seif, 2013: 293). What specific heritage practices, embodied in digital circuit, are then being conceived and implemented?

Commodify yourself: when digital memories challenge industrial history...

The White Rock project focuses on the lives of the people who worked on the site and lived around it. Industry is always in the background but is not the primary target of the project. We are interested in everyone in the community, at work, at prayer, at play, and at mischief. (Extract from the project’s brochure)

Raising awareness about “the real people” who lived and worked in the industrial estate is the first ground of the project. The White Rock volunteers show interest in the daily lives of families and workers, personal and intimate narratives, amusing anecdotes, survival stories, tales of trick, and so on. The “living history” movement that gained popularity in Great Britain since the 1980s has actually impregnated the way the participants think about heritage. It “both refers to ‘interactive’ heritage museums which use reconstructions and simulations, as well as describing a

general tendency towards forms of display that ‘bring history alive’” (Dicks, 2004: 122).

Still valid, this “tendency” seemingly guides the amateur volunteers who fabricate and supply “living history,” as if they were museum curators. Some of them have recently interviewed former inhabitants and workers of White Rock. They have also explored the oral history archives of the area, available in various city services, in order to find “interesting snippets” from recordings made in the seventies. Selected transcribed excerpts will then accompany pictures and historical information related to GPS waypoints, providing a base material for the Digital Trails application. The team has “the money to develop the app, but a lot of people in the project don’t care about it, they’re much more interested in history and so on,” recognises Jack. Anyway, digital technology has to be integrated into the project in agreement with the funders’ political agenda. Even if the volunteers are not ICT-literate, they rely on Jack for realising the “app” – with specially trained students involved through a collaborative class project – and on current generations for using it. They do not feel frustrated by technical conditions beyond their competence, nor constrained by a device outside of their control; on the contrary, they live the ongoing project as an exciting and promising venture full of fun and challenges.

This project partly emerged in response to a lack of consideration of people’s attachment to White Rock site due to the focus of the regeneration project on Hafod-Morfa site, which is located on the opposite bank:

it was a bit of a reaction to Copperopolis¹⁴ [...] It’s a very big project, very high profile, [the leader] is a very hard-working person. And the White Rock project was neglected. It had been forgotten about. And a lot of people posted comment on that, about the White Rock site.

As mentioned before, a large part of the team members used to work and/or live in White Rock area. Several male volunteers, belonging to the last generation having worked on the site, had to “follow the job,” to change workplace and even profession, to adapt themselves, moving at the pace of the industrial cadence, converting and retraining, evolving in line with factory closures and new industries. They witnessed, but also frequently endured, restructuring plans and successive redevelopments, as well as socio-economic decline and employment loss. Such a cultural transformation can thus be seen through their gaze. For these men, who

experienced the collapse of the working class, industrial heritage values merge into embodied knowledge.

Thence, the volunteers attached to White Rock adopt an ambiguous stance regarding the urban regeneration project, which gambles exclusively on the epic story of the copper industry, condensed in the image of “Copperopolis.” On the one hand, they fully support the initiative, believing it will generate income for the city, employment and wealth; but on the other hand, they advocate a more nuanced interpretation of history based on people’s memories. They can hardly agree with the rhetoric advertised under a nationalistic slogan: “We tend to think that the history of Wales is written in coal dust and iron and steel. But in fact it's really copper that lies at the heart of Wales’ development as an industrial nation.”¹⁵ The popular approach of White Rock project is deliberately opposite to this elitist disembodied point of view. “On the Hafod site, you still have buildings;¹⁶ on White Rock, we don’t have buildings anymore. People have their memories, so it’s their memories we’re dealing,” explained Jack. Rather than glamourizing a historical period in a freeze frame based on material remains, the Digital Trails highlights living memories arranged in a continuous time. However, the subversive position of White Rock project is clearly compatible with the tourist-oriented economy designed by the heritage-led regeneration scheme:

You will go with your smartphone and you will go round Whiterock and you will see on the screen what used to be there... and you’ll spend money... in Swansea! But you’ll make it survive, cause otherwise it won’t survive. Personally we have to find ways of regenerating the economy of areas like Swansea. (Timothy)

The team members join this marketing idea of attracting visitors and arousing desire by producing original facilities which brand the uniqueness of the place. By means of digital application, recycled pictures and oral histories recorded in the last century as well as collected contemporary accounts and future users’ contributions could be hosted in a sharing platform, thereby delivering a common good. Staging these images and personal stories all together would offer an innovative way of linking distant and recent past within present settings, allowing users to rebuild symbolically a sense of community, through virtually unlimited navigation paths. Eventually the users will be able to participate by posting their own records in a variety of format (words, pictures, sound, and video); so anyone – with the required ICT equipment – could contribute in

increasing the collective data base. This community-led digital heritage commodity, mixing consumption and production practices, might potentially become sustainable – though the obsolescence of the technology is another issue to deal with. It would not simply display a folklorized past, but make it communicate with newer stories, in accordance to one’s liking, letting people perceive change and continuity.

Explore yourself: when industrial legacy triggers network treasure hunt... In Saint-Etienne area, the share of derelict industrial buildings provides amazing playgrounds for the photographers-explorers (photo-explorers) that we have got to know. As Garrett (2011: 1065) writes, “[r]uins may be decaying, but they are not dead: they are places filled with possibilities for wondrous adventure, inspiring visions, quiet moments, peripatetic playfulness, and artistic potential.” Exploring the urban space through the practice of photography offers incentives, not only to recreate, but to appropriate the environment, gain confidence, develop skills and stimulate creativity (Sontag, 1983). Arduous situations – such as job loss, long-term unemployment, even the fact of living in a town that bears the marks of a sharp decline – would be then overcome or appeased by a diverting occupation/economical pastime satisfying needs for enjoyment and escape, “a form of non-spectacular tourism that roams across uncultivated commons and a range of urban areas that are supposedly unattractive” (Edensor, 2005: 29). As we shall see, this “cheap hobby” consists of free cultural practices, self-manufactured in the DIY spirit.

How do people find brownfields? They are not always easy to recognize on the ground, but “if you see graffiti on the walls, it is a sign,” advised Marc. On the Internet, while pictures of these sites are massively mediated, details about their location are much less accessible – as specified above. Amateurs often play detective by cross-checking information and combining different tactics. All the time on the lookout, these nosy photographers may discover a spot randomly, by strolling. Anyway, they got accustomed to a genuine research process. They usually browse on blogs and websites dedicated to industrial heritage, urban exploration, or street art in the surroundings of Saint-Etienne; contact Internet users displaying photographs related to historical buildings, abandoned factories, or graffiti art in the territory; consult books on the history and geography of the regional industries; enquire about the redevelopment of brownfields on the website of public and private land institutions; keep

abreast of redundancy and closure decisions by reading local newspapers; use Google Earth for visualising zones of interest and precisely locating a site. In sum, all are worth considering, without discriminating between old manufactories and recent plants.

Among the panoply of tools and resources, one is particularly acclaimed for being “the bible” which inventories “all sites” of the industrial legacy in Saint-Etienne and its agglomeration. The photo-explorers call it familiarly “the 100 sites”¹⁷ (Peyre, 2006). This large tome has been written and edited by the chief curator of the “Puits Couriot/Parc-Musée de la mine de Saint-Etienne.” As the title suggests, it documents a hundred sites across the area of Saint-Etienne. Designed for discovery trails, the guidebook, comprising an introduction on the geo-historical context of the vernacular industrial landscape, provides pictures with descriptions of each site, their name and address, as well as a map pinpointing the locations. An amateur told us that he got it with her partner who works in the mining museum, and that he even recommended it to a street artist who was wondering how to find nearby wastelands. As for Marc, the urban explorer, he confided that “the 100 sites” was quite naturally “on [his] bedside table” at the moment.

Given that this inventory was carried out about ten years ago, the photo-explorers observe that some sites have been transformed, while others have disappeared, so that they check whether the legs still exists in its material form. In fact, if the in situ discovery of a place on paper fills them with joy, the possibility to explore inside the buildings makes them even happier. The photo-explorers are not primarily interested in the legacy of the local industries, but they delight in tracking the different layers of time, from the recent days to a distant past, through the contemplation of heterogeneous activity traces. This is in line with the argument of Tim Edensor:

walking through ruins produces a complex sense of time [...] and this acts to decentre easy divisions between past and present. For instance, derelict spaces are often replete with obscure signs of the past, a past that is rarely comprehensible, but they are also full of new forms of life. (Tim Edensor, 2008: 129)

Thus, brownfields’ visitors can feel the living atmosphere, which is each time different in a same place:

We are chasing each other (...) there is a place nearby where I went several times, three times over two months, it's amazing how it can change in those places. These are places that are supposed to be stationary, where there is no more life, where there is nothing at all, which are bricked up on all sides, well, in spite of everything, you see that there are moving objects, there a table football arriving on the floor, kids toys, new drawings, walls that have fallen, furnitures that have changed places (...) You think 'but who's going in here?' (Marc)

The explorers especially love discovering artworks inside these continual historical places where time has definitely not stopped. They are excited when experiencing unusual or significant encounters like this, enchanted to find artist's offering which they receive as a special gift. And this kind of surprise is also what makes them want to return. They take pictures of the treasures h(a)unted, bringing back a sort of trophy collected in the hidden spot they found. They may as well leave their own ephemeral mark, purposely or not. Then, sharing online some pictures of these "works within works," arranged with text such as haiku, is an attempt to transcribe the beauty of a momentary experience. They become explographers. The others are never insensitive when they discover on the Internet photographs of places they have also explored. Digital images give a visual foretaste of what has changed and heighten the desire to come back.

Although these practices flourish on marginal pathways, they expand through dialogical exchanges with heritage institutions. In recent years, the Heritage Days (les Journées du Patrimoine) have proposed tours in shut down plants around redevelopment sites: "the Heritage Days are also an opportunity to visit some of them. Before, well, we visited castles, churches... But I would never have thought to visit factories!" said Marc. After all, as another photo-explorer pointed out, few heritage sites in Saint-Etienne had been neglected industrial zones before starting a new career: "it's the same with the mining museum; it's still a wasteland, a wasteland that was reinvested in museum, but right, a patrimonial brownfield. There we go, it starts from there eh!" Indeed, exploring a brownfield by yourself whenever you want appears the reverse mirror image of visiting a museum with a guide at a specific time. The difference resides in the infinite freedom of movement and imagination that ruins enable.

THE AMATEURS-DIGITAL-INSTITUTIONS TRIAD

We have proposed to understand the (trans)forming of contemporary heritage networks through “the cultural circuit of capital,” likely to empower anyone who is developing know-how in handling tangible and intangible resources, specific political and economic frames of reference, multiscale influences, heterogeneous and hybrid codes, in which the local and the global are inseparable. It is a matter of skills blossoming via playful learning, since people implement their will power while having fun and taking pleasure. They express hedonistic ways of meaning-making. In fact, they engage as customers, consumers, visitors, and users towards heritage institutions and/or digital commodities. This does not in any case mean they are passive, but they do not necessarily realize they produce and transmit cultural values because it happens ordinarily and collaboratively, through the convergence of: different activities, both solitary and convivial; distinctive involvements, between amateurship and professional background; and various practical situations, online and offline, such as photography, uploading, strolling and surfing. Nowadays, we should rather see the field of heritage as a non-field or a non-circumscribed domain that is weaving rhizomatically. Though heritage has always been an imaginative and ingenious compound production, the digital reveals its composite and inspirational nature. Just like desire, heritage flows ceaselessly (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972: 11). If sometimes institutions hardly recognize and host mundane practices, the amateurs do not stop prosuming and nor wait for instauring new heritage practices off the beaten tracks.

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Notes

¹ Hannerz uses the term "creolization" (Hannerz, 2010: 311).

² Personal translation.

³ Bjorki Valtysson borrows the term to Felix Stadler: Stadler, Felix. "The End of an Era: The Internet Hits Ground," 2001. <<http://felix.openflows.org/html/endofera.html>>. Accessed July 20, 2014.

⁴ Funding for this project was provided by a grant from la Région Rhône-Alpes.

⁵ This article takes place in a comparison that we have engaged between French and British heritage policies (Rautenberg, 2012).

⁶ It is important to see that the two notions of working-class heritage and community cannot be simply translated from the British to the French context because of their specific political history. They would deserve a long development that we cannot do here. To know more, see Smith, Shackel, and Campbell, 2011.

⁷ This project is granted by the Heritage Lottery Found, under the management of the Swansea Branch of the Historical Association.

⁸ Connected Communities is a programme led by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in order “to connect research on communities” and “to connect communities with research.”

⁹ “The Welsh Government contributed £936,000 to the scheme through the Swansea Regeneration Area programme and the Targeted Match Fund. A sum of £244,000 has also been provided from the European Regional Development Fund as part of Cadw-Welsh Government’s £19m Heritage Tourism project. The City and County of Swansea provided £20,000.” Accessed on July 17, 2014, http://www.welshcopper.org.uk/en/about_regeneration.htm

¹⁰ This quotation is from Jack, the team manager.

¹¹ Each of the Connected Communities projects has to be run by an organisation.

¹² Digital mediation is a high priority in the political agenda.

¹³ Ninjalicious, *Access All Areas: A User’s Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration* (Toronto: Infilpress, 2005).

¹⁴ The word designates the legendary nickname given to Swansea, which is also the title of the book by Stephen Hughes, “Copperopolis: Landscapes of the Early Industrial Period in Swansea”.

¹⁵ Extract from the website www.welshcopper.org.uk/en/, accessed on July 17, 2014.

¹⁶ Indeed, few rare distinctive industrial ruins are still visible on this site.

¹⁷ The full title is “L’héritage industriel de Saint-Etienne et de son territoire: 100 sites en enjeux.”