

About Historical Centers: Is the Trend towards Decor Really Irresistible?

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1 ABSTRACT

We argue that the projects in the historical centers of European cities are characterized either by truth, either by authenticity and either by spectacle (*décor*). There is always a formatting of space and behaviors, but for culture or entertainment. This is confirmed when companies using Internet, which are specialized in the industry of “events”, manage historical monuments. Also, a monument can be used for entertainment, as if it was a piece of *décor*. To deal with the topic of the limits of the trend towards *décor* (in historical centers) we use the ideas of the French philosopher Lipotevsky. In a society with three characteristics, democracy, individualism and consumption, when in a group tastes and desires are shared, it can obtain decisions in accordance with the preferences of its members. Therefore the set of the projects in the historical center of some city should be somewhere inside a triangle truth – authenticity – spectacle. It is because if there is need of entertainment, there is also a need of authenticity. This ambiguity exists for a long time in tourism and architecture.

2 INTRODUCTION

We see in the historical centers of the large European cities two trends at work, which are in conflict:

- One is preservation of Heritage. The goal is Culture.
- The other is adapting the city to *décor* (fairs, parades, urban scenography, “events” ...). The goal is entertainment.

In any case, some space and behaviors are formatted. A space is formatted either for culture either for entertainment. This is confirmed when companies, using Internet, specialized in the industry of “events”, manage historical monuments. More, historical monuments can be used for spectacle, and the preservation of Heritage leads to ... *décor*. Therefore there is this question which is posed: what are the limits to the trend towards *décor*?

We deal with this topic in this paper.

One can present some features of the two trends in a kind of tableau:

	<i>Heritage</i>	<i>Décor</i>
<i>Personalities and professionals</i>	<i>Julien Benda¹, Marcel Poete², Guy Debord³, Viollet le Duc, professionals of Heritage preservation</i>	<i>Barneys⁴, advertisers, specialists of marketing, specialists of scenography</i>
<i>Kinds of places and examples of sites</i>	<i>Museums, cultural quarters, historical cities. Cité de Carcassonne, Mont Saint Michel ...</i>	<i>Thematic parks, quarters devoted to entertainment. Euro Disney Land, Las Vegas ...</i>

Our method will be to use examples, which allow showing three trends:

¹ Julien Benda was a French philosopher. He thought that intellectuals have to tell the truth, always. He quoted the famous French philosopher Renan: “one has always to tell the truth, no matter the price”.

² Marcel Poete was a French urban planner. He set out the notion of “Mysticism” of a city. It means that all the monuments of a city “translate” some chosen values: the Religion, the King, the Nation, Science ... He was a proponent of the value of reconciliation of social classes.

³ In his book “Comments on the Society of the Spectacle” Guy Debord tells how “the Spectacle” hampers “historical knowledge” and imposes the “perennial present”. Also, he speaks of “irrefutable fake”. According to him, the Spectacle is the consequence of Medias in the context of mass consumption boosted by advertising. Guy Debord was a proponent of self-organization and autonomy.

⁴ This intellectual was a forerunner in the twenties, when he argued that any method efficient to sell goods was good. He invented the modern tools of advertising and marketing.

- The choice is between two formattings (of space, of behaviors). The “historical truth” has to be interpreted. There are rival doctrines. And décor corresponds to some formatting: the reactions of consumers are conditioned by Medias and specialists of shows (and scenography).
- A trick is that décor can follow Heritage. One knows how to use historical settings to mount entertaining shows. Therefore the preservation of Heritage can finally lead to décor.
- There is a limit to the adaptation of the City to décor. To show it we shall use the ideas of the French philosopher Lipovetsky.

The limit between Heritage and décor is blurry. In the Conclusion we show that this ambiguity is not new: it exists for a long time in the case of tourism and architecture, for instance.

3 HERITAGE OR DÉCOR? SOME EXAMPLES

We shall present four examples.

3.1 “The birthplace”

It is the title of a short story from the famous American novelist Henry James. A guide is in charge of the visit of the house where a famous poet is born. There is nothing interesting to view, so he is asked to imagine and tell attractive anecdotes. Being honest, he refuses. But after some reflection, he accepts and all the people are pleased: himself (he wins more money), his wife, the proprietaries of the house and ... the public (more tourists visit the house). Even if it is irony, the spectacle wins, no matter the historical truth is.

3.2 The House of Slaves

The so-called House of Slaves is in the Gorée Island in Senegal, near Dakar. According to the guide Joseph Ndiaye, who launched it, it was there that thousands and thousands of people left their country to America on ships, to be sold as slaves. The historians deny: the house belonged to a rich Senegalese woman having a dozen of servants, the only slaves in the house, and Gorée was only a marginal center of slave trade. Now Joseph Ndiaye is dead but the tourists are still told this story. Clearly, it is spectacle (not truth or authenticity).

3.3 Illumination of cathedrals in France

One started to illuminate the Notre Dame de Paris cathedral with funny colors (purple, pink ...), but it ceased soon. Instead, the illumination highlights the architectural features of the monument. But the spectacle had its revenge, which concerned other cathedrals in France. Thanks to chemical analyses of the remaining pigments, researchers discovered the real colors with which the statues of the façades of the cathedrals were painted in the Middle Ages. Using very much sophisticated cameras one projects these colors on the façade of cathedrals (like the cathedral of Amiens) while there is an aesthetic and historical comment, and music which are listened to. The spectacle has been a great success for ten years. In this case, it is historical truth the winner, not authenticity or spectacle. Indeed, it is an entertaining spectacle, but in accordance with historical truth. Note that historical truth is preferable to authenticity. If we believe what the historian Leon Poliakov tells in his book “The history of anti-Semitism”, the Mysteries played on the squares of cathedrals in the Middle Ages were vulgar, violent and anti-Semitic. They were great success, all the people living in the city attending them, except ... the robbers. Also, Viollet le Duc suggests that every year the cathedral was given to the populace for a few days, and strange actions occurred. For all these reasons, today the choice of historical truth seems preferable to the choice of authenticity.

Today the gothic monuments are restored in accordance with a doctrine set out by Viollet le Duc. To explain the influence of Viollet le Duc is easy. There is no reason to not apply the ideas set out by the American sociologist HS Becker in his book “Art worlds” to the milieu in charge of preservation of Heritage. This milieu is made up of several groups, each of them having a role (architects, artists, craftsmen, critics, administrators ...). This milieu is pleased with two Viollet le Duc’s ideas: the necessity of popularity (of restored monuments) and the role of architects in the past. Viollet le Duc praises the role of the group of architects at the time of gothic art (from twelfth century to fifteenth century). Even, he uses the Hegelian parable of the Master and the Slave. They were commoner, secular, working and talented people. They greatly contributed to the recovery of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They triggered the rise of building castles, palaces, city halls etc. Before, there was Roman Art, which was remarkable, but was not

unified and monastic. Gothic art was useful to the unity of France, triggered by the power of the King. Viollet le Duc died in 1879, he did not see modern art and that is why he thought that gothic art was the best of art in France (with a short period in the beginning of the seventeenth century). Further in the paper we shall describe the rules of “good style” according to Viollet le Duc.

3.4 Napoléon Peyrat: a mix of deeply thought history and poetic imagination

Napoleon Peyrat is a famous French historian of the nineteenth century. Being born in the South of France and protestant, he was fascinated by the heretic people having lived in this region (Cathars, Protestants) and studied their history. He “discovered” the role of the castle of Montségur, which was the headquarters of the Cathar church from 1232 to 1244. After the Treaty of Paris (1229) the lands belonging to the Count of Toulouse were no more secure for Cathars, and many of them found a refuge in the castle. They surrendered in 1244, many of them being the victims of the Inquisition. Peyrat discovered also the deep penetration of the Cathar religion in the society of this region, and the role of women among the believers. But he imagined the role in the Cathar church of a Countess of Foix, Esclarmonde. He imagined an underground Montségur, room, crypts, “holy pools” etc. More seriously, he imagined the story of a “second Montségur”: according to him, around 1330, the last Cathars, hundreds of men, women and kids, died because of hunger and thirst, walled in the cave of Lombrives, in the valley of Ariège. They preferred this fate to abjuring their faith. Their bodies were covered by limestone and stalagmites etc. According to Peyrat, this kind of suicide was common among Cathars, but this also has been never proved. When Peyrat has imagined stories, no documents or clues have been found by historians, since his death in 1881. But the guides told tourists the story concerning Lombrives. Only in the fifties and sixties the story was removed from guidebooks. Today the guides only evoke the legends concerning the cave at Lombrives. Napoléon Peyrat has done very much to launch touristic sites in the region of Ariège: it is justified in the case of Montségur, and Mas d’Azil (a site with a cave where Protestants victoriously resisted the troops of Louis XIII in 1625, an event studied by Peyrat), but not in the case of Lombrives. This is an example of historical truth winning.

Today Internet is popular for twenty years and there has been some thought on rumors. One can use, to understand how a rumor is diffused, a word (the “buzz”), a metaphor (the “snowball”) and a notion (viral process). The notion of viral process shows how a rumor is disseminated, benefitting from several variants (or changing forms), each of them being adequate to some group which believes the rumor and propagates it. Historians have ideas on the process of dissemination of the rumor on the cave at Lombrives. These ideas are set out in a book which presents the communications at a congress on the works of Napoléon Peyrat (Cabanel and De Robert, 1998). The process could have been:

- First, a tale which concerns the cave at Lombrives is published in a local review.
- The guides at Lombrives tell the tourists the story, but presenting it as a true story.
- Napoléon Peyrat visits the site, believes the story told by the guide.
- He has the idea of a similar story, but which would concern Cathars. If the first story (which concerns robbers) is true and believed, the similar story (on Cathars) will be believed.
- He imagines the story of the Cathars at Lombrives, and tells it in his book on Cathars.
- The readers of the book of Napoléon Peyrat believe the story on Cathars.
- Etc.

These examples show that the struggle between authenticity, historical truth and spectacle is very ambiguous. It results in historical truth or spectacle winning, depending on circumstances.

4 THE IDEAS OF LIPOTEVSKY AND THE LIMITS TO THE TREND TOWARDS DÉCOR

According to the French philosopher Lipovetsky, there has been during the second half of the twentieth century a Revolution which was democratic, egalitarian and individualistic (Lipovetsky, 2000). Individuals make the choices they want: in their personal affairs, as consumers, when political and social stakes are considered (since they are part of an Opinion omnipotent because of the influence of Medias) ... The rights of minorities (sexual, ethnic ...) are respected. When there is some stake, a majority appears and decisions are taken which protect the rights of individuals and groups. For instance, consumers are protected against the bad quality of products. Now we can speak of the conflict between Heritage and décor. There are

contradictory needs. A large city has to be vibrant, allow entertainment. But there is also a need of authenticity and memory. As the destruction of monuments is unconceivable, the alternative, if one wants to adapt the city to décor, should be to imagine a new identity for them, to speak of them in a new way thanks to marketing and Medias.⁵ But people do not like lies and mystifications. Therefore the trend towards décor in the historical centers should be limited. The result could be neither the “mystical” city in the Marcel Poete’s meaning (displaying some chosen value thanks to every monument), neither a city completely devoted to spectacle.

Lipovsky thinks that cinema pervades Society. The way in which it deals with topics, relying on drama, hyperbole, spectacle and stars, is imitated in many fields of social life, including urban planning (Lipovsky, 2011). For instance, one can imagine a city covered with high towers, each of them being a hallmark of the city and having a characteristic and funny shape, and an identity of “personality” built up thanks to marketing and Medias ... Surely, the adaptation of the City to décor owes very much to cinema. But the complete adaptation of the city to décor, scenography and cinema seems improbable.

5 CONCLUSION

We argue that the set of the projects in the historical center of large European cities, should be somewhere inside a triangle authenticity – historical truth – spectacle. In other words, these projects should remain in some ambiguity.

This ambiguity exists for a long time in the fields of tourism and architecture.

5.1 The ambiguity exists in tourism

Tours are not a quest, except in rare cases. Tour as a quest has been defined by the German philosopher Keyserling (a well-known intellectual at the time of the Weimar Republic): “I toured around the world to find myself”. Exceptions are, for instance, Goethe⁶, Liszt⁷, and Nietzsche⁸. There are several traditions, concerning guidebooks. Of course, each of them has been founded. One can take the example of the Stendhal’s travel books⁹. If one considers his confidences, it is only a mix of false and true. But errors and even plagiarism are forgiven when he speaks of art. When he examined the social, historical and political conditions of culture, he was a forerunner, his works heralding those of Burckhardt and Nietzsche. He had a deep intuition of what is production of culture (in the case of books, paintings, statues ...) one century before the Frankfurt School’s works. He initiated a tradition for guidebooks. Even in the fifties, when car and photo were popular, a well-known French writer, Gabriel Faure¹⁰ wrote the guidebook “Aux lacs Italiens” (“At the Italian lakes”). The goal of such a guidebook is, besides giving practical advices, to trigger the sharing of tastes. Problems of aesthetics are posed and discussed, the author displaying his own choice. Indeed there is a spectrum of guidebooks, from the diary or travelogue (today it is called “travel writing”) to the guidebook giving only impersonal and objective advices. But there is always some formatting (of the vision of the visited country). An example of a tradition for guidebooks is the guidebooks examined by Edward Said in his book “Orientalism”. They present people in Oriental countries in the same way: they have a great past but their present state is poor and dull, they are passive, fatalist, lazy, sensual, either very much loyal either deceitful etc.

In any way the modern guidebooks (including those on Internet) describe (if they do not recommend) spectacles for tourists: fairs, parades, carnivals, scenography¹¹ and thematic parks ... This shows the ambiguity in tourism. The guidebooks pay attention to what is authentic, true or spectacular in the countries visited by tourists.

⁵ In Paris, a little park à la Indiana Jones will be seen, soon.

⁶ The poet was initiated into beauty of art thanks to a tour in Italy.

⁷ The musician, who became a monk when he was old, made tours in Italy in the same spirit than a pilgrim.

⁸ The philosopher touring in Italy was ill and his only preoccupation was to achieve his works.

⁹ One of them is “Promenades dans Rome” (“Walks in Rome”) which was the most popular book from him, during his life.

¹⁰ He was not the famous French musician Gabriel Fauré. They were friends and toured Italy together.

¹¹ To obtain a nicer view of the monument, one changes the surroundings.

5.2 The ambiguity exists in architecture

The aesthetics of authenticity postulates that the best is when the monument remains exactly what it was before its restoration. Thus it remains the same in the imaginary. One often quotes the restoration of the castle of Haut Koenigsburg in Alsace, in France, by the architect Bodo Ebhardt, around 1900.

The proponent of the aesthetics of historical truth is Viollet le Duc. He interprets the style of the architecture of a particular time, thanks to a doctrine. The historical and social context is taken into account. The success is when the solutions of the problems are made visible by the architect, these problems being the program of the monument (or building), its stability, how it is integrated in the landscape, and the choice of the materials which are used ... Decoration and color and even some scenography have their role. Also, the “scale” (today the human being), geometrical proportions and symmetry, matter. For instance, Gothic Art displays the equilibrium of pressures and counter-pressures, decoration (dramatic statues, local plants on capitals) and color completing the scenery.

It is not Viollet le Duc, but his followers, who were criticized for having changed the restored monuments, too much.

The conflict between authenticity and historical truth remains. Architects specialized in the restoration of monuments have accepted some principles which are set out in the Chart of Venice (1964):

- The changes have to remain visible thanks to some signs (for instance one uses another material than the material used to build the monument, when one makes changes during the restoration).
- The changes have to be reversible.
- The original state of the monument should be respected if it is possible.

Also, traditional and local materials should be used.

When big changes in historical centers of cities are considered, the choice of authenticity, truth or spectacle is a stake which is often intertwined with other ones.

For instance, in many cities of Northern Italy, inhabitants like Heritage. But they also want to keep the conditions of life in the city, as they are. They do not wish their city attracting too many tourists. It is as if they feared attractive Heritage leading to décor. The outcome is a reasonable exploitation of the resource that Heritage is.

6 REFERENCES

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