



## ON THE ROAD WITH A SMARTPHONE

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This article aims at discussing the changes of modern travel and a traveller, arising from mobile technology. As research suggests, nowadays smartphones are more likely to be worn as garments than carried as tools, therefore mobile technology is distinguished by an unusually intimate relationship with the holder. The article is concerned with the consequences of this relationship, or, to be more precise, with the change in the concept of a digital image, increased confidence in its verisimilitude, altered signs of an authentic relationship with the reality and an illusion of a specific location, paradoxically emphasised by mobile technology. As it turns out, the traveller's attention on the road with a smartphone is focused on himself rather than on the surrounding unseen reality.

Keywords: body, communication, digital image, journey, location, text, travel.

### Introduction

What is travel? According to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, travel is probably the most significant spatial category, because it can be related through genealogical ties to almost all the most important concepts of spatial experience, such as home, staying abroad, crossing the border, departure, arrival, etc. (Derrida, Malabou 2004: 17).

In addition to spatial semantics, as Derrida has it, travel is the act of making actual moment privileged (Derrida, Malabou 2004: 31). A journey is always happening *now* and it finishes upon arrival. Therefore, the traveller is the one who in no way settles for the actual moment and feels that the essence constantly slips from his view; and to be the closest to the essence means to be on the road. Discontent with the actual location links a traveller with a thinker, as both of them are searching for something new and unexperienced in a certain sense forsaking themselves to fulfill their dreams about something else. In other words, a traveller is the one who leaves the original source and often only for the reason to discover that source again (Derrida, Malabou 2004: 26).

Consequently, travel is a state of a permanent encounter with Another and sustention of experience and intellectual life in the state of constant change and performativity. “Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road”, as it

is put in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (Kerouac 1999: 183). It is difficult to grasp or reflect the actual moment, because it is too volatile and collapses, dies immediately after it has been fixed in any form or embeded in the media. However, paradoxically, the moment of death makes it possible to get back to the essence of travel at the intensity, inaccessible to the traveller himself.

The article discusses the changes of a traveller and travel, determined by mobile technology, that is constantly on the road in accordance with its essential function. It is mobile technology that intervenes into the processes of travel experience mediation and in this way creates completely new practices of movement, environment, self-experience and its communication.

### Travelling via writing, image and network

After having told what this article is about, it has to be mentioned what it is not about. This article does not analyze the very actual moment of a journey and its subject; it focuses on the situations, where travel performativity is suspended, and the movement turns into a becalmed wordy story, travel notes, photographs or filmed cinematographic fragments. It is likely that the traveller's choice to capture his experience in one or another way is important to understand the journey itself, its nature and the traveller's relationship with the repeatedly encountered Another. However, the article does not discuss the historical panorama of the ways to capture travel experiences and diachronic changes of the travelling subject. As can be seen from the title of the article, the research focuses on the specifics of anthropology of a traveller *with a smartphone*. Nevertheless, a couple of historical illustrations as a background to the formulated problem cannot be avoided. I would like to remind a couple of classical cases of a journey for the sake of a description, a journey via written text and a journey for the sake of a text: travel notes of an American writer Ian Frazier *Great Plains* (1989) and John Steinbeck's novel *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962).

With regard to Frazier's work, it is necessary to remind that the *Great Plains* in the culture of the United States have predetermined the creation of plenty of great American stories<sup>1</sup>. That is the place where the great Indian chiefs Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse have come from and have been perpetuated in dozens of texts; Billy the Kid went on the rampage here, and a buffalo hunter and a *showman* Buffalo Bill created and popularized cowboy romanticism. However, in the second half of the 20th century the *Great Plains* had neither heroic cowboys, nor herds of buffaloes remaining. Americans themselves no longer wandered in the former source of great stories, which turned into an inhospitable province. According to Frazier, they just flew past at an altitude of dozen kilometers. Nobody read the texts that arose from the aura of the *Great Plains* anymore. Location and associated cowboy culture were no longer the space in which the journeys took place.

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida's saying that "America (of 1970s) is a deconstruction" illustrates how a location and an abstract concept can coincide (Derrida, Malabou 2004: 96).

Frazier dedicated two years to travelling in this area and his novel *Great Plains* became a bestseller. When reading this book it is obvious, that the journey took the route through the previous texts devoted to the *Great Plains*, and not actually through the geographical area. It shows the new residents of the *Great Plains* and the new heroes, arising from an infinite emptiness after the disappearance of cowboy mythology. After all it becomes clear, that it is more a journey through a written text than through an unknown *terra nullius*; the journey is intended to remind the reader of that forgotten literature of the *Great Plains* and to make the reader revert to the literature in the same way as Frazier returned to the location which has given birth to so many heroes of American literature. It has to be noted that the author of these travel notes does not invite to start on a real journey. Readers can make a completely adequate choice to travel through a written text, which has been designed for the origins of cowboy culture, and become aware of their roots.

The key motif of starting on a journey represents written literature here, and Frazier becomes sort of a reader, who shows how former glorious cowboy times can be *read* nowadays. He invites his readers to repeat his journey through the great plains of written texts. In this way, a written text and classical literature become the most important exhibit and a relative tourist attraction.

A little bit earlier, in 1960s, another American writer Steinbeck decided to see how America “he had written so much about”, looks like. He bought a house on wheels, called it Rocinante after Miguel de Cervantes’ Don Quixote’s horse and started on a journey with his beloved poodle Charley. As in the case of Frazier, the kilometers of a written text and not of real America were counted; Steinbeck travelled through his own and Cervantes’ text areas (Benson 1984: 137).

This is the journey of the discourse of written words, or memory shaped by written culture. Frazier offers Americans to recover it in the very dawn of the Internet boom and remember American history in the way it was written. Steinbeck had another purpose of his journey – to perceive his own text as a map and try to understand the world conversely, as a descriptive text and not in an ordinary way (Benson 1984: 41).

Continuing this as if historical excursus and speaking about a journey in terms of capturing images, both photography and cinema create a different kind of forms of memory. On this occasion, it is worth remembering a conversation between a Lithuanian avant-garde filmmaker and poet Jonas Mekas and avant-gardist Italian director and writer Pier Paolo Pasolini, which took place in Rome in 1967 (Staff 2014). In this conversation, Mekas enthusiastically praises cinematographic cameras, categorically contrasting them to typewriters, because a camera captures the reality as it is. There are a lot of cameras, thus, the reality cannot be hidden or falsified. In response to this optimistic question, Pasolini asks an ironic question about the difference between a cinematographic camera and a typewriter. Why cinema is a better way to release the reality than literature?

Mekas responded, that in writing, everyone reflects the reality in his own way, and a cinematographic camera eliminates the individuality of each of us at the same time preserving the reality as it is despite us. Pasolini does not continue the discussion, neither do we. It is enough to distinguish the difference in attitudes towards two

machines *producing* the reality, i.e. a cinematographic camera and a typewriter; the way these machines handle us, thinking subjects, if we choose them as partners in our journeys.

### Mobile *non*-reflection

If we recede a little and perceive a journey not as an actual moment, as Derrida envisages it, an issue of memory will become of great importance, because a journey as a whole is remembered. Smartphones transform this memory in a different way than a written text or photography. Smartphones transform memories so much, that researchers have proposed to introduce a special term *memobilia*, which is intended to describe the forms of memories, transformed by smartphones (Reading 2008: 358). The term itself has encoded the the most important features of modern human cultural practices: “me”, as orientation to oneself, “mob”, as orientation to mobility as well as a meme form, which allows information to be disseminated like a viral infection.

What is characteristic to this specific memory, transformed by smartphones?

To begin with, smartphones are more likely to be worn as garments than carried as tools (Campbell, Park 2008: 380). The change of smartphone status has determined an increased intimacy scale of mobile equipment in human life. A traditional cinematographic camera is usually used for recording special occasions, such as weddings, birthday parties or other celebrations. The participation of a camera in an event shows the uniqueness of the event first of all, because it is not with us at all times. On the contrary, smartphone cameras are always with us and in this way they are intended to record and remember everyday moments of our lives (Kato *et al.* 2006: 307).

Another important feature of a smartphone is its constant connection to communication networks. It takes just a second to see the moment of the reality somewhere on social networks after it has been captured. It can be said that the time distance between the direct experience, the moment it is recorded in a visual or textual form and making that experience public is so short, that it is possible to talk about the simultaneity all of these three situations (Gye 2008). Speaking about travelling and a journey, especially having in mind the meaning of travelling, suggested by Derrida, smartphones take away any possibility of reflection from the traveller. Or, in other words, the center of reflection of a journey wearing mobile devices is the traveller's observer, able to observe the journey almost in real time rather than a traveller himself. If we stick to the classic concept of travelling as a certain reflection, a traveller, who collects and transmits his travel experience via his smartphone, does not travel at all. The actual traveller is the data interpreter, who gives it narrative coherence and meaning. This point can be supported by Lev Manovich's idea that the new media has fundamentally changed the concept of image, as it turned passive viewers into active users. The image is no longer something the viewer looks at, trying to find a match in his memory, afterwards combining that match with the image and discovering a variety of meaningful effects. The user of the new media is the one who *employs* the image by enlarging, cutting or adapting it in other ways to his own information reality (Van Looy 2003).

## Defective reality

When the experience of the reality, its capturing in any mediated form and publication lasts only a blink, the usage of certain media becomes very problematic. Written media requires a much larger investment in time than creation of an image. Therefore, smartphones and changes in cultural practices, caused by them, are one of the reasons an image and visual culture have established themselves in modern culture (Bruno 2008: 112). It can be said, that mobile devices dictate their own terms and give us too little time to write or record our impressions on the reality in other ways that require more time. At the same time, it must be stressed that an image captured by a smartphone differs from a traditional one or even from the one captured by a digital camera. Mobile images are often experienced as very personal or even intimate. Communication of almost a tactile nature is experienced while sending mobile images, as if communication takes place through carnal fragments of the very self (Christensen 2004: 18). Exactly the same experience is related to text or video communication on smartphones, which give an illusion that communication is very authentic and private. Some studies sometimes describe this illusory experience of immediacy as if smartphones enable some kind of a telepathic connection, or sharing dreams (Shusterman 2000: 38).

Paradoxically, time deficit conditioned by smartphones has determined not only the change in the meaning of a traveller and travel, but also the images captured. As smartphones have weakened the interface between travel and reflection, the most common object captured by a traveller is... the traveller himself. Travelling with a smartphone is an entire *selfie* performance, when the main experienced object is the travelling subject (Peters 2001: 709). It is claimed, that a user of a smartphone poses a greater interest on his device than on a place where he actually is (Ihde 2002: 68). In a sense, the user's body is more important to him than the place where the body is. Thus, a smartphone has become a device for exploring one's own body, and not the environment.

This is a fundamental change of experience, which can be described as transfer of sight from the surrounding reality to the hands, holding a smartphone (Lobet-Maris 2003: 90). A smartphone, especially with an integrated camera, begins to create digital images that can be described as a process involving a range of body practices rather than autonomous spectacles. These practices have begun to depend not only on the body itself, but also on the intimacy of the relationship with a smartphone and its spatial characteristics (Christensen 2004: 63). As it has been poetically observed in some explorations of a smartphone as a special object, it is constantly provoking us to engage in a joint game, especially if the model has appeared in the recent couple of years. It even tempts us with its animated apps icons and sounds, the shape and surface coating, key projections and any other details (Manovich 2006). Such an interpretation basically attributes smartphone to the phenomena of postmodern reality, characterized by the connection of form and emotion. In contrast, the form was associated with the function according to modernist model (McDonagh *et al.* 2003: 93).

In other terms, unlike the classical camera, which requires human body to obey its logic, smartphone adapts to human body and does not interfere with its natural kinetics anymore. The altered body practices are vividly reflected in the images produced, so the shift from oculacentric to haptic aesthetics with all its body practices are formulated when speaking about images produced by a smartphone (Hansen 2004: 10).

As etymology indicates, the word of the Greek origin “haptic” means being in contact with someone. First of all, tactile sense is distinguished by haptic function, and it creates a mutual contact between us and the environment. The way we touch creates the communicative user interface between us and our environment (Bruno 2008: 23). The interface between us and the environment, created by a smartphone, has a certain aesthetic expression. It is associated with an impulsive smartphone users’ need to connect the device with a gesture and adjust characteristics of photographic images, such as focus and contrast, by a movement. Users see poor focus, detuned brightness and contrast settings determined by the movement as a playful, performative traces of their own body activity in an image. This disengagement from the imperative of the technical quality of an image, on the one hand, represents a secession from consumerism aesthetics; on the other hand, it refers to the performativity of the image, where visual features of the image connect to the body in hybrid combinations.

Video and photography captured by a smartphone are valued in today’s communication due to low resolution, as they are immediate and have their own aesthetics of spontaneity, speed of thought, idea mixing and blending, connection of images with emotions, multi-layering of the meaning, stream of consciousness and collective, albeit chaotic, consciousness. This aesthetics is determined by poor technical quality.

### Mobile location

The abovementioned smartphone aesthetics has been named by a Japanese term *keitai* aesthetics in research after Japanese *keitai denwa*, the name of a mobile phone. Essential feature of this aesthetics is the integration of body experience in video, photography, writing, watching, or reading practices. Constant presence somewhere “among” (among photography, video, written text, or music) is also characteristic to this aesthetics. *Keitai* aesthetics is a permanent creation of interfaces, when communication is linked to the media, generated by optical lenses, a screen or a keyboard (Kato *et al.* 2006: 308). Communicativeness of any information, recorded by smartphone, creates a state, which has been called “connected presence” by a French scientist Christian Licopp (2015). This term is used to describe the state, when a viewer is regularly sent information for a certain longer period of time. In this way communication via a smartphone makes the user feel a special state of constant communication and staying connected. This state colours substantially all the information that is shared on smartphone. An image sent on smartphone is no longer limited to just an image; it is a part of an illusion of constant connection.

Practices, resulting from this communication unexpectedly throw images and texts, created by smartphone back to the times, when a work of art was necessarily tied to a certain specific place – a cave, or a building. Such artistic experience was inevitably linked with some ritual. A smartphone user is always informed about the message received by sound or vibration. This moment creates a certain situation full of expectations and impatience; it is a very important part of message “opening” ritual (McLuhan 2005: 289). Message itself is sort of separated from the flow of everyday life to the moment a smartphone user embraces his powers and opens it (Auslander 1999: 48).

However, one of the most important features of *keitai* aesthetics is interconnection of text and image with a specific location. Paradoxically, constantly moving smartphones eliminate the boundaries among different media and in particular emphasize the meaning of location in mediation of experience, because it remains the only feature of original and authentic experience. As research indicates, smartphone reacts against the tendency to decouple a viewer from a location, a tangible sensation of being *there* (Hansen 2004: 25). Nevertheless, this particular location of the reality becomes permeable to other “realities”, various virtual digital environments, and avatars. Smartphone can create connectors among all of them and transform a classical location into a hybrid one, where a physical location will be mixed with a variety of digital “locations” as well as virtual social environments (Souza e Silva 2006: 22).

Smartphone combines real world experience with the new media contexts; it combines technology with a body and the sense of location (Christensen 2004: 11). It becomes a window into the world (Mickūnas 2015: 45), helping us to feel that in this way we see the world more clearly, and most importantly, that these experiences can be shared immediately. In this way, we discover the world and ourselves in it. Feeling that otherwise we would not be able to experience the world *in this way* or that it would not show itself in *so many details* make us highly dependent on smartphones.

## Conclusions

It has been recently decided in Washington and Antwerp, that people do not see Another when immersed into their smartphones, as they bump into each other, smash expensive appliances and hurt themselves. A traveller usually chooses an unknown and unseen expanse. However, special lines have been drawn for people with smartphones to ensure their safe journeys without a risk to get lost or bump into somebody or something; these people can walk and write short messages or browse through their *Facebook* accounts (more about the project see BoredPanda.com 2015). Although they move, these travellers can only follow the predefined trajectories, as it seems from the outside. Is that extinction of cultural practices of travel and a traveller? The research discussed in this article permits the assertion that practices of travelling still persist, while the purpose of travel has changed dramatically. We are on the road with a smartphone in order to get to know ourselves rather than to meet Another. *Γνωθι σεαυτόν?*

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## KELYJE SU IŠMANIUOJU TELEFONU

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariami keliautojo, kelionės bei su jomis susijusių atminties pavaldai – fotografijos bei teksto – pokyčiai atsiradus mobiliosioms technologijoms. Kaip pastebima, santykis su mobiliosiomis technologijomis yra išskirtinis, jos labiau yra dėvimos kaip drabužiai, nei nešiojamos kaip kokie įrankiai. Šio beveik intymaus ryšio pasekmės pastebimos tiek skaitmeninio atvaizdo transformacijose, tiek kintančiose tikrovės autentiškumo koncepcijose, tiek paradoksaliai akcentuojant mobiliųjų – regis, beviečių – technologijų konkrečią vietą. Straipsnyje daroma išvada, jog mobiliosioms technologijoms tapus savotišku keliaujančiojo partneriu, jo kelionę papildančiu nepalaužiamos komunikacijos dėmeniu, dėmesys nuo supančios tikrovės yra narciziškai perkeliamas į save patį.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kūnas, komunikacija, skaitmeninis atvaizdas, kelionė, vieta, tekstas, keliavimas.