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Off scenes and the making of cities' tourist-image

Abstract

Could *off* cultural places (such as artistic squats) be tourist places by corresponding to the 'tourist gaze' expectations? In this paper, I discuss an analysis based on guidebooks, considered as city-image and tourist-image makers. Do *off* places appear in the guidebooks? Are they considered as places to visit such as museums? How are these places presented by the guidebooks? Which meanings do the guidebooks give to them? Are they a part of a city's imaginary? In other words, are *off* cultures a part of the city imaginary? Actually, *off* scenes are becoming tourist attractions in some cities, such as Berlin, while they are ignored in other places like Paris.

Off scenes: an element of the 'tourist gaze'?

This analyze aims to understand how *off* cultures could be a part of the city imaginary, and so, how they might give meaning to the city. In this paper, I am focusing on *off* cultural spaces, that other might called underground or alternative.

Off refers to any kind of cultural activities that are not subsidized and that have no commercial value. But, these activities are a part of the 'art world' (Becker 1983) and should not be considered as separate from the mainstream cultural world. So I am using a new semantic scheme: "*n* culture / *off* culture"¹. *Off* culture is characterized by a research of new

¹ This *in/off* scheme comes from festival's descriptions. The *in* is organized and planned, while the *off* is spontaneous and opportunist; the *off* is free of commercial, academic or trend constraints, so it is a creative and

artistic modes of production. It is not subsidized. It takes place in *off* venues which do not planned their schedules and management. *Off* places might be temporary. *Off* scenes are moving throughout the city. Artistic squats and other *off* places are considered both as the space of the *off* culture and as the *off* spaces of culture.

Off scenes in Berlin and Paris

During the whole 20th century, artistic avant-garde and politics were embedded with Berlin urban history. Moreover, the Wall that divided the city for four decades, created a specific cultural geography of the City. On each side of it, governments used cultural amenities as a sign of power and supremacy in the Cold War frame. So, Berlin hosts a large number of official and mainstream cultural places. At the same time, this cultural and political specificity encouraged the emergence of underground (*off*) culture which bloomed in both side of the Wall (Grésillon 2002). Grésillon shows that a major part of the Berliner cultural life is taking place in *off* spaces such as artistic squats. According to him, thanks to the *off* scenes, Berlin is becoming a major cultural and creative city in Europe while Paris remains a romanticized city, a place where artists are going to show off but not to create anymore. Furthermore, he argues, without any proof or evidence, that *off* scene are becoming a popular tourist attractions in Berlin.

Nevertheless, *off* artistic scenes are quite dynamic in Paris too (Vivant 2006). In particular, artists squats are becoming more active and visible since the mid-nineties, when artists were choosing new location for squatting. Even if some of them are still going to squat in popular neighborhood, few of them choose to settle down in expensive, trendy either meaningfully inner-city neighborhood. For example, in 1998, some artists squatted a building in front of the Picasso's Museum in the Marais, or more recently, they had squat in front of the Paris Stock Exchange. Some of their new locations are in the Paris's tourist core. Are they becoming tourist attractions?

As Urry said, "[t]he [tourist] gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off from everyday and routine experience." (Urry 1990; Urry 1995). But, it is also "constructed through signs and tourism involves the collection of such signs." So, "places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through day-dreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures." (1995:133). In this way, I argue that *off* cultural

innovative space; the *in* draws from the *off* new ideas and new talents; the *off* needs the *in* to build its legitimacy; and, little by little, the *off* becomes the real festival: the place to show and to be, the real engine of the festival which attracts more people and more artists until a new *off* of the *off* appears... In much the same way, I consider underground cultures as "*off* culture", and mainstream culture as "*in* culture".

spaces could be tourist places by corresponding to the ‘tourist gaze’ expectations. Therefore, I suppose that *off* places might be important tourist attractions. In order to demonstrate it, I analyze the tourist potential of the *off* places throughout guidebooks descriptions of a city.

The tourist guidebook : a meaningful pathfinder

There are only few works considering the guidebook as a part of the tourism field, even though, as Gilbert argues, the tourist guidebook is a key element in the making of the modern feature of the ‘tourist’: a person who goes through selected, described and explained paths, landscapes and monuments (Gilbert 1999). Indeed, the tourist guidebook has three of the four characteristics of the tourist guide² described by Cohen (Cohen 1985). The guidebook is an ‘instrumental leadership’ (i.e.: a pathfinder), and facilitates both ‘interactional mediation’ (i.e.: mediation between tourists and local people to obtain services) and ‘communicative mediation’ (i.e.: mediation between tourists’ cultural background and local places’ history and meanings). But, the guidebook doesn’t have the ‘social leadership’ function of the tourist guide (Bhattacharyya 1997; Cohen 1985).

According to Karpik, the guidebook (in this case, the Michelin Guide Rouge) is a tool of market control, based on quality expectations (Karpik 2000). He proposes that the guidebook is a tool for choosing both catering facilities and tourist attractions. He considers the guidebook as an ‘expert system’ which could reduce doubt (i.e. of choosing a bad restaurant or an uninteresting tourist attraction).

Besides, guidebooks writers give meaning to a place in several ways:

1. by selecting them: as a pathfinder, the guidebook helps the tourist to distinguish tourist places from non-tourist places or experiences. In this way, it constructs the ‘tourist gaze’, and it marks places as ‘tourist attractions’ (MacCannell 1976).
2. by interpreting them: as a cultural mediator, it explains (and sometimes establishes) the meaning of places to the tourist.
3. by evaluating them: as a regulator agent, it could rank several places, by, for example, distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic tourist experiences.

However, it should be never forgotten that guidebooks are written by author. But the subjectivity of the author is generally hidden by the written style. For instance, authors do never use “I” and so never introduce evaluation as their own point of view. By this way, author objectivize their judgment and legitimate it. In the following, each time I refer to the guidebook’s discourse, I always keep it in mind.

² The tourist guide is a person who help and guide the tourist, while the tourist guidebook is, namely, a book.

Methodology

In order to understand the making of cities' tourist image, I analyze how tourist guidebooks present a city. Based on the Gresillon's assertion, I compare two cities, Berlin and Paris, in order to show how *off* cultures could be present by guidebooks. Do *off* places, such as artistic squats, appear in the guidebooks? Are they considered as places to visit such as museums? Which meanings do the guidebooks give to them? Are they a part of a city's imaginary? Are *off* places tourist places?

I select only cities' guidebooks (and not countries' ones) to have more detailed descriptions of cities, with urban tourism oriented perspectives. As much as possible, the collections are the same (Guide Bleu, Guide Voir, Lonely Planet). But some do not exist for both cities. I use them however because their specificities might be relevant for the analysis: one (Nelles guidebook) is the French version of a German guidebook about Berlin; the second one (Routard) is the Paris edition of the main French guidebook collection.

Then, I focus on the discourse about *off* scene, by a classic text analysis (and sometimes photo analysis). I present here the main conclusions, as a comprehensive reading of guidebooks. I minimize the direct quotations because the text analysis was in French, and it is not always relevant to expose and translate it here.

Off scenes: Berlin's unique taste

The Post-Wall era was an unique time of flourishing creativity throughout the blossom of *off* spaces. Is this cultural uniqueness mentioned by guidebooks? To what extent the *off* scenes is a part of a tourist experience in Berlin?

The *off*: an historic specificity

Firstly, every guidebooks mention Berlin *off* scenes, with more or less details: three guidebooks describe it widely, and devote few pages to it, but two of them just mention it, without any details. The following descriptions are based on the text analysis of these guidebooks, showing that *off* scene is a Berlin speciality that deserve a visit before it disappears.

According to guidebooks, the history of the *off* scene is deeply embedded with the history of the city itself. The city's division is the pretext of a divergent explanation of the parallel emergence of *off* scenes on each side. This similarity is revealed by the current comparison of the East and West *off* scenes and neighbourhoods. For example, the East *off* area (Prenzlauer

Berg) is often presented as the “Kreuzberg [Western *off* neighbourhood] of the East”. Nevertheless, East and West *off* differ due to the different political contexts.

West *off* is the extreme expression of freedom and liberty. If the *off* individuals are politically marginal, they are free to express themselves and to implement an alternative way of life in this enclave of the “free” world in the communist one. Close to the Wall, Kreuzberg is a marginal space in the enclave that attracts any kind of fringes : from cultural activists to migrants. Guidebooks associate geographical marginality to social and cultural marginality that create a lively alternative ambiance.

On the East side, *off* artists are supposed to be political activists, that resisted the communist regime and took risks facing the powerful political police. The Stasi interference forced them to be less visible and exuberant than the western ones, and so, to be more imaginative. In some ways, guidebooks consider them as more subversives than their western contemporaries.

But with the fall of the Wall, the two sides of the *off* catch up. The squatters movements that used to bloom in West Berlin, are described as a “wave” by guidebooks. At the beginning of the 90s, this wave came to the East, taking benefit of the low rents, the emptiness and the uncertain tenure of many denationalised buildings. According to the guidebooks, the Berlin squatters movement is unique by its extent and by its political processing. But, if some guidebooks’ authors might agree and understand the squatters, emphasising the cynical speculative attitude of landowners and real estate developers, others are more ironic. For instance, they recount anecdotes about bourgeois kids that squat for a while, but with parents’ financial supports. According to these authors, squatting is more a hip way of life than a political struggle against poverty. Actually, the most ironic guidebook is the German one.

The *off*: from threat to myth

Two guides describe the violent context of the birth of the *off* scene. According to them, several times, squatters fought with the police and waged a war against landowners (guides are using a vocabulary of violence and war). Moreover, several authors describe *off* neighbourhoods as dirty places, with a rebel spirit that may lead to chaos. One guide illustrates it by a photo showing a punk couple with their rat, and this legend: “the fright of the 80s: punks with their pets”. However, few lines further, it considers that *off* brings diversity and an unique taste. It recommends the reader to visit it, but by bus, in order to “observe safely punks and homeless and to live the social contradiction shocks”. Does visiting *off* Berlin look like a safari? According to other guidebooks, certainly not. The social and

cultural mix in the *off* places creates an avant-garde and eccentric atmosphere. One guide uses a bucolic vocabulary that reminds a peaceful ambiance instead of the violent punk history. Moreover, *off* is presented as the uniqueness of Berlin, the taste of the city. It tends to be a myth. Authors turn yesterday's violence and desolation into a local specificity: everyday exoticism for Berliners or tourist experience for visitors.

Off as tourist sites

Guidebooks are marking the *off* scene as a tourist attraction by several ways. The more direct is to say that tourists come to experience it. According to them, *off* is the purpose of the visit. Especially for the youngest, fascinated by underground and wishing to be at "the place to be". Even for genuine tourists, not aware of *off* scenes, it worth a visit. To help tourists, guidebooks describe *off* places and how to get there. The common way is to experiment Berlin nightlife, especially the uniqueness of the *off* nightlife, even if *off* venues might be difficult to found. Guidebooks provide a wide list of venues, bar, clubs, more or less *off* depending to the audience (Lonely Planet is the most exhaustive). Non-nighclubbers may experiment *off* day life, by visiting *off* neighbourhoods thanks to several guides that describe journeys throughout Kreuzberg, Prenzlauer Berg or Freidrichsain. Moreover guidebooks mark some *off* venues once and for all, especially Tacheless, Ufa Fabrik and Kulturbrauerei that become normalised tourist attractions. This marking process may be describe in five points.

1. Venue history. As much as usual tourist places, *off* venues have an history. The history of the building: building process (the architect, the date), former occupation (a cinema, a brewery). The history of the *off*: how and when artists came in, what were the reaction of the authorities...
2. Venue appearance. Guidebooks describe the place, sometimes join a photo, in order to help the tourist to recognise the building and so to drive the tourist gaze on it (McGregor 2000; Urry 1990). In general, guidebooks describe the original architecture, its evolutions (and often its decaying), and the changes done by artists (like graff').
3. various activities. According to the descriptions, there is always something happening in the *off* scene, for any taste and any public. Whenever he comes, the tourist would always find something to do in an *off* place. Some activities are spread in every place (bar, concert, theatre), but some of them are most specific (organic market, circus school). *Off* places often host unique performances.

4. a part of the Berlin cultural life. A common way to legitimize *off* venues is to say that they are well integrated and appreciated in the Berlin cultural life (even if any proof of evidence is provided). Technically, arguing general assessment (one of the most creative place, one of the best address, the most popular) without subjective mark (as “I”), seems to generate an objective (so legitimate) discourse about the qualities of the place.
5. Practical information. When the provide practical information (such as open time, website, address,...), guidebooks achieve the tourist making of the *off* venue.

Gentrification threatens the *off*

But tourists should hurry: *off* is threaten by gentrification processes. *Off* neighbourhoods are becoming trendy. Gentry pushes out the *off*, that takes refuge in new areas. The neighbourhoods are becoming more touristy, but less unique. In some places, nothing remind the *off* anymore. Regeneration development cleaned it up. To experiment what was the uniqueness of Berlin, tourist should discover new areas. Lonely Planet is the only one that describe newly off the beaten track areas (such as Freidrichsain). Some *off* places are becoming so trendy that they gentrify themselves, they are becoming *in*. their public, that used to be young and *off*, is getting older and in the same time more affluent. The *off* artists are more famous or recognised.

But fortunately, *off* never die. It may move (to other areas) or change his face, but this Berlin unique taste survives and even spreads into the *in* sphere.

Off Paris: a private secret

Bohemia comes from the Parisian “*vie d’artiste*” of the 19th century romantics. But is Paris still the place of Bohemia? As Hancock showed, in 19th century’s guidebooks, Paris was describe as the city of lights, luxury, entertainment and pleasure while London was (already) a business city (Hancock 2000). A these days, guidebooks used to recommend to slum it into cabarets in Montmartre, the 19th century *off* scene (Moret 2000). Do guidebooks still mark the contemporary *off* scenes as tourist attractions? Or is touristy Paris a historical pilgrim to the bohemia birth place?

The Parisian postcard is not *off*

While leafing through guidebooks corpus, it seems evident that *off* scenes do not play a fundamental role in the tourist image of Paris. While they talk about *underground*,

guidebooks refer to the real subterranean Paris, such as the Catacombes, not its secret artistic life. According to guidebook, *off* places that worth a visit are old style bohemia survival places. Moreover, guidebooks tend to present a backward-looking of Paris, denigrating all signs of modernity.

Bohemian places such as Montmartre, Montparnasse and Saint-Germain-des-Prés are deeply described. The avant-gardes' moves from a quarter to another one are explained. Moreover, guidebooks recommend their readers to visit it by describing walks in these streets where bohemian atmosphere seems to drift in the air. "The soul of artists" is still there and might inspire new vocations. Some guidebooks offer to follow the paths of famous artists, such as Hemingway (Lonely Planet) or Picasso. Places where artists used to live and work (and often where they had fun and get drunk) are described to tourists, underlining the charm and the uniqueness of those place, as if artists get a sixth sense to find the nicest places in the city. Nevertheless, bohemia and *vie d'artiste* is scored by poverty. The hard conditions of living are widely describe with details that hit 21st century European comfort standards (artists have no tap, no heater, have to share bed, etc...) Surprisingly, guidebooks also recommend to see places that do no longer exist, such as the Bateau-Lavoir (which was destroyed and replaced by newly built artists studios), or that are not accessible and visible to visitors (such as La Ruche that hosts several artists (some are famous)). Here, imaginary is the key. Descriptions help the tourist to imagine and feel the 19th bohemia atmosphere. It had to be said is not so easy on the place du Tertre!

If artists' life is marking the city, artists also bring the city into their artwork. Looking for famous placed painted by famous artists could be a visit theme. Moreover, some places are becoming tourist attraction because of their artistic representation that locals tend to reproduce, like for instance the Amelie's Abesses.

Contemporary Paris is not tourist Paris

Contemporary architecture is the target of attacks from every guidebooks. Concrete and modern architecture are blamed to destroy the "real Paris". For instance, according to Lonely Planet, Tour Montparnasse's architects "should have been frogmarched to the place de la Concorde and guillotined". The lexical vocabulary of destruction and trespass is widely used by authors. The most virulent is the Routard which seems to regret past and according to whom tourist experience looks like a back-to-the-past experience.

Of course, trendy areas, gentrified neighbourhood, and nightlife places are widely describe to tourists. Guidebooks provide addresses and recommendations to spend nights and have fun in

the city. But, the *off* scene is not a part of this tourist night scene. Bastille, Saint Michel, sometimes Oberkampf are not presented as artistic areas but as leisure places. Hazard may bring visitors on the artists studio paths, especially during open-door days. But it should not be the main objectives of the visit. Contemporary art seems to be only showed in official venues (such as Palais de Tokyo), but not made in town. Actually, the only guidebook that presents *off* scene (and local authorities' cultural projects) is the *Guide Bleu* which is almost as a Paris Encyclopaedia (more than 800 pages). The Routard (the French Lonely Planet) talks about La Forge, a factory that used to be squat by artists and that now is turned into public artists studios.

Moreover, one the *off* nightlife venue describe by Lonely Planet (la Fleche d'or) surprised so much the author, that he feels that "this could very well be Berlin"! Not only *off* is not expecting in Paris, but also Berlin is the *off* standard. So, according to guidebooks, a tourist experience in Paris does not pass by the *off* scene. Tourist has so much think to see, to do, and to discover, that *off* is not his priority.

Off : a tourist experience for locals

However, *off* scenes exist in Paris and are quite dynamic. But they remain a local attraction, attended by Parisian only. Actually, the tourist is generally considered as an alien, a visitor. But locals may have tourist experience in their own city. Contemporary metropolis are large and diverse. They offer many out-of-the-ordinary experiences. Inhabitants do not pass by many places everyday. A large part of the metropolis remain out of their everyday life sightseeing. While they visit museums, locals act as tourist. Or while they go to Chinatown once a year for Chinese new year. While they are looking for antiques in the flea market or shop Xmas presents in department store. While they celebrate kids' birthday in Euro Disney. The metropolis is a tourist playground for locals too! Without exit the city, they could escape the ordinary. Locals are also avant-garde tourists because with their networks and personal experiences of the city, they may discover newly trendy places before alien tourists. Local medias recommend for example to visit such neighbourhoods (like Place Sainte Marthe in Paris) before tourists "invasion". Indeed, local medias are acting as guidebooks while they are prescribing to visit such places. They are marking places or venues as tourist attraction by detailing open hours or special events.

In order to show to what extend *off* venues may be marked as tourist attraction, I realise a (almost) exhaustive press review, related to artists squats, in local and national press. Squat might be considered as a social and housing issue. But it appears that squats are also

becoming a cultural issue (for instance, many papers are published in “arts columns”). Moreover, it should be questioning somewhere else to what extent medias put artist squats on the political agenda. Here, I focus on the marking of artist squats as tourist sites. First, a lot of papers are describing squats as artist places. Squats do not refer (necessarily) to fringe and poverty. It could be a choice (even constrain). Most of them are not described as party venues but as places where artists are working. Journalists invite readers to go and visit these squats in order to discover artists’ works and workplaces. Such visits aim to live a real bohemian experience. These poetic places may contrast with their environment. Indeed, some of the new artists squats in Paris choose very smartly their locations: downtown, in strategic places to catch the widest audience, in the heart of the power landscape of the city : market power (rue de Rivoli), financial and media power (place de la bourse), art power (rue dauphine or rue Matignon). Moreover, readers have to visit such artists squats because they are the place to be at the moment. Papers produce visitors figures (gave by the squatters themselves) that give the impression of visitors’ flows: 40 000 visitor/year at Chez Robert. Much more than most of the contemporary art venues, many authors said. But none of the journalist discuss these figures: how are they made? Who does count? Is it related to artistic interest or to a smart location?

Such as 19th century cabaret, artists squats are the places where bourgeois are slumming it into *off* scene. Authors describe visitors they met : yuppies, bourgeois (stigmatised by their Hermes scarf), teenagers, etc. who are exploring the squat with their photo camera. These visits are described as out-of the daily routine experience, where people meet smiling and welcoming artists. In order to facilitate the visit, many articles provides address, open hours, website and even map to get there.

Actually, if they glamorise artists squats and mark them as ‘the place to be’, journalists are not naïve, they are aware that smart location strategies help artist to survive and to be mediatised. But they also become political actor when they describe the risks threatening squatters, mainly eviction. For squatters, mediatising the threat is a way to prevent, or at least to delay it. For the local tourist, it is a warning: hurry up before closing!

Conclusion

As I show, *off* culture play a very different role in cities’ tourist image. On the one hand, in Berlin, guidebooks mark *off* scenes and venues as tourist sites that had to be experienced by visitors. *Off* is a part of the Berlin taste, a proof of its uniqueness. On the other hand, *off* is missing from Paris’s guidebooks. The romanticised traditional Parisian landmarks (Eiffel tower and so on) are so strong that it is almost impossible to drive the tourist gaze somewhere

else. *Off* scenes are secret attractions where locals may escape routine and visitors flows in the same time. Threats of eviction or gentrification emphasize the *off* place uniqueness. Moreover, I show that city's tourist image is not reflecting the reality but guidebooks' author interpretation of it. Based on their own representation of the city, they emphasize some common images of a place. The "Musee" Paris is a powerful tourist image. But is the Berlin's unique taste a sustainable one?

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