Virtualities in the New Tourism Landscape: The Case of the Anne Frank House Virtual Reality Tours and of the Visualizations of the Berlin Wall in the Cold War Context

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Visualizations of tourist sites – by video cameras, multi-media equipment, 3D scanners and other forms of representation usable with advanced computer technology – have increasingly been included in web sites to promote visitation. In many cases, potential visitors can take a full or partial virtual tour of the exterior and/or the interior of a site. The purpose of this paper is to assess the importance of virtual reality tours for the present tourism landscape. Two site examples are chosen to demonstrate the argument that carefully crafted imagined places existing only in virtual reality will become a more common practice.

Since 2010 a virtual reality tour of the interior of the Anne Frank House has become available to millions of Anne Frank fans. The main objective has been to allow the potential visitor on the internet to enter “The Secret Annex” where Anne Frank wrote her diary 1942 – 1944. The award winning virtual tour of the historic site includes the voice of a young Anne Frank narrator who gives personal information about what she did in a particular room of the house the visitor on the internet chooses to see. The surfer on the internet is invited to explore the peculiar lay-out and architecture of a narrow three story house in an older mixed neighborhood, now a main tourist attraction in Amsterdam.

Little is left of the Berlin Wall which divided the city from 1961 and 1989. The grim reality of the Cold War was quickly removed in 1990/1991 and implementation of plans for the re-unification of West and East Berlin became a paramount task. As a result, few sites have remained for the commemoration of the victims of the Wall. Yet, there is continued interest in this dark chapter of the Cold War and a multitude of offers are available for tourists in present day Berlin to experience reminders of the German Democratic Republic era (East German State 1949-1990). In particular, the Berlin Wall has caught the attention and fascination of many visitors. Thus, there are several web sites available for virtual tours of the Wall. One of the most complete renderings and virtual tour of the situation has been achieved by artist Yadegar Asisi. He carefully reconstructed a Berlin-Kreuzberg site right next to the Wall on a fictitious autumn day in the 1980s. Visitors to “The Wall” black box commercial site near ‘Checkpoint Charlie’ are placed on a platform to view “the banal routineness and subtle horror of normality in the divided city”. What makes this virtual panorama a unique addition to the Berlin tourism landscape is the illusion the vantage point of the viewer creates. The viewer finds himself/herself only a stone’s throw away from “the death strips and border fortifications dividing East and West Berlin, East and West Germany, Capitalism and Communism”.