Tourists and discontented places in the Old Town of Prague

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All that you have seen in this world are ideas according to which it is possible to examine all things that take place in the other worlds and discover whether they are right.[1]
J. A. Comenius, *Mundus possibilis*, circa 1645

Overture

When, in 1973, I came to graduate school I was eager to catch up on all that anthropology I had heard of and missed during my undergraduate years at Charles University in Prague. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that I could indulge in the study of European tourism instead of peasantry; it seemed a bit risqué to be studying something like that. Though I had little experience as a tourist and there were no tourists to speak of in Prague at the time, the idea that one could examine the complex point of contact, that ambiguous culture of mediation that develops between the two sides that characterize tourism *in situ*, made a deep impression on me. I know better now, lost in search of the Old City of Prague itself lost to the stampede of tourists who walk the narrow corridors of entertainment protected by their guidebooks from getting lost or from knowing too much.

At once perceived as a welcome source of income and a never-ending infestation of insects, the ubiquitous tourists and the industry that caters to them are usefully described in terms of sensory commoditization, the arbitration of taste and all manners of sensing, as the bottomless pit for the serial reproduction of authentic memories. This paper explores one particular local claim about the normative and experiential impact tourism has on the sense of place. As familiarity gives way, under repetitive acts of estrangement, to an angering sense of loss, the 'spirit of the place' is frequently cited as the victim of this abusive onslaught. My point will be this: if we take the idea of *genius loci* literally, we will discover, beyond the everyday, figurative meaning of the term, a discursive practice the understand-

[1] "Quicquid enim in toto possibili Mundo vidisti, Ideae sunt, ad quas in reliquis Mundis omnia fiunt, et an recte facta sint, examinari possunt." As quoted in Patočka (2003, p. 387).

ing of which may even be intentionally veiled. This tactical move redirects our attention away from theories of tourism that focus on the "commoditization of cultural forms" or, that implicate "narcissistic ego structures in the consumption of intangible qualities".[2] Instead, I propose a way of describing a tourist location as a tough competitor on an ontological landscape, as a volatile interpenetration of otherwise separate worlds, both actual and possible, with multiple agents and agendas.

The Latin wording *genius loci* is invoked more often than its Czech translation *duch místa*, the spirit of the place, although both words *duch* (spirit) and *místo* (place) are used on their own liberally and with the same range of meanings as their English cognates. It is as if the very sound of Latin evoked an aspect of that which the expression refers to, something that is both real and elusive. The problem I and all my friends and acquaintances face is that the *genius loci* have gone missing. When approached about this issue, some were agitated others nonplused. All maintained that things had changed, that the Old City has lost its charm and, with the exception of a couple of pubs and cafes, was best avoided, as most did, unless you worked there and had to pass through it. A few maintained that it was quiet and "ours again" (*opět naše*) at night and at the break of dawn and for a few weeks in February. I disabused them of this naive opinion by playing the deafening arias from an unknown Scottish operetta I had recorded from my hotel window at around 3:00 AM, performed while kicking an empty beer bottle by a group of heavily tattooed and inebriated men in pleated skirts returning from the *Irish Pub*, which is just around the corner on *Liliová*, right across the street from the *Pussy Bar*. However, a friend, old enough to recall the final years of the First republic and World War II, insisted that "the *genius loci* was first trampled by the Nazis and, with the systemic neglect of the Communist era, it had no time to recover". While she agreed that the tourist plague is further grinding it into the ground, "at least the buildings are getting repaired and shops have opened up, there is some color and life where it was so dreary ever since the German armies entered 60 years ago".

I had noticed that something was wrong a few years ago. I had been taking pictures of the passing of time since I first took up photography at age 14. The block of four streets near the Old Town Square that I had been circling since the summer of 1998 was the source of dozens of still lives depicting the memorializing effect of natural decay in the walls, drainpipes and the reversed reflections discoverable in the gray patina of broken windowpanes. Then, one day, I noticed that there was "nothing left to photograph" (*už není co fotografovat*). I told my friend. "Of course there isn't…" he replied. "The walls and nooks have no stories left to tell." The disturbing feeling was followed by an equally disturbing thought. I figured that "someone had stolen it". It seemed clear to me that the encroach-

[2] MacCannell (2002, p. 146–151).

ing tourism (broadly conceived) more than the effects of urban renewal were to blame. The hordes may be attracted to the beauty, the sense of unspoiled layers of architectural history, and the repetitious performances of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to be followed by several half-liters of beer. A familiar sight around the globe, the stream seems endless. Today's thousands will tire their feet following the Royal Path in both directions like ants and leave with a few fake souvenirs (an oxymoron of sorts) and several gigabits worth of mementos. Several thousand more will pass through tomorrow.

In 2007, apparently, tourism accounted for 11% of the Czech Republic's GDP. According to the estimates of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 million foreigners visited for a day or more of whom some 90% traveled through Prague and 90% of those, about 7.2 million, will have walked the Royal Path. For comparison, the population of the country was about 11 million and Prague had fewer than 2 million registered residents. The Royal or Coronation Path stretches from the Powder Gate in the Old Town, across the Old Town Square, pass the former Jewish Quarter through the narrow streets to cross over Charles Bridge, and continues up the hill to the Hradčany castle. It is literally packed with visitors of whom, it seems, but a trickle will venture into a side street only to turn back. It is a revealing sight. A couple standing alone, outcasts from this rush, is looking to match the street sign with their maps so that they can trust their actual location. Funny thing about tourism, we crave other places to get away from our own but getting lost is a terrifying thought appropriate in fairy tales or adventure movies we are drawn into from the safety of our chairs. Will pocket GPS turn the tables and make "getting lost" into another 'added value'?

The Blunder

In May 2008, I spent two weeks in Prague barricaded in "the nicest hotel in the noisiest place" of the city I grew up in and continue to claim as my own. The point was to observe tourism first hand. Playing tourist at home, in places that harbor strong memories that fail to ease the jarring present, is a perverse exercise in participant-observation. It was also illuminating.

Prior to our meeting this spring, I had been in correspondence with Kateřina, an architectural historian, over her work on the razing of the Jewish Ghetto and the district of *Josefov*. Between the late 1890's and first years of the 20th century Prague underwent a major reconstruction and expansion and the threat to the *genius loci* was a centerpiece of heated debates at the time. As we sat amidst the noisy tourist trappings of the Royal Path, Kateřina smiled at my insistence that the tourists had stolen the *genius loci*. I had suggested that perhaps the historical Old Town provided a kind of theatre stage, on lease to the global tourist industry for the performance of local tourism, and offered *façadism* as a term I coined to

denote the phenomenon and its most distinctive feature, the freshly renovated buildings that presented their fronts as stage props. Her agreement with my description was emphatic. In her opinion "first, the facial uplifts of the old buildings are not, historically speaking, always the best choices and, second, the magistrate is much more concerned with the looks and less with whether internal reconstructions result in significant loss of historically invaluable architectural designs, such as vaulted ceilings, stairwells or the spatial disposition of rooms". As for the sense of loss, the co-editor of the multivolume "Disappeared Prague" (*Zmizelá Praha*)[3] observed that when she looked at many of the more recent buildings that lined the streets of the Old Town – for example, the 1903 Secession style building across the street[4] from where we sat – all she saw were the buildings that stood there before. She had not lived in the 19th century yet her feelings of loss and nostalgia and the visual sense of how things had been before were just as strong. In what way does it matter that she was drawing on her expert knowledge of paintings and photographs from the time? Clearly, she must have access to another world.

Shortly after I had returned from Prague, I received the following email from her: "I have been thinking about the 'stolen Prague'. I recalled an argument I had approximately 10 years ago with one young art historian. We argued about the *genius loci*, that is, about that feeling of a kind of infatuation, of being transfixed or even bewitched, that one is at times overtaken by when in contact with a particular place. The gist of our disagreement had to do with whether the *genius loci* emanates from that place or from the person. My colleague maintained that a *genius loci* is an integral part or attribute of the configuration, the appearance, or formation of the place, that it is, therefore, not transferable and is always present in that place. It is one of its attributes. I maintained, to the contrary, that *genius loci* is an immaterial product of a relationship that develops in a person in contact with this place and that he can also carry it away within him, for example, in the form of a spiritual tie. As I go over the basis of the argument again in my mind, I realize how trivial this matter is, since no one has ever seen the *genius loci*, and it is therefore impossible to catch it, lock it in a cage, examine it and determine its genetic origins, whether it was lurking "in a given place in order to ambush a person" or lurking "in a person in order to ambush a place". But, in any case, if my version is correct, it could provide one of the keys to explaining your feeling of a 'stolen Prague'… "

My answer followed a day later: "Your conversation with a colleague art historian speaks beautifully to an important aspect of *genius loci*, that is, to the problem of its essence (existence) and 'presence'. From a scholarly, that is to say analytic point of view, I agree with your conception from which stems my own attempt at

[3] Nakladatelství Paseka, 2002.

[4] *Dům u modré štiky*, 1903, Karlova ul. 20, Praha 1 (Staré Město).

capturing the various expressions of this concept. Of course, the nearly pathological states of nostalgia (whether spatial or temporal) corroborates that it is a state of a relationship of a person to a place, though I would venture to go further and claim that it is an intersubjective (let us say 'interpersonal') relationship and not a merely solitary and private one. What however is so interesting about the whole thing, is indeed the very anchoring of this *genius loci* 'in situ' (hence the expression '*genius loci*'), its objectification and concretization that is further substantiated by a 'discursive practice' insisting 'that it really is that way!' A hermetic Prague would be a good example. In other words, I am of the opinion that, heuristically, your (and my) position is more valuable but that the opinion of your colleague is 'real' (if not true) in the sense that it supports a manner of seeing the world as it is given and that 'matters' more. He does not doubt it, therefore it is that way and others will confirm it. […]"

That was in July. I now take my response to contain an important blunder. Note, that while it recognizes a phenomenological position in which "world" figures as the intersubjective horizon of a taken for granted life, it also insists on privileging an analytic model that emphasizes the intersubjective construction over the construct itself. The result is an oddly asymmetrical dissonance that grants the colleague a self-evidential reality while reserving a positive truth-value for Kateřina and myself. Leaving aside, for a moment at least, whether the distinction between reality and truth is logically sustainable or whether I would have done better to speak of being "right" rather than "true" (since in neither case is truth at issue while "rightness" is in both), the blunder forces open first a dilemma and then the possibility of an alternative way of describing the situation at hand.

The Ontological Landscape

Am I not writing about the sense of "belonging"? A figurative reading would certainly suggest as much and a discursive analysis that would place these claims in their broader socio-cultural context would help flesh out this interpretation by, perhaps following Peirce, treating the notion of *genius loci* as a "qualisign". After all, my exchange with Kateřina draws attention to the close association between states of longing, loss and nostalgia and states of mind, expressions and emotions if you will, that are as real as they are also poetically fashioned. Moreover, we would all agree, though it did not come up this time, "those who do not belong have pushed out those that were at home here, such that we feel that we don't belong here anymore, the place is not ours". This is manifested in several way, the dramatic loss of permanent residents due, in part, to the post-communist restitution process (itself a sordid story) and to the boom in property values, in part to the alienation of non-resident locals (us) or to the fact that most all of the businesses catering to foreign tourists are serviced and often owned by foreigners

(*cizinci*). Russian, Ukrainian, Slovak and Italian, among others. Tours from different countries pass each other in ignorance, within their own travel size sociocultural cocoons, traipsing through the quaint stage-front of the historical city. They buy souvenirs. Little Kafkas and Good Soldier Švejks and clay Golem salt and pepper shakers, and marionettes, thousands of marionettes of dragons, and multiples of stupid Hans, the wicked witch, of Gorbachov hanging next to Charlie Chaplin and Don Quijote, while the local residents make themselves invisible as they rush through with a distinctly different gate, knowingly, with a sense of purpose, eyes cast down. Has historical Prague succumbed to a frontier mentality with a landscape corrupted for an exploitation in which both sides, vendors and tourists, are 'outsiders'?[5]

To treat the expression *genius loci* as a figure of speech is to accommodate for the otherwise incongruous in our world. However, as Umberto Eco has argued persuasively,[6] metaphors outline not other worlds but, at best (I would add) suggest other versions of the world as we know it. As much as they may draw on the shared familiarity with possible worlds, fictional or not, their aim is to suggest poetically, rightly or wrongly, that an actual individual or state of affairs has certain properties. In that way, it may also aim to subvert. In our case, the two versions can stand next to each other, perhaps in disagreement that is reconciled by pointing out their very different noetic and moral claims and very different truth-values.

On the other hand, to treat the notion of *genius loci* literally is to treat the disagreement between the two interlocutors as a clash between counterfactual statements and entertain the existence of other possible worlds. This somewhat daring alternative is heuristically useful and suggestive of modal ways we could describe ontologically disorienting phenomena. In one world, our actual world, *genius loci* is the figurative expression for a culturally recognized sense of place in a familiar, secular world. In Kateřina's words, quoted above, "no one has ever seen the *genius loci* and it is therefore impossible to catch it, lock it in a cage, examine it and determine its genetic origins". The case is resolved as suggested, as a soulful and conservative commentary on the destructive consequences of tourism and unregulated growth. On the other hand, with many worlds, the one just mentioned is but the actual world with the others existing within its manifold, all of them possible yet some fictional, fused in a variety of manners and therefore governed by very distinct rules of access. The result is one particular case of what has become an increasingly familiar occurrence, a heterogeneous ontological landscape characterized by a plethora of coexisting worlds in a dense,

[5] For an interesting discussion of this concept see Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005).

[6] Eco (1990).

knotted like network of possible and actual links as well as complete disconnects.[7] Of course, a personal library of randomly shelved books, each its own world with inter-textual links to some others and to others not at all, would also match this description. However, so does Times Square and, my argument goes, so does the Royal Path of Prague. With distinction and with a fundamental difference: the ontological landscape includes a physical one, a cityscape, the intersection of *Karlova*, *Liliová* and *Seminářská*, to be precise, that join to open up into a small square. To extend the bookshelf analogy: the shelf only supports the books, their physical condition, and unless one of the texts is also about library bookshelves, the shelf itself is not implicated ontologically or epistemologically in their reading. However, you can picture these individual texts implicated in a myriad of semantically significant ways in a physical landscape! From a seemingly straightforward, predicative relationship, best represented by the tourist guidebook, to a demarcated co-presence of the holy scripture, available 'inside' the church of St. Clement up the street, or finally to the many images and signs that decorate the door or window portals along the path and throughout the city of Prague. Their meanings, mostly allegorical, could seem obvious and arresting, if at all noticed. Perhaps that may be their purpose! They are said to be the veiled voices, entrance doors as much as enactments of the hermetic sciences, another world that maps the quest for the philosophers' stone on a geographical map of Europe. Simply the physical extension of a *metaphysique*, the Royal Path now corresponds to the most significant of the astrological coordinates, the East-West axis, that defines the very founding of the ancient city of Prague, the invincible source of its *genius loci.* Fortunately, for you and me, the mouths of these books are mute (*mutus uber, mutus liber)*. Except for the few initiates, such as my friends Ivo and Martin and Vašek, whose reading skills follow another practice…

This same physical landscape has become a stage front full of storefronts, set in charming twists and turns, for those who have come from afar and for whom the guide and map offer the key that enables and structures their immersion – while also acting the part of Ariadne's thread – it comes across as complete even as they only see it in fragments. Suggestive of world of fiction, there is no "other side" or "around the corner" or "another part" to the story not told.[8] In the modal

[7] Alfred Schutz points to the destabilizing quality of modern man's ontological overload in his discussion of "multiple realities".

[8] The limits of this analogy are important as well: I have often heard my friends refer to the scene in Prague as "Disneyland". The comparison is telling, of the artificiality, transience, flashiness and of the distance, they keep from it. The description misses the point, however, if modeled on possible world semantics. For the world of Disney, the fictional world best characterized by the movies and its characters, is complete and *a-priori* to the entertainment park which assumes it and is meant to enact it. It is also, de facto, two-dimensional like the Hollywood stage sets. In contrast, cityscape tourism,

model I am suggesting, history, literary fiction, folklore or biography (turned into marionettes) are not just commodity fetishes. They are also here to stand in, I should say "hang in", for their referred to identities that continue to live fuller lives in their particular "home" worlds. Worlds which they cannot leave except, of course, concretized as tchachkas. The tour guides can talk history as so many stories, full of predicative claims, their finger pointing like a needle, weaving bite size truths back into the facades. What then is tourism, semantically speaking? An activity and global industry that works on the premise that a possible world re/presented (as advertised) through the mediating process of heavily textured objects, is made actual and fully accessible through a travel "to" i. e. by pursuing the referent. Tourist sites, in turn, designed to offer the experience of authenticity (though not exclusively!) are that actual world, again highly textured through the employment of intensional devices, guided, literally or otherwise, to provide a relatively structured movement throughout the visit.

However, this does not make tourism by definition a text or narrative, though it may include such segments! My argument with narrative theories of culture is straightforward. The mundane world,[9] is not a narrative, one's immersion in it is life itself. Its flow as well as its fullness is not, for the most part, an intensionally structured, semiotically mediated reality.[10] Fictional narratives are certainly a major component of a tourist's entertainment (e. g., visits to the opera, street performances, etc.) and constructing travel narratives "on the fly" in anticipation of their future recounting, is certainly a typical tourist's mindset. These activities are neither exclusive to nor exhaustive of tourism. Both, in fact, also inform "our" claims on the same place. The point is that to us this tourist version of the actual world is mostly inaccessible. "We" are not tourists here and, therefore, lack the appropriate perspective although we are fully capable of it elsewhere as tourists, of course. Instead, the same geographic location is embodied by us as a place that is not limited and closed but rather a part of an infinitely larger sense of location in the city and one's life in it – after all, I am usually "on my way", I know "the lay of the land", including many, if not all, of its worlds. We hope to keep it that way. The irony of the ontological shift rests with the distance gained from this

even if staged, takes place in an actual world to which there is no "before" except of course, and this is decisive if best saved for another discussion, the glossy advertising, the travel magazine review, the promise of a good time to be had by all. Furthermore, the possibility of exploration and making alternative claims is implicit in all travel, whether real or hyper-real.

[9] I prefer Jan Patočka's more telling usage *přirozený svět* or "natural world" (as in "obvious").

[10] "Our semantics rest on one basic ontological assumption: to exist actually is to exist independently of semiotic representation; to exist fictionally means to exist as a possible constituted by semiotic means." Doležel (1998)

disenfranchisement. In the words of Thomas Pavel [where the] "actual worlds appear to be undoubtedly real, complete and consistent, […] the fictional worlds are intrinsically incomplete and inconsistent […]"[11] Whereas the former denies that even the actual is presupposed, the immersion in the latter is enabled by an invitation to suspend disbelief, such that its estranging qualities are believable and enchanting. Yet if, when I am passing through "my place", I do not recognize it as undoubtedly real and, more importantly, I am struck by its inconsistency and incompleteness to the point of feeling disturbed, then something about this world has changed. In this altered landscape, the place that we knew now serves up a grab bag of donut hole like thrills you can consume and peak through into yet another world. On the other hand, the place as we knew it continues to flourish in the possible worlds of memory and history, fiction and Hermeticism.

A dozen chemical toilets stood on the Old Town Square in neat rows directly across the *Palác Kinských*: where Kafka's father had his store, where little Franz went to school, where I have always imagined him writing the *Letter to his Father*, where, in 1948, president Gottwald staged the public celebration of the Communist takeover. He stood there on the balcony waving to the crowd and smiling, next to his friend and colleague Clementis, yet another scapegoat Jew soon to be executed, airbrushed from the photograph and erased from history only to find another life in the fictional world of Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. The cacophony continues, I guess. For visitors badly needed conveniences, for us the ugly boxes exude a scent of irony. Do they have special windows, we wonder, like Leibniz's monads that offer views of other possible worlds.

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