

Home, sense of place and visitors' interpretations of digital cultural immersive experiences in museums.

An application of the “embodied constructivist GTM digital ethnography in situ” method.

Patrizia Schettino

TEC-Lab

Università della Svizzera italiana

Lugano, Switzerland

schettip@usi.ch

Abstract—What is the relationship between the visitor's hybrid identity and his/her interpretation process? How can his/her relationship with one or more places affect the understanding of a real place, a virtual place, or a digital representation of a real place through augmented panoramas? This paper will answer these two research questions, interpreting the patterns emerging from data collected about visitors' experiences in the immersive environment PLACE-Hampi, designed by Sarah Kenderdine and Jeffrey Shaw. The paper is based on a method which the author calls “embodied constructivist GTM digital ethnography in situ”.

Keywords— *home; interpretation; immersive; sense of place; museum; interpretative community, digital ethnography, grounded theory method*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents some of the results of visitors' interpretations of the PLACE-Hampi immersive environment [1], part of the exhibition Ancient Hampi held at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne (2009-2010) [2]. The paper will focus on the concept of interpretation, interpretative community and home in the first paragraph. The PLACE-Hampi case study will be described in the second paragraph. The method, called “embodied constructivist GTM digital ethnography in situ” is presented in paragraph 3 and, finally, paragraph 4 summarizes the results of visitors' interpretations of the content using the key concept of “home”. In the tradition of digital ethnography, in this paper I will write in the first person [3].

II. INTERPRETATION, INTERPRETATIVE COMMUNITIES AND HOMES

Visitors at an exhibition can be part of different interpretative communities, in the sense that they can use different interpretative strategies in common with other different visitors [4, 5]. Within the context of globalization, especially in multicultural cities, a person can feel part of different communities and also feel connected to different

places in the world. Bhabha's concept of “hybridity” [6] can explain this condition. The places which are relevant for a hybrid personality can be simultaneously the original home and the temporary home (for example the city where the person works or studies). Even the simple question “where do you come from?” or “where is your home?” can be challenging for people who have spent part of their life in one country and part in another one.

The concept of “home” and the emotional relationship with it has been studied by anthropologists, by geographers and scholars of material culture [7] and is characterized by mutability, fluidity, ambiguity [8].

“Home” is not only a physical place but “somewhere that people feel is an intrinsic part of them, of who and what they perceive themselves to be” [7]. “Feeling at home” is fundamental in coping with displacement. The idea of multilocality is described by Dudley with reference to how the Karenni refugees in Thailand link their “original home” and their “current home”. “Karenni refugees construct, engage with and, to different degrees, feel at home in two different places at the same time: the refugee camp in which they are physically present and the villages of origin to which they can metaphorically return in ritual and imagination” [7]. Their reflexive relations with a place are thus “fragmented and multilocal” [9]. They are “at home” differently in both the past and the present, a metaphorical “multilocality” [7]. This experience and reflection on the sense of place and home of the Karenni refugees can be generalized and extended to people who live between different places for other reasons.

Appadurai [10] described the concept of multilocality in this way: “The Goddess Meenaksi has a living presence in Houston”. This is the final sentence of Appadurai (“a Tamil Brahman male, brought up in Bombay and turned into a “homo academicus” in the United States”, 1996), at the end of his “vignette”, the story of a visit to the Meenaksi Temple in Mandurai (India) with his wife (“an American female historian of India”). This “vignette”, merging in one experience the representation of a Goddess in the United States and in India by two cosmopolitan academics,

summarizes the complexity of representation and imagination in a globalized, “deterritorialized” world. [10]

Just as the Karenni refugees have a past and present home (the village and the camp), come from one place and live in another, and the two are connected, also people living in a multicultural city have an original home and a present home, that is, the city.

As Peter Read has said [11], homes are mentally constructed. They are also uniquely “ours”: one person’s home is different to another’s. “Home is where one starts from”. [12]. Home is the root of most conceptions of sense of place. [13] It need not only be a domestic place but also a place of regular and routine pilgrimage, such as a football stadium [14] or museum [15]. We always find ourselves in places [16] and a space becomes “a place” as we get to know it better. This process takes time: home is a place that we know intimately [17].

Home can metaphorically also represent the person as an extension of the body. The exhibition the “Home of Annie Lennox” is an example of how the concept of “home” can summarize the world of one person [18].

All these considerations on the concept of home are fundamental in understanding the interpretation of the experience of a place (Hampi, India, etc.) by Indian and non Indian visitors. I argue that the concept of the original home and the present home can be extended to people who have experienced migration. I will use the concept of home in my data analysis, I will also use it to code my data and I will extend it, arguing that there is not only an original home and a present home but also other types of “home”.

There are people who, without ever having been there, might say, for example, “In another life, I was Japanese”. This gives them a direction in their life, they will try to go to Japan. They like aspects of Japan and Japanese culture, (they eat Japanese food, they watch Japanese movies, etc.). How can this kind of “home” be defined?

And how are the different “homes” relevant in understanding how visitors interpret the exhibition?

In paragraph 4 I will show that visitors with similar homes have similar interpretations and interpretation strategies: they are part of the same interpretative community.

III. THE CASE STUDY: PLACE-HAMPI

PLACE-Hampi is one of the immersive environments designed by Sarah Kenderdine and Jeffrey Shaw. The name PLACE and Hampi sums up the project: it consists of the platform PLACE and is about Hampi. The PLACE platform was designed by Jeffrey Shaw in the 1990s and allows visitors to interactively explore digital panoramas 360 degrees. As Oliver Grau wrote [19], the platform is in the tradition of panoramas but innovative in the way the panoramas can be explored, with a new interactive design paradigm.

Sarah Kenderdine [20] describes PLACE-Hampi in this way: “PLACE-Hampi is a vibrant theatre for embodied participation in the drama of Hindu mythology focused at the most significant archaeological, historical and sacred locations of the World Heritage site Vijayanagara (Hampi), South India. The installation’s aesthetic and representational features constitute a new approach to the rendering of cultural

experience, and give the participants a dramatic appreciation of the many layered significations of this site”.

IV. METHODOLOGY

It has been argued that this area is new and requires a new approach: “it is necessary to develop a new and appropriate methodological framework and, where appropriate, borrow from a range of disciplines” [21]. Sarah Kenderdine at Museum and the Web 2012 [22] also highlighted that this area of research is crucial in the field of virtual museums, especially with a focus on cultural diversity: “A deeper understanding of how virtual environments (created within a predominantly Cartesian based perspective system) appropriate and distort other culturally derived views of the world will offer us ample opportunity for experimentation, evaluation and future research” [23] The method used in this research is a combination of four different methods (grounded theory, digital ethnography, case study, narrative inquiry) and can be summarized as an “embodied constructivist GTM digital ethnography in situ [24]:

Embodied: the researcher is in the immersive environment with the visitor, without taking notes or recording a video; the notes are written up immediately after each visitor observation session;

Constructivist GTM ethnography: the researcher uses visitor observation and triangulates the observation with the same visitors; the research process follows the constructivist Grounded Theory Method or GTM [25]; the researcher is aware of the potential bias in the interpretation of the experience; the researcher takes into account cultural diversity in his/her data collection and analysis;

Digital: the researcher analyzes immersive digital projects in situ; this can be considered a subfield of digital ethnography [26]; the immersive environment is not online but in situ, part of an exhibition in a museum. This research is an attempt to define a methodology for the qualitative analysis of an immersive experience in situ.

In this case study, the data (notes from observations, tracking of visitor paths, interviews, comment cards) were collected when PLACE-Hampi was at the Ancient Hampi exhibition in Melbourne, Australia, in 2009 and 2010.

V. RESULTS

Analysis of visitors’ narratives brought to light patterns about the visitors’ interpretation of the space, platform and content. Fish [4] and Hooper Green Hill’s concept of interpretative communities [5] was used in the analysis regarding the visitors’ points of view. The data was coded in order to identify the interpretative strategies used by visitors and the different interpretations of the content. Visitors sharing the same interpretative strategies are part of the same interpretative community. In this part of the analysis the “home” emerged as a key concept. In their narratives visitors mentioned several places and some of these were home. Visitors sharing the same home and using the experience of the home as their interpretative strategy are part of the same

interpretative community. In the analysis, home was described as:

- a) *Original home*: the place where the visitor was born.
- b) *Actual long-term home*: the place where the visitor remains for a long period of time;
- c) *Temporary home*: the place where the visitor lives for a short period of time;
- d) *Imagined home*: the place where the visitor has never been but only imagines as a possible home;
- e) *Emotional home*: the place the visitor has adopted as home for family reasons, such a marriage to a person from that place;
- f) *Dreamed home*: the place where the visitor has been in the past and has a strong desire to return to in the future.
- g) *Cultural home*: the place that has become the “cultural origin”, even if the visitor was not born there.
- h) *Holiday home*: the place where the visitor went on vacation, and of which he/she has lasting memories;
- i) *Denied home*: the place the visitor was forced to leave, as a refugee or through migration due to poverty or other negative circumstances.

This concept is very important in understanding cultural hybridity [10, 6] and the visitor’s interpretation of an exhibition about a place such as India. Using the different types of home to analyze the visitors’ interpretation of PLACE-Hampi, we can say that:

Visitors whose original home is Hampi shared a common strategy to interpret the experience based on their embodied memories of the place and their childhood.

Visitors whose original home is India, near Hampi, looked for things they remembered about the place.

Visitors whose original home is India and were Hindu were contemplative during their visit and considered the exhibition sacred. They came to the museum as pilgrims. They also mentioned that they were happy to see non Hindu visitors learning about Hindu Gods.

Visitors whose original home is India (but not Hampi) were able to understand the cultural content of the exhibition. They shared a sense of pride in the exhibition.

Indians with India as their long-term home said that they had never visited Hampi but they knew about the place and expressed their intention to visit Hampi when they returned to India.

Visitors whose emotional home is India, e.g. the wife of an Indian Hindu man who had been to India several times, felt a strong emotional connection to the place, had vivid memories and felt connected to the place in a special way, as in some way she had “married” the country and adopted it as her home. She also felt that her children should learn about the place as part of their heritage. These visitors shared an in-depth understanding of the cultural elements of the exhibition with visitors whose original home is India and used, inter alia, the tale of the Ramayana as an interpretative strategy to connect all the animations in the exhibition.

Visitors not originally from India, but with *India as their cultural home*, e.g. Indian Australian visitors who said “I am

an Indian born in Australia”, who had maybe never been to India, who were not born in India but consider themselves Indians and are part of the Indian community in Australia fully engaged with this exhibition. Some of them had been to India (to visit relatives, etc.) and the experience also evoked memories of the country. Visitors who had never been to Hampi expressed a desire to go there on their next trip to India, their cultural home.

Some visitors dream of going back to India. They left for different reasons but their dream is to go back. This gave a sense of “saudade” to their visit. Visitors mentioned the glorious past of the kingdom that was destroyed, with a sense of pride and at the same time also a sense of “saudade”.

Visitors whose imagined home is India were visitors who were not born in India and are not part of the Indian community, have no relatives from India but *feel a strong emotional, spiritual and cultural connection with the country*. India plays a very important part in their lives. These visitors were, for example, yoga teachers who have studied India and Indian culture. India is a passion for them. These visitors had a real understanding of the content of the exhibition, looking for specific content connected to their special interest.

Several visitors had India as their temporary home, for holidays or business and spent time there. They had memories of their trip, sometimes very vivid (such as the experience of having slept on the floor of a temple). They were familiar with Indian symbols and able to understand the meaning of the projections on the floor, of the Gods, etc. They frequently expressed a desire to return to India more often.

In general, Australian visitors were familiar with India and Asian cultures. Some of them had been to India, and some who had never been there mentioned programs on Australian television such as a documentary about India.

Very young visitors originally from Australia, who came to the exhibition on a school visit with their teachers, already knew something about Indian Gods. They were also introduced to the exhibition by the customer service staff who told them all about it.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The paper presents a new way of understanding visitors’ hybridity, using the key word “home”, and of analyzing the intercultural interpretation of an immersive experience by an international audience. In this paper, the concept of home was broken down into different subcategories, properties and dimensions. The paper also shows how a methodology, called “embodied constructivist GTM digital ethnography in situ”, can be used to collect and analyze data about the visitors’ interpretation process. The same methodology can be used to analyze other immersive experiences in museums. This approach entailed a significant commitment on the part of the researcher who had to spend many hours in the environment to collect the data directly, but it also allowed better and more in-depth understanding of visitors’ hybrid identities and interpretation processes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research has been supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Thanks to the designers Sarah Kenderdine and Jeffrey Shaw and to the Immigration Museum, Melbourne.

REFERENCES

- [1] PLACE-Hampi website, <http://www.place-hampi.museum> (last visited in june 2013)
- [2] Ancient Hampi exhibition on Immigration Museum website, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/whatson/past-exhibitions/ancient-hampi-museum> (last visited in june 2013)
- [3] T. Boellstorff, Rethinking digital anthropology, in Miller D. and Horst H.A. ed., 2012, *Digital Anthropology*, pag. 39-60, London: Berg, 2012.
- [4] S. Fish, Is There A Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities. Cambridge:Harvard U. Press, 1980, 147-174.
- [5] E., Hooper-Greenhill, Interpretative communities, strategies and repertoires, in *Museum and Their Communities*, in S.Watson. ed., Museum and Their Communities, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007, 76-94.
- [6] H., Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994.
- [7] S., Dudley, *Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*. Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 2010.
- [8] Giariana, Tuton, Mursi, cited in S. Dudley, *Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*. Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 2010, pag.117
- [9] Rodman, pag. 646, cited in S. Dudley, *Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*. Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 1992.
- [10] A., Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimension of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MM: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- [11] P. Read, *Returning to nothing: the meaning of lost places*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- [12] T.S. Eliot, 1940, *East Coker*.
- [13] Schofield, Szymanski, in *Local Heritage, Global context, Cultural Perspective on Sense of Place*, J. Schofield and R. Szymanski ed., Surrey: Ashgate, 2011, pp. 1-11.
- [14] J. Wood, *Topophilia, Reliquary and pilgrimage: Recapturing PLACE, Memory and Meaning at Britain's historic football grounds*, in *Local Heritage, Global context, Cultural Perspective on Sense of Place*, J. Schofield and R. Szymanski ed. , Surrey: Ashgate, 2011, pp. 187-204
- [15] V. Golding, *Learning at the museum frontiers: identity, race and power*, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009.
- [16] Casey 199:17, cited in S.Dudley, *Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*. Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 2010, pag.10.
- [17] Y.F., Tuan, *Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience*, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1977, pp.6, 184.
- [18] The exhibition *The Home of Annie Lennox*, from the V&A website, http://www.vam.ac.uk/channel/happenings/exhibitions_and_galleries/exhibitions_archive/the_house_of_annie_lennox/
- [19] O., Grau, *From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge: MIT-Press, 2003.
- [20] P Schettino P. and S. Kenderdine, *PLACE-Hampi. Narratives of inclusive cultural experience*. *Journal of Inclusive Museums* 3, no. 3: 2011, pp.141-156.
- [21] M. Economou and L.P. Tost, *Educational tool or expensive toy? Evaluating VR evaluation and its relevance for virtual heritage*, in *New Heritage, New Media and Cultural heritage*, ed. Y.E. Kalay, T. Kvan and J.Affleck, London: Routledge, 2008, p.255
- [22] S. Kenderdine, *Bringing together theory and practice in digital museum communication*, *Museum and the Web 2012*, San Diego, USA
- [23] S. Kenderdine, *Speaking in Rama: Panoramic Vision in Cultural Heritage Visualization*, in *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage*, Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007, 301-331.
- [24] P. Schettino, *The embodied constructivist GTM digital ethnography in situ to analyze visitors' immersive experiences in museums*, submitted to the *Journal of Visitor Studies*, expected publication in 2014
- [25] K. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory, a practical guide through qualitative analysis*, London: Sage, 2006.
- [26] T. Boellstorff, B. Nardi, C. Pearce C. & T.L. Taylor , *The Ethnography of Virtual Worlds: Handbook of Method*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012.