

**"'What a picturesque village': producing tourist spaces in North-West Romania"**

(Very early draft!! Please, do not quote without author's permission)

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**Introduction**

The theme of this paper deals mainly with the spaces in which the tourism experience occurs in a Romanian village (Botiza<sup>1</sup>) that offers a form of rural tourism since 1994. Through this paper I wish to show how locality is manipulated, acted, re-visited and produced (Appadurai 2001) in order to become "tourist locality". In fact, on the one side, the landscape - as increases its value - becomes "an essential and distinctive part of the tourist offer" (Lanzani 2003: 217), on the other side, places, objects and practises are re-thought in order to attract tourists.

As emphasized in anthropological literature, the process of encounter and (more or less conscious) auto-observation bring a social group to observe the known - landscape included - with a certain detachment. This allows the gaze to distance itself from those characteristics which are more difficult to see from the inside. Through foreigners - whose gaze is not used to certain place - a community is able to see clearer what normally, in everyday practises, local gaze does not notice.

In Botiza tourism brings local people to re-examine themselves, "we are trying to explore what we have here", says the Mayor, and with the term "explore" she means the need to see themselves with new eyes, which also take into account the watchful eyes of the tourists.

The "potential" of the community and of the place, the "hidden treasures", are first explored and then discovered, after the contact with the external world, finally it gets moulded, styled and re-visited. This complex process - which gives raise to contradictions and paradoxes - will be discussed in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Botiza is one of the municipalities of Maramureş, a mostly mountainous region which occupies a vast area of the Western Carpathians in the North-West of Romania. In the village there are about 4000 inhabitants, approximately 900 families, of which 30-35 work directly with tourists (some with agencies some without), other are indirectly connected with the tourism industry and a host tourists occasionally.

## **Tourism landscape**

When we want to consider the relationship between a landscape, the population living there and the tourists, we need to think about the nets – both physical and symbolic ones – which relates these three elements. The picture that comes out is a relationship between place and people. A relationship that refers to the language of the obliquity that ethnography is able to analyze.

According to Urry (2003), it is not possible to talk about landscape without considering group mobility and environmental features. The actual position of anthropological literature considers space as a social product and the relationship between community and territory in a dynamic and historically contextualized way (Lai 2000). The idea of movement, transformation, change, recalls an idea of environment as something that is not fixed but always 'in construction'.

Therefore, landscape is no more a concept linked to the eye over the other senses, it is rather understandable with all human senses. Landscape has changed from "object of contemplation" (Urry 2003) into "a scenario of practises" (Ingold 2001).

Through ethnographic observation, my analyses intends to follow some of the shifts, the changes – both physical and in terms of relationships – that bring to the construction of a specific tourism locality.

In Botiza, as in the case of a number of other tourist localities, some landscape features are "valorised" by practices that come about via a complex synergy which compare the local and the external and that modify a given environment into a "scenario" of a tourism landscape.

In order to introduce my fieldwork I chose these pictures (ILLUSTRATION LEFT OUT) taken from tourism brochures because they are particularly appropriate to show how the tourist gaze is allowed 'to reach' the landscape since it imagines it, before watching it. Those pictures/images show selected landscape features that allow the tourist to get a picture in his/her mind. The overlap of images that show a wooden door, which opens toward a field where there are hay stacks and a wooden church has already the characteristics largely diffused in this region. Characteristics that become the elements of the local patrimony, or the "tourism potential", as defined by the Major, that is what the tourist is going to see in his/her tourist experience, in its/hers holiday in Maramureș. Or rather, what the tourist is also welcomed to see.

## **Narratives**

In Maramureș villages are presented to tourists as literally "come out of a fairy-tale". For example, the Belgian association 'Operation Villages Roumain', which manages several tourism projects, produced a leaflet to promote tourism in Botiza which quotes: "Many Maramureș villages appear to be out of a fairy tale frozen in time with men and women dressed in traditional folk costumes, with many small farms worked by hand and quaint wooden houses and churches". Expressions such as "a dream-like village", a "fairy-tale village", "I feel I have ended up in a fairy-tale town" are quite common in tourist's descriptions about Botiza. During my fieldwork, I got used to those exclamations in the conversations with tourists. In the collective imagination of the European tourists I met, Botiza, seems to have many of the characteristics of childhood fairy tales' landscapes and the tourism experience is enriched with a mythicised habitat.

In tourist narratives there is not – or very rarely – trace of evidence of changes and manipulations from those who, in that landscape, live and work not only today but also in the past. Tourists also do not take into account that its beauty, which makes it

look as if it has “come out of a fairy tale<sup>2</sup>” (as can be seen in a brochure of the O.V.R.), is also the result of the work of the men and women who work and have worked there in order to make the best profits possible from their farming land.

Numerous tourism researches oppose local people and tourists. On the one side, locals are thought to perceive their habitat as managed/manipulated by men, on the other side, tourists are thought to think of it as wilderness and to consider it a sort of everyone's land. In this sense, tourists act freely in foreign place, since the landscape is there for them to observe, to get pictures and eventually to appreciate (Aime 2005). This analysis can be frequently verified in a lot of contexts, though I find it too simplistic and it does not consider the plurality of positions that everyone has about issues such as “conservation”, “authenticity”, “valorisation”, ...

Data from this ethnography show how in this tourism locality two experiential spheres coexist, both are quite evident and endowed with specific practices and vocabulary. In these two spheres both hosts and guests play their role. Therefore, they are not in two opposites sides but they share – or, at least, try to – places, practises and discourses. In my fieldwork, hosts and guests meet continually, either for oddity, either for necessity.

### **Transformation policies**

Tourists and locals use narratives that set Botiza in an ideal situation - which preserves a past that has not a precise temporal reference - that sometimes refers to mythical past. They both create a landscape through a sort of mirror game, which reflects what one expects from the other.

However, the local organisation, the economic policies and the increasing tourism demand drive various actors (institutional, tourist intermediaries, etc.) to carry out profound and dynamic changes in that locality. The ethnography that I carried out in Botiza, by returning several times (between 1999 and 2001) in the field, allowed me to observe the changes as they occurred. Some were quite evident others less so. A lot of them should be related to the fact that Botiza has not remained immobile, but has changed and organised itself in order to better deal with tourists' demand for certain standards. The municipality has invested in public works such as a new road, public lighting, telephone cables, water pumps, local people work in order to ameliorate their houses facades, build wooden gates, decorate gardens. There is an intense activity in order to modernise the town and make it as welcoming and as enjoyable as possible. In this work it will be referred to hosts' practises of manipulation of the houses, both outside and inside.

Quite often, host families invest tourist incomes in the reconstruction of their houses, in order to make them as comfortable and inviting as possible. In order to do so, the hosts consider tourists' tastes and needs. In general, the guests are particularly attracted to a “rustic” style. This is the reason why the practices of manipulation of the internal and external spaces take into account the tourist's gaze, that is culturally shaped (Urry 1995, Bonadei 2003). Therefore, the modernisation that is necessarily carried out for the restoration and decor, is done so as to maintain the characteristics that are considered traditional.

The houses where tourists are lodged are masonry and have either gas or wooden heating, running water and lighting, unlike the majority of the village houses. While at the very beginning of the tourism activity these equipments were the basic requirements for hosting tourists, little by little also these houses have been changed

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<sup>2</sup> This expression is part of the way many tourists describe Botiza, but it is also a slogan used in a tourist brochure produced by O.V.R.: “Many Maramureş villages appear to be out of a fairy tale frozen in time with men and women dressed in traditional folk costumes, with many small farms worked by hand and quaint wooden houses and churches”.

both aesthetically and structurally. Nowadays, people use wood, which represents the traditional element of the local building trade, rather than concrete and iron, particularly in the construction of balconies, gates and in decors. The same tendency can be observed regarding the exteriors and interiors of the houses. In fact, wealthy people replace industrially produced gates and furniture with new wooden ones, handmade according to traditional designs, which in the past were common in the region. Interior decoration too is facing a similar fashion/style shift: from industrial-type furniture to wooden hand-built furniture. There has been a shift also concerning the production and use of the woollen tapestry padding - both for floors and for walls - which was traditionally important for the heating and isolation of rural houses and are now produced as carpets for tourists<sup>3</sup>.

Another interesting example is the structural change of the houses where tourists are lodged: rooms may change their use; or people may build extra rooms to be used as dining room – even detached from the original house. I myself participated in some of the works of restoration of a house, for example I painted the door of a new dining room. The family I lived with during the summer of 2000, decided to change the use of some of the rooms in order to host more tourists. The room on the first floor that was used so far as dining room was made an extra bedroom while a bigger room on the ground floor - that till then had been used as a shed - was restored so that it could be used as a dining room. This room was separated from the other part of the house, because it only had an external entry from the courtyard and therefore did not have an entry into the kitchen nor into the other rooms. Once this inconvenience of having only an external entrance was overcome, the room became quite pleasant: the internal walls were plastered in a light-blue colour, the old front door restored and embellished with glass and painted in the same brown colour as the other casings.

There are a lot of other cases where tourists eat in rooms arranged for this purpose. Houses are made comfortable and charming through features that re-call the rural environment, such as wood and woollen carpets. However, some nice and cozy rooms have no structural use - a part from hosting and charming tourists - they stand apart from the house, as a sort of side-room, or second dining room, they are separated from the kitchen and would result uncomfortable for the everyday use. Most of the times they are built outside the house (ILLUSTRATION LEFT OUT), sometimes they are one with the showroom where souvenirs and art-crafts are displayed. Or else, some dining rooms are used as “stage” where folklore groups may play in traditional costumes and entertain tourists.

On the other hand, the farmers’ houses that have not been “tourist transformed” seem less charming to the tourist’s gaze (Urry 1995) because the old wooden trunks, of which they are made, are blackened by age, and the farmers are not interested in adorning them with plants and ornaments. Nevertheless, tourists themselves define them as “picturesque” and appreciate them as part of the local colour. What tourists appreciate as “typical and rural” is then a local interpretation of Western urban designs, which are enacted by Botiza’s residents knowing for certain that they will be appreciated by tourists.

## **Tourism/landscape management**

We can clearly see from the words of the Mayor of Botiza<sup>4</sup> that the problem of the local management of tourism is a question that closely concerns the local politicians

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<sup>3</sup> Basically, they are both hand-woven but the so-called “tourist-carpet” is dyed with natural extracts colours and represents different patterns.

<sup>4</sup> “For our country, tourism is an exceptional solution to the economic problems that in recent years have more or less concerned the whole of Romania. This is why as the Mayor of Botiza I have decided to concentrate many activities in the area of tourism. I have tried to fix up the infrastructures, to bring running water to houses, so that they could all have their own bathrooms, with sufficient water. I have

and administrators and which encourages the Mayor to work in order to promote tourism by operating, in the first place, on the landscape. Considering tourism as a potential economic solution for a country or a circumscribed area is an idea widely diffused. This assumption is particularly important in the discourse of sustainable, green and fair tourism. However, in this context we need to consider the presence of the local management, which is not separated from external anchorages.

In Botiza, since the beginning of the tourism activity, local community has worked driven by a desire of economic growth, both in imitation of neighbour villages, where the tourist industry was developed earlier, both enchanted by a dream of easy money through the promotion of patrimonializable resources already widely diffused locally, such as the landscape immediately identified as resource - to be managed in order to be then showed and somehow sold.

Terms such as “valorization” and “conservation” cross-refer to complex and multifaceted issues. In particular, in a place where tourism potential is mainly constituted by the landscape - as the case of Botiza - tourists arrivals make it necessary to: on the one side, organize and manage those that cross the very landscape and that take advantage of it even though they do not belong to it (therefore strangers, guests, tourists); and on the other side, protect the characterizing features of the landscape.

These targets can be ambiguous in themselves since they aim both at conserving and at transforming, as for the instance of the new dining room examined before where folk groups are invited to sing traditional Christmas songs *colinde* all year long, as a tourist attraction. Ambiguities, paradoxes and ironies are largely diffused in the tourism phenomenon. If, on one hand, making the place more “accessible and practicable” to tourists facilitates the access of those who, though seeking a rural environment, are unable to give up some of the comforts of modern living, especially those comforts that urban living has made indispensable; on the other hand, the countryside that many tourists seek, and are attracted by, needs to be devoid of elements of modernisation too evident and visible.

Whereas in the narratives there is a desire for the search of “uncontaminated nature” that becomes, in most cases, a tourist experience which allows the tourist to re-live experiences linked to the past; in the practices an organisation can be observed that leaves nothing to fate, that is mindful of detail. This can be seen from municipal policies that aim to encourage those who host tourists, to the reconstruction of public and private works, to domestic decisions concerning the organisation of spaces and decoration of the internal and external areas, etc. As we have seen from the examples, some of the aspects of the town and local life are purposefully “valorised” and emphasised by the language and images of tourism advertising, while other aspects are maintained in the private sphere, and constitute the backstage (Maccannell 1989) that cannot be shared with tourists.

Thus, it is a “conversion” of the observing eye that takes place in this community. It is a conversion of abilities, of visions of the world, of capital, which implies a “re-conversion” of knowledge, practices and narratives.

## Final remarks

Nowadays we know that for tourist purposes places can become museums of themselves, where ways of living survive time and changes (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). We also know that every effort of conservation requires people and landscape

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tried to make the roads practicable in order that automobiles can drive from place to place in Botiza. I have worked on the public illumination of Botiza, and on the direct telephone services, because otherwise, here we would be isolated” (Ioana, Romanian).

transformations (Padiglione 2007). Chambers (2000) underlines how places specific nature<sup>5</sup> is the element that makes a place worth to live in or not, charming or not to tourists.

One of anthropology's tasks should be to demonstrate that "landscape identities are always changing and positioning themselves in specific contexts" (Papa 2007). Migration and tourism deal with the movement of millions of people on global scale and have the power to speed these processes producing hybrid practises – sometimes even paradoxes – which are worth analysing in order to enact landscape politics able to make landscapes "good to live in and to visit".

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<sup>5</sup> Chambers (2000: 116) claims that some places, such as Scotland, "serve as powerful symbols of locality that seem immune to any attempt to alienate them from their contexts".

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