

Imagined Place, Encountered Place: Opposition in Platform-Mediated Travel Writing

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Abstract

In contemporary mobility, travel increasingly begins prior to movement. Short-form videos, blogs and platform-circulated rankings produce condensed narrative templates through which destinations are framed and experienced before physical encounter. These forms do not merely inform travellers about a place; they pre-select what is meaningful within it, establishing expectations about atmosphere, behaviour and value. The traveller therefore arrives not in an unknown environment but within an already interpreted space where attention is oriented toward confirmation rather than exploration. Because encounters are brief and experience is rapidly translated into narration, impressions are recorded before duration allows them to be revised. The relationship between anticipation and experience is thus shaped by prior narrative and limited observation. This paper examines that opposition between anticipated place and lived place through travel writing about post-communist Albania, asking how pre-mediated expectation structures perception, interaction and narration. Instead of understanding travel as a direct meeting between cultures, the paper treats the encounter as temporally structured in advance. Online images present a place as coherent and immediately readable, while the lived environment unfolds more slowly and contains details that do not fit this prior image. Under conditions of accelerated tourism consumption, visits are brief and impressions quickly become stories; travellers therefore resolve discrepancy through recurring narrative strategies: framing the place as belonging to another historical moment, evaluating practices in terms of authenticity, or relying on local interlocutors whose explanations modify initial assumptions. The analysis compares circulating representations with everyday experience in order to examine how prior narratives organise the encounter and influence narrative authority between visitor and inhabitant. After the visit, online reviews stabilise these interpretations by turning experience into judgement, where individual accounts may challenge official images while simultaneously reinforcing shared evaluative norms. The paper argues that contemporary travel functions less as discovery than as confirmation: experience does not simply produce representation but unfolds under temporal and mediatic conditions that limit its revision (Urry, 1990; MacCannell, 1976; Rosa, 2013; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Platform environments organise perception in advance while also accelerating its narration, transforming encounter into rapid evaluation rather than gradual understanding. Travel becomes a comparison between what was expected and what is encountered, and it is within this discrepancy that cultural meaning is produced and stabilised through networked judgements and shared interpretative frames (Abidin, 2016; Zulli, 2018).

Keywords: travel writing, pre-mediated travel narratives, platformed tourism perception