



LECTIO

THE GRAND VOYAGE: THE EXPERIENCE, THE NARRATED EXPERIENCE AND THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

AN ANALYSIS OF OCEAN CRUISERS' TRAVEL BLOGS

Patricia Aelbrecht

Lectio praecursoria, Åbo Akademi University 7 June 2013

I have lived for years on board a sailing boat; I even worked with it as a tourism professional. Still, I never crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

My dreams of departure fell apart in the Guadiana River, between Portugal and Spain. There, between land and sea, a little tribe of sailors had gathered: some were on their way back to Europe after a long voyage, some were on the outward journey. A few others had become errant: they continued to turn around the world, incapable of going back to a life on the mainland but having lost the pleasure to be at sea. There, I realized that my teenager dream had become that of numerous others.

Many years later when I discovered a blog written by a family during their two year cruise around the Atlantic Ocean, I didn't realise that I had cast off for my own "Grand Voyage". Today I am back, here in Åbo Akademi University, from where my journey in research started.

TO BE THE HERO OF ONE'S OWN STORY

In today's society, the model of an autonomous, creative and original individual controlling his or her own life is omnipresent. However, the desire of emancipation is a social phenomenon that becomes normative. The anonymous hero of long ago has lost his popularity. We want to be the hero of our own story. And we are ready to pay for it!

This is demonstrated by the success of the experience economy, with tourism as a main actor. It's a growing sector aiming at creating favourable conditions for clients to make intensive, enriching, and significant experiences they can use in their identity construction.

Consequently, the approach to the tourist experience becomes an important challenge for the scientific research and for the tourist industry. In this setting, narration plays a central role, as attested by the numerous personal stories published on the Internet.

The "Grand Voyage" of those who leave their ordinary life, job, family, home, and friends to cruise the Atlantic Ocean, one or two years on board their sailing boats, exemplifies such a transformative and significant tourist experience.

Ocean cruising has been for long reserved to adventurers. Today however, an important industry has grown that makes such an experience accessible to ordinary people who are ready to devote time and money to realise their dream. Every year, hundreds of sailing boats cast off from Europe to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

However, in fact their journey started much earlier, for most often those who leave their routine life already started their journey while reading the travel stories of previous navigators. In the same way they conclude it when telling their own story. This is even more evident today when everybody is given the possibility to publish it on the Internet.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

My aim with this work, based on travel blogs written by French short-term ocean cruisers, was to investigate the relationship between the experience (the cruise), the narrated experience (the travel blogs) and the experience economy (the tourism) in order to understand the role played by narration in the construction of a successful tourist experience both at a personal and at a collective level.

As any other experience, the tourist experience itself cannot fully be reached, but only be approached, by narration. It is the main medium to make it meaningful and communicable. As narratives of tourist experiences, the travel blogs offer a rich source of knowledge about the personal and the normative character of journeys.

I studied the blogs from a double disciplinary position. As a folklorist I focused on the individual expression of the cultural values. As a geographer I considered space – concrete or imaginary – as an intrinsic element of the real-life and of the narrated experience. I used it as a key to comprehension. Effectively, space is an essential element of both our individual and our collective identity construction. We cannot think about ourselves

without thinking us being somewhere. In the same way, we cannot tell our stories without situating them spatially. We are situated in the world, between the subjectivity of our interior space and the materiality of the external space. We give sense and meaning to this dual position when we translate it through language. Therefore, we tell about the concrete places with both our personal sensibility and the help of cultural patterns. Our narration will in turn be interpreted by our audience within a shared cultural space.

Another leading thread running through my research is the trend for contemporary individuals to assume their contradictory needs and aspirations rather than making excluding choices. At first sight, the “Grand Voyage” appears to be an initiation to freedom and independence. However, the sailors are also looking for stability and close relationships.

Those paradoxical aspirations are represented by the referential figures of both the traveller and the nomad. Another point that appears clearly is the signification of the journey for the identity construction of the travellers. The “Grand Voyage” is a transformative and significant experience that offers the possibility of an unceasing oscillation between freedom and stability, autonomy and belonging, originality and norms. Through their blogs, the sailors give meaning and coherence to their experience. But, they adapt this experience in order to make it acceptable to the prevailing cultural context and to those they address to.

Since they are published on the public space of the Internet, the travel stories also contribute to maintaining the norms of journeys and travel blogs.

I considered them as the folklorised form of a literary genre, the travel literature. Furthermore, they constitute a contemporary tale emphasizing the individual autonomy while being rooted in the tradition. With the help of Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotopes and Paul Ricoeur’s concept of *mimèsis*, I investigated the relation between the concrete space of the journey and the subjective space of the travellers as they express it in their stories. This analysis revealed the features, deeply anchored in the western tradition, of an experience believed to be unique, original, and personal. Under the real-life journey, the sailors interpret and reproduce a collective story that the concrete world provides with a decor and enriches with anecdotes. In the blogs, the individual authors become the heroes of a folklore that they renew in their own way.

If we look at them in the context of the experience economy, the travel blogs give rise to a double perspective. Firstly, they approach the subjective experience of the travellers because they inform the reader about the journey almost in real-time. In particular, they give access to trivial details that generally disappear from the post-journey narrative.

Secondly, the bloggers also give, unconsciously, a culturally rooted image of the perfect journey. Due to personal and cultural narrative bias, the tourist experience is idealised.

Therefore, the blogs are used for marketing goods and services, especially because they have the persuasive strength of authentic stories.

NARRATION AND THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE

The narratives show the influence of the preconceived image the travellers have of the visited places. Nevertheless, this image is affected by the relations the sailors establish with the other navigators and the inhabitants. The quality of these relations affects the final representation of the place that is spread through the blogs, because through their stories, the sailors share emotions rather than pure information. They act as desire mediators and stimulate new departures more than they serve as travel guides for the readers.

This study demonstrates the determinant role played by the narration in the construction of a successful tourist experience. By narrating a journey that appears unique and individual but has nonetheless a collective and culturally bounded character, the blogging tourists show their individuality. They also take place in the larger frame of a traditional master narrative.

Because of their large publication, the blogs afford a high cultural value to their authors. They contribute to the bloggers' identity process as well as to the construction of their memories. Beyond the personal anecdotes, the readers recognise themselves in the common and traditional aspirations shared through the blogs. That allows them to identify with the authors. Moreover, the important place of the human interactions in the narratives has to be taken into consideration. The blogs refer to the tourism professionals who involve themselves in a relationship to their clients. The tourism professionals act as representatives of their own places. But more than that, they become either the goods or the villains of the tale depending on whether they give a positive or a negative coloration to the story.

Taking into account these two points and using the *mimèsis* theory of Paul Ricoeur, I propose a working method that offers new prospects to the tourist industry and calls for further research. Indeed, by engaging themselves in a positive mutual relation, the professionals take place in the narrative of the tourists. By actively supporting clients in the construction of their narrative at the time of their experience, the tourism professionals participate in the elaboration of a positive tourist experience. Simultaneously they are gaining some visibility on the Internet. Nevertheless, and that's true for all the sectors of the experience economy, the professionals are also affected by this process and by the relation they establish with their clients.

Therefore, it would be interesting to study the influence of these interactions on the tourism professionals and their identity process.

It is important to better understand the effects of the experience economy on its producers.

THE GRAND VOYAGE OF SCHOLARSHIP

Yes, this research on the Grand Voyage has been a voyage for me too: a concrete journey between two countries, two cultures, two languages but also a metaphorical journey

between two paradigms, two disciplines, between philosophy and practice. The metaphor is not new but let me expand it. I would like to focus on one aspect that appears so clearly in the blogs: the sailors' search for both freedom and stability.

As I just told you, the navigators leave their ordinary life to feel free, autonomous, and independent. They are animated by a bit of a rebel spirit and they want to abandon the constraints of the social everyday life in order to go away and discover the world. They put their stability at stake!

As researchers, we are educated in an intellectual context that structures our thinking. As ordinary people, we are influenced by the general socio-cultural context. However, in order to be creative and to propose a new interpretation of the reality of our topics, we have to dare deterritorialisation and leave the firm ground of the norms. We have to become travellers. We need to venture into a risk zone and to strive for autonomy and independence. We have to dare face the fluidity and the complexity of the world and confront our certainties with other interpretations.

The Grand Voyage is a question of weighing and casting anchor, again and again. The time spent at the margin of the mainland is a time for transformation and maturation, and each call is a space where to meet alterity. During our research process, we must, like the sailors, in turn detach ourselves from both theoretical and cultural frames and come back to them again while opening them to challenge. We must engage in a conflict of interpretations and come up against other perspectives in order to confirm or to modify our positions.

The return belongs to the voyage because without this return the voyage would be nothing else than an errancy. Back home, some navigators find again the routine life they had let behind them for a while, when others start a new life. They reframe their existence.

Whatever attitude they opt for, they base their choice on the knowledge of the possible alternatives that they gained during their journey. And it's through their story that they make their choice meaningful. It's the same for both travellers and researchers. We need reterritorialisation. But, we never come back to the initial point. Meanwhile, the context has changed and we too. Our voyage is a spiral, not a circle. And it's through our narratives we give it sense and coherence.

The bloggers alike, it's thanks to imagination that we re-interpret the reality of world. As Ricoeur put it, imagination is anchored in the empirical reality and is not only subjective but also social. It is a fantasy with a restricted freedom: we use mainly the language, its rules and structures to share it. Following Ricoeur, the social imagination allows us to create a common reality through the dialectic of two essential functions. The ideological function is integrative and conserves collective structures, group identities, and a stabilized conception of the reality. But, because this ideological function is liable to lead to a static system, it needs the utopian function aside, which is creative, destabilizing, critical, exploratory, and which opens up to all the possibilities. Together, ideology and utopia help us to organise but also to renew our common reality. We need both!

AELBRECHT, PATRICIA 2013: "Le Grand Voyage" L'expérience, l'expérience racontée et l'économie d'expérience : la croisière hauturière vue au travers de blogs de voyages. In electronic format: <http://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/90341>

PhD Patricia Aelbrecht is currently working on the research project "Bitar av samma pussel? Intersektionella perspektiv på det svenska i Finland" financed by the Society of Swedish Literature in Finland.