2 The open-ended ruin

Imaginative authenticity as a driver of alternative tourism

André Jansson

Introduction

Historical ruins belong to some of the most classical tourist sights, often depicted in postcards and guidebooks. People travel from afar to see world-famous places like Pompeii, Knossos, and the pyramids of Egypt, whose historical authenticity is confirmed by heritage institutions. Since the industrial era, they have turned into objects of mass tourism. At the same time, there are people not at all interested in heritage sites, as well as people who want to escape the tourist bubble and find alternative places to explore. Typically, they feel that the intensely mediated and staged appearance of heritage sites takes away the magic of foreign places, making tourism experiences *per se* less authentic. Instead, they prefer more ethnographically oriented forms of travelling where they can meet ordinary people or discover historical places that are not (yet) on the radar of commercial tourism (e.g. Munt, 1994; Jansson, 2010). One such alternative form of tourism is *ruin tourism*. Another, more extreme form, whose supporters reject the very emblem of tourism, is *urban exploration*. What these types share is an interest in ruins that belong to the relatively recent history of industrial society and are not promoted as tourist destinations. In comparison, though, urban explorers are more concerned with abandoned places – especially buildings but also other human-made constructs – that have not yet been visited by others and are not open to visitors.

How are we to understand the attraction of abandoned buildings whose status as ruins has not yet been (and in most cases will never be) named by the heritage industry? Is it possible to distinguish any particular traits of these kinds of places that explain the thrill experienced by alternative tourists? Or do these ruins function just as means of distinction, giving certain groups a convenient way to escape the tourist crowd and classify themselves as more sophisticated travellers?

While people's *habitus* is certainly a key factor (as I will come back to in the concluding section), in this chapter, I will argue that the attraction of abandoned buildings *also* stems from their open-ended nature as ruins whose histories and futures are more or less unknown and not yet told. I argue that such *open-ended ruins* sustain a particular kind of authenticity; what I call *imaginative authenticity*. This type of authenticity can

be experienced only inasmuch as the process of decay is considered open ended and non-staged and invites one to imaginative work. At the heart of imaginative authenticity is the freedom to fantasize and reconstruct fractured meanings and interrupted narratives of a particular location (cf. *Introduction*; Lennon, 2015). As such, imaginative authenticity does not fit easily with any of the approaches to authenticity that have figured previously in tourism research – notably, objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, and existential authenticity. Imaginative authenticity is at the same time object related (tied to the particular character of open-ended ruins) and activity related (residing in the explorative practices sustaining imagination). It cannot do without either of these components and thus begs us to develop a more relational approach to authenticity in tourism. By extension, this would open up new avenues for studying the role of imagination as a driver of tourism.

I base my arguments on a case study of urban explorers, whose main interest is to discover abandoned buildings, preferably without guidance, and explore and document them *before* they disappear or get re-appropriated and categorized as named ruins (e.g. Garret, 2014a, 2014b). The study was part of a larger project and comprises nine interviews conducted in 2016 with urban explorers in Sweden.¹ These explorers were specialized in different types of buildings and places (e.g. industrial plants and private houses). While the sample is small, its demographic profile corresponds to what is known about the community globally, consisting mostly of men and individuals with relatively high levels of education (e.g. engineer, photographer, public administrator, and university student). This underscores the view of urban exploration as an adventurous yet intellectualized middle-class pastime (see Jansson, 2018a, 2018b). The specific setting of the interviews (Sweden) is not likely to have affected the argument I want to pursue here. The findings teach us something about the volatile status of ruins and abandoned places as sites of imagination in a mediatized culture where it gets more and more difficult to keep things hidden from public display.

The chapter is divided into four parts. First, I provide a typology of different ruins in order to define what is unique about abandoned buildings. Second, I overview different approaches to authenticity in tourism and suggest a tentative notion of imaginative authenticity. Third, I turn to the study of urban explorers in order to grasp what kinds of spatial experience and attraction open-ended ruins give rise to. Finally, I use the empirical observations to highlight the need for a social theorization of imaginative authenticity in tourism.

A typology of ruins

Some of my strongest childhood memories involve ruins. When I was six years old, my family and I went to Crete on vacation. While there, it was more or less mandatory to join the bus trip to Knossos to see the ruins of

Europe's oldest city and its palace complex – the mythological home of King Minos. It is estimated that in the 18th century BC, the population of Knossos was 100,000 people, but some hundred years later, it was abandoned. As a six-year-old, I was absorbed by the historical legends and the visualizations of what the palace had once looked like. As we followed the guided tour, I could almost sense the bustling street-life and the affluence of the Knossos aristocracy. After the visit to Knossos, I continued for a long time to read about ancient palaces and dreamed about becoming an archaeologist who could discover and explore previously unknown ruins.

From about the same age, I can also remember an entirely different type of ruins. In the 1960s and 1970s Sweden underwent a rather dramatic process of urban change. A cornerstone of the social-democratic welfare programme was the production of one million new homes between 1965 and 1975. The programme brought along large “sanitization projects” in which entire neighbourhoods, proclaimed to be too run-down to be preserved, were demolished and replaced by modern housing complexes. Still, in the late 1970s, these sanitization areas presented frightening sights. I grew up outside Gothenburg, and when visiting the city, we often passed through areas where aggressive-looking bulldozers were tearing down houses and buildings. Through the car window, I could sometimes see straight into the former apartments and get glimpses of wallpapers and other interior details before everything was reduced to piles of stone and dust. I remember these journeys through the ruins of Gothenburg as very sad experiences. What had happened to the people who used to live in the houses? And what was to happen with all these empty places?

It is probably not a coincidence that these childhood memories are so strong. The ruin can be seen as one of the most powerful sites of imagination. As Walter Benjamin wrote about the decaying arcades of late 19th-century Paris (see Benjamin, 1983), the ruin is a site of (lost) dreams, around which society can congregate and conceive of itself, its past, and its future. It constitutes a place where the narratives of social life have been broken. After people have left, only memories and a peculiar kind of materiality remain, a materiality marked by escalating *porosity*. Benjamin first wrote about porosity in his 1925 essay on Naples. He uses the term to describe a bewildering city of disorientation, imagination, and open-ended decay.

Side alleys give glimpses of dirty stairs leading down to taverns, where three or four men, at intervals, hidden behind barrels as if behind church pillars, sit drinking.

In such corners one can scarcely discern where building is still in progress and where dilapidation has already set in. For nothing is concluded. Porosity results not only from the indolence of the Southern artisan, but also, above all, from the passion for improvisation, which demands that

space and opportunity be at any price preserved. Buildings are used as a popular stage.

(Benjamin, 1925/1978: 166–167)

Whereas Benjamin certainly did not present Naples *per se* as a ruin, the interesting thing is how he describes the lack of clear-cut demarcations between the old and the new, between dilapidation and reconstruction, between exterior and interior. The porosity of Naples makes the city reminiscent of a vast ruin, whose lure consists in the element of surprise and the possibility to discover what otherwise lies concealed (see Gilloch, 1996: 25–36). Naples is thus a space of ambiguity, where the visitor can easily get lost, and where maps are of little help. As Benjamin writes, the “banal tourist” may run into trouble, since “even Baedeker cannot propitiate him” (Benjamin, 1925/1978: 164). Any encounter with Naples is bound to be open ended. Similarly, the imaginative force of ruins can be traced to their porosity. Ruins can hardly be grasped in any purely intellectual sense. They urge us to speculate and fill in the blanks. They urge us to fantasize and dream, and to improvise, just like children do in their play.

If we go back to the opening examples, they represent two distinct types of ruins, as well as two different ways of relating to porosity and imagination. Knossos can be described as a *named ruin*. It is one of the most famous heritage sites of Western civilization and a place whose history is constantly explored and given more detail. It is also a ruin that constantly expands as scientists dig out more areas and make more documentation available to the public. While Knossos in the material sense constitutes and *must remain* a ruin, it is also much more than a ruin. It is a cultural icon and a machinery of historical knowledge and tourism phantasmagoria – a site of fixed, or controlled, porosity, or what Arboleda (2019) calls arrested decay. The demolished areas of 1970s Gothenburg, by contrast, represent what we may call *transitory ruins*. Their porosity remained only long enough to send nostalgic shock waves and sensations of bewilderedness through the occasional passer-by. Today we can only learn about these ruins and their short-lived existence through old photographs and history books. As with other regeneration sites, their temporariness was a calculated part of a sociopolitical project. They had no other future than to be replaced, as quickly as possible, by new material structures and new forms of social life.

But there is also a third category of ruins (see Figure 2.1), *open-ended ruins*, which falls in between the previously mentioned types. Such ruins come particularly close to Benjamin’s description of Naples. They are neither explicitly named as ruins and thus not given the status of heritage nor destined to be replaced, regenerated, or otherwise eliminated as ruins. Instead, they are human-made structures that have been abandoned and whose future is uncertain. From a material perspective, their status as “ruins” may be questionable, since there is no exact threshold as to when a decaying structure turns into a ruin. From a social perspective, however, the process of

	<i>State of materiality</i>	<i>Dominant forms of representation</i>	<i>Dominant forms of imagination</i>
<i>Named ruins (heritage sites)</i>	Organized preservation; enclosed porosity	Touristic naming and framing	Staged historical imagination
<i>Transitory ruins (regeneration sites)</i>	Organized demolition or regeneration; solidification	Spatial planning	Non-staged historical imagination; scripted or reimagined future
<i>Open-ended ruins (abandoned buildings and other sites)</i>	Open-ended decay; extended porosity	Incoherent forms of (non-)mediation	Open-ended imagination

Figure 2.1 A typology of ruins.

ruination – and thus the growth of porosity – begins as soon as a place is no longer in use or ascribed any particular purpose. Even the future of Knossos was entirely open from around the 12th century BC, when the population for unclear reasons abandoned the city, until the late 19th century, when it was rediscovered and excavations started.

The distinct quality of open-ended ruins is their *extended porosity*. Their pasts are not described in guidebooks. Their futures are not envisioned in planning documents. They are culturally, socially, and materially abandoned, suspended in time, which also means that they offer us a sense of freedom to explore, fantasize, and lose ourselves in alternative pasts and alternative futures (Edensor, 2005, 2007). This goes for places that have been abandoned by their inhabitants and/or users, as well as for constructions that were never completed and whose material remnants do not refer to any other social history than the plans and dreams affiliated with their origination. We can find these strangely tantalizing places especially in areas, and during periods, of socioeconomic stagnation. Arboleda (2019), for example, discusses the ambiguous cultural status of the many unfinished architectures found in the Sicilian post-2008 crisis landscape. In and through their incompleteness and porosity, they represent what society seemingly wants to forget and thus become part of our phenomenological construction of where “the margins” of society are geographically located and what they may look like (Shields, 1996).

At the same time, there is ruination taking place also at the centre. Even expansive cities harbour places of decay and degeneration, sometimes invisible to the public eye, sometimes spectacular reminders of a bygone industrial era. In relation to the urban credo of expansion and connectivity, such abandoned places stand out as anomalies whose very existence as open-ended ruins is bound to become relatively short lived. Sometimes they are

turned into aestheticized tourist attractions, that is, named ruins. Sometimes they become part of urban regeneration and/or gentrification projects, incorporated into broader processes of heritage production, whereby dilapidated environments are moulded into something new by means of aestheticization and display (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). This has happened in many former harbour areas in cities around the world, modelled after London Docklands, where industrial land was turned into exclusive waterfront locations. It has also happened in post-industrial cities like Detroit (see Millington, 2013; Slager, 2013; Tegtmeier, 2016; Fraser, 2018), the former world metropolis of automotive industries, where trendy travel agencies like *Urban Adventures* (2020) nowadays offer guided tours telling the story of the city's "rise, fall and renewal". During two-hour excursions, tourists are shown "which buildings have been restored and which await renewal" and invited to "marvel at all of Detroit's vacant buildings and what the future might hold for them".

Open-ended ruins are thus difficult to find – which partly explains why they are so attractive to alternative tourists wanting to go "off-the-beaten-track" to see places that are neither marketed nor clearly marked out as heritage or tourist sites. Similar impulses of non-touristic attraction can be seen, for instance, among people engaged in novel forms of neighbourhood tourism enabled by the sharing economy, especially mobile apps helping people to find private accommodation (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Still, searching for open-ended ruins is very different from visiting previously unknown people's local neighbourhoods. The difference lies precisely in the imaginative affordances of open-ended ruins: the prospects of *imaginative authenticity*. This type of authenticity is best experienced at sites whose meanings and stories must be actively recreated by visitors through imagination – before, during, and after the exploration *per se*. Before showing how imaginative authenticity works as a driver of urban exploration (and possibly other forms of alternative tourism), I will define how it is theoretically related to pre-established notions of authenticity in tourism.

Forms of authenticity in tourism

Authenticity is one of the most-debated terms in tourism studies. It entered the stage with MacCannell's (1973) article on "staged authenticity", where he presented the desire for authenticity as one of the key drivers of modern mass tourism, whose commercial logic, in turn, contributed to the erosion of precisely the authentic qualities of tourist sites. Since then, the role of authenticity, especially as a form of attraction, has been analyzed in relation to a broad range of tourism fields, including heritage tourism (e.g. Halewood & Hannam, 2001; Chhabra et al., 2003; Zhu, 2012), backpacking (Shaffer, 2004), volunteer tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017), film and media tourism (Månsson, 2010), and ancestral tourism (Bryce et al., 2017), just to mention a few examples. There are also different ways of interpreting the meaning of authenticity. In 1988,

Cohen presented a critique of MacCannell's approach, stating that the concept of authenticity was not sufficiently problematized in MacCannell's work but relied on a rather intuitive understanding of authenticity as a genuine state of things to which the modern, alienated individual-as-tourist wanted to escape during leisure time. MacCannell's notion of authenticity, according to Cohen, also took for granted the superiority of the analyst (as opposed to the ordinary tourist) to objectively discern and judge what was the "real thing" and what was just staged versions of the original objects or practices.

Cohen's contribution is a good example of the gradual turn from realist to constructivist understandings of object authenticity, or from *objective authenticity* to *constructive authenticity*. As he puts it, "'authenticity' is a socially constructed object and its social (as against philosophical) connotation is, therefore, not given, but 'negotiable'" (Cohen, 1988: 274). Even commodified objects may gradually achieve a socially constructed, and more or less agreed upon, aura of authenticity. A generic destination such as the "beach resort" may seem authentic because it fits the imageries consumed by mass tourists, and the souvenirs and goods sold at heritage sites or museums may be part of the ongoing authentication of the site (e.g., Bruner, 1994; Halewood & Hannam, 2001). However, the constructivist view has been criticized because it leads to an understanding of object-related authenticity that would ultimately include anything, depending on what people in different times and contexts perceive as authentic. Reisinger and Steiner (2006) go as far as to argue that the whole idea of object authenticity (whether realist or constructivist) is pointless altogether and that the term should not be used in tourism research because it obscures more than it explains.

An alternative view of authenticity is presented by Wang (1999), who argues that a large share of tourism is motivated not because of a desire to encounter authentic places, people, and things but because people want to reach a more authentic sense of self through activities that are freely chosen and resonate with their deeper understandings of who they are. Tourism, according to this understanding, is a liminal time-space that invites such activities of self-exploration and self-expression. The form of authenticity at stake is not object related but activity related. Wang (1999: 352) calls this *existential authenticity*, which "can have nothing to do with the authenticity of toured objects"; that is, people may choose to travel to a particular destination not because of the destination as such but because of the type of activities and experience they search for. These experiences, in turn, may be self oriented (see Hughes, 1995), as in the case of finding a place for peace and quiet or bodily challenges, or oriented towards social togetherness, or *communitas*, that actualizes the individual's sense of belonging. As Steiner and Reisinger (2006: 313) argue in their overview of existential authenticity in tourism research, there is also a need to engage with more overlooked dimensions of existential authenticity, such as anxiety, fear, and courage.

There is not enough space in this chapter to delve deeper into the theoretical attributes of these views or to conduct a fuller overview of relevant research. I want to bring three points into the remaining discussion. First, in spite of the large and continuously growing body of research on authenticity and tourism, the three previously mentioned views are still the ones that dominate and define the main ontological and epistemological lines of division. Second, even though tourism researchers (and others) may debate what authenticity actually means, it is evident from empirical research that different tourists are drawn to different types of authenticity and that different types of journeys may be motivated by different desires. For instance, as Kontogeorgopoulos (2017) argues, even though the idea of objective authenticity may seem outdated or, rather, out of fashion among researchers today, tourists are often keen to see original heritage objects rather than replicas, meeting local people spontaneously rather than through organized tours, and so forth. Third, we should assume that a single journey may include experiences that actualize different types of authenticity. We should thus avoid establishing simple analogies between tourism genres and authenticity types.

These points alone should caution us from drawing too rigid lines between different types of authenticity or claiming one approach as superior to another. I find it particularly problematic to maintain the distinction between object-related and activity-related forms of authenticity. I do see that there are many cases when tourists are concerned only with seeing the “real thing” – and that is about all there is to a journey (whether the “real thing” is objectively “real” or perceived as such from a symbolic point of view). Tourism is replete with such practices, typically associated with the organized sightseeing tour, which in many cases constitutes merely a box-ticking exercise. Similarly, there are many forms of tourism whose attraction resides in the truthfulness or deeper meaning of the practice itself, regardless of where it takes place. It is particularly obvious in cases where the very act of transportation, the moving through space, is key, as in train hiking or long-distance biking. But then there are other, more complex instances, when the truthfulness of the location matters just as much as the activities performed – and when the tourist’s sense of authenticity emerges through the coming together of the two. Based on my study of urban explorers, I propose *imaginative authenticity* as one such *relational* form of authenticity. There might be others, which I will return to in the concluding section. Imaginative authenticity captures the motivational force behind certain forms of alternative tourism, for example, the exploration of open-ended ruins. Such explorations are driven by a desire to encounter previously unknown, yet strangely familiar places of non-orchestrated and non-mediated decay and to engage in the improvised reconstruction of spatial narratives through imagination. As suggested by Figure 2.2 – which is an elaborated version of a similar typology presented by Wang (1999: 352) – imaginative authenticity is neither an inherent quality of the site as such (since it ultimately

Object-related forms of authenticity in tourism	Activity-related forms of authenticity in tourism	Relational (object- and activity-related) forms of authenticity in tourism
<p><i>Objective authenticity</i> refers to the cognition among tourists that they experience the authenticity of originals.</p> <p><i>Constructive authenticity</i> refers to the authenticity projected onto toured objects by tourists or tourism producers in terms of their imagery, expectations, preferences, beliefs, powers, etc., and thus refers to a continuously negotiated experience of symbolic authenticity in objects.</p>	<p><i>Existential authenticity</i> refers to a potential existential state of being that is activated by tourist activities, especially through the liminal qualities of these activities.</p>	<p><i>Imaginative authenticity</i> refers to the felt freedom among tourists to recreate through imagination the meanings and narratives of a location whose transformation is open-ended and non-staged (i.e., non-orchestrated and non-mediated), e.g., the open-ended ruin.</p>

Figure 2.2 Approaches to authenticity in tourism experiences.

Source: This typology is an adapted and extended version of the model presented by Wang (1999: 352).

depends on the relation between site and visitor and is only realized through imagination) nor a strictly activity-based experience (since it requires very specific spatial conditions). Rather, imaginative authenticity entails *both* a state of the object (open-ended porosity) *and* a state of activity (imaginative work). In order to make this theoretical argument more tangible, I will now provide an inside view of how this type of spatial attraction is played out among urban explorers, a particular group of alternative tourists whose travels are largely guided by the desire to encounter places that have been abandoned and left untouched for longer periods.

Searching for imaginative authenticity: the appropriation of open-ended ruins among urban explorers

Urban exploration is a relatively new phenomenon, even though its roots can be traced back to early modern tours of urban sewers, catacombs, and other hidden spaces. The very term was allegedly coined in 1996 by the Canadian urban exploration pioneer Jeff Chapman, also known by his alias Ninjalicious. In his book *Access All Areas: A User's Guide to the Art of Urban Exploration*, Chapman defines urban exploration as “an interior tourism that allows the curious minded to discover a world of behind the scenes sights” (Ninjalicious, 2005: 3). The parallel to tourism is not coincidental. According to *Wikipedia* (retrieved in April 2019), urban exploration is “the exploration of man-made structures, usually abandoned ruins or not usually seen components of the man-made environment. Photography and historical interest/documentation are heavily featured in the hobby and, although it

may sometimes involve trespassing onto private property, this is not always the case". Urban explorers are thus mobile people, predominantly white men (see Mott & Roberts, 2014), willing to travel long distances in their free time to discover, enter, and experience new sites, appropriating them as adventurous time-spaces and visual sights. In addition to abandoned buildings (e.g. industries, hospitals, and residential buildings), urban explorers seek out places that are hidden or difficult to access (e.g. urban rooftops, subterranean spaces, and military complexes). They document and share their experiences with other explorers, showing the rest of the community that they have visited a certain site.

While urban exploration entails a form of spatial consumption and circuits of representation that in key respects resemble tourism (cf. Jansson, 2007), it is also distinguished by its *antagonistic* relation to tourism; it is actively and explicitly defined in opposition to (mass) tourist practices. As Robinson (2015: 149) argues, urban exploration can be viewed as "a form of touristic activity, and, paradoxically, anti-tourist resisting all the formal tourism practices of signage, information, instruction and control". This was also a recurring theme in the interviews we conducted with urban explorers in Sweden, who were eager to underline that what they are up to is *not ruin tourism*.

It feels like it's really lost focus lately, what people have called urban exploration. . . . I wouldn't call it urban exploration to like join a guided tour at some old fortress with the family, that doesn't feel very much like urban exploration. That would be more like ruin tourism. . . . And if one would never consider to climb into a place then I think one is a ruin tourist and not an urban explorer.

(Sven, mid 50s)

From an analytical perspective, then, it seems relevant to categorize urban exploration as a form of *alternative tourism*, based on the fact that its basic shape corresponds to tourism (travelling to see, experience, and represent other places during leisure time), while its *modus operandi* is defined in opposition to mainstream tourism. Most notably, the sites and sights of urban exploration are located *beyond* the radar of commercial tourism, and the journeys are not commercially scripted or organized. Yet it is obvious that the level of "alternativeness" varies between different groups of urban explorers – ranging from those who do clearly illegal things (and thus do not fit common definitions of tourism) to those whose practices overlap with ruin and heritage tourism. This intermediary position makes urban exploration an interesting case to study if we want to grasp cultural tendencies on the fringes of tourism.

The defining feature of urban exploration is the desire to explore, document, and, ultimately, *reimagine* abandoned buildings that are neither marked out nor staged (or in any other way rearranged after they were

abandoned). It is the first-hand encounter with uncontrolled decay, that is, the previously described lure of open-ended ruins, that matters – and gives rise to imaginative authenticity. Sven compares the experience of visiting a place that has been abandoned for 35 years to a “parachute jump” – an adventurous (and thus also well-prepared) vertical jump into the time-spaces of bygone eras, whose decaying and ghostly appearances may elicit physically thrilling and uncanny sensations in their visitors.

The non-staged and open-ended porosity of abandoned buildings is important to imaginative authenticity in two interconnected ways. First, there is a moment of exhilaration attached to the fact that *one does not know what to expect* once crossing the threshold of a new site. It may be vandalized or in dangerously bad condition. It may be occupied by other individuals, such as graffiti painters or homeless people.

You never know what you'll find, it can be a little dangerous, but hopefully it's safe. Perhaps you're not allowed to be there, that's quite exciting too.
(Olle, mid 20s)

This takes us back to Benjamin's (1925/1978) characterization of old Naples as a porous space: a space of blurred boundaries, disorientation, and surprise. Similarly, the desire for open-ended ruins is a desire for sites marked by *extended porosity*. The specific quality of open-ended ruins is that they are in an *authentic state of flux* (whether from an objective or constructive point of view) and become meaningful to visitors only through imaginative work.

Second, the porosity of open-ended ruins implicates that there is an *invitation to imagine*, that is, to construct one's own meaning of the place. This does not mean, however, that the ideal urban exploration site is an empty site. Rather, it is obvious that excitement is reinforced if there are certain material clues that may trigger imagination and establish meaningful links between the site and the interpretative universe of the explorer. These clues, according to the interviewees, should ideally take the shape of traces involuntarily left by the people who once occupied the site, thus signifying an interrupted narrative.

I like places where you get a feeling of how it was when it was alive. That there are things left from people who have lived there, and not just an empty barrack. . . . You start looking at your local environment in new ways. You search for it. You see a garden where nobody has mown the lawn for a long time and you get curious. . . . You're always on hunt.

(Milton, mid 30s)

As Milton describes, urban exploration gradually turns into a particular way of seeing and sensing the built environment. It can even be understood as a

particular *mode of consciousness* marked by heightened sensitivity to porosity and ruination. In this sense, the experience that urban explorers search for is akin to Wang's (1999) notion of activity-related existential authenticity. Notably, the very *act of imagination* comes close to Wang's description of how tourism may evoke liminal and existentially charging experiences.

Still, the crucial point here is that imaginative authenticity cannot be reduced to either an activity-related or an object-related quality. It relies on *both* – which also makes it very fragile. In the interviews, the fragility of imaginative authenticity was articulated in two main ways. First, the liminal sensation of urban exploration was easily replaced by frustration and disappointment, a sense of decapsulation (Jansson, 2007), if a site was found to be *damaged or rearranged* by previous visitors.

One should take great care to leave the place exactly like it was. That is the worst thing I know, when people have been there and painted graffiti all over the walls. If I were to choose everything should remain as it is for another 1,000 years.

(Niklas, mid 30s)

I know that some people also rearrange the sites. When they enter a house they may put away certain things and instead place out table and chairs, making it look like things were just left behind. But we never do that. Perhaps some people think it looks better that way in pictures.

(Greta, mid 40s)

Greta's comment also highlights the fundamental tension between imaginative authenticity and mediation, residing in the fact that the desire to take good and "likable" photos may have a direct impact on the porosity of the site *per se*. In effect, the invitation to imagine is disrupted. Once an abandoned place is rearranged in order to be communicated, it starts performing like a named site and ultimately turns urban exploration into a pseudo-event, to paraphrase Boorstin (1961/1992).

This leads us to the second threat to imaginative authenticity. The general *circulation of popular images* of abandoned places (especially beyond urban exploration communities) may distort the possibilities to freely construct one's own meaning in relation to the site (Klausen, 2017). In one of the interviews, Milton described the growing dilemma of social media and online image-sharing sites whose popularity, in his view, distorted the prospects of appropriating place in an open-ended manner:

Last Monday there was a new place in Belgium, really an awesome place. But then [because of social media] I know that there were more than 50 people there already on Tuesday and then the charm totally disappears. It becomes almost like a tourist destination. . . . If there have been 50 people there already it becomes difficult to do one's own thing.

One gets influenced by the other pictures and may take the very same picture in the same way, and then it's not very exciting anymore.

(Milton, mid 30s)

This example shows how mediations of abandoned places contribute to the naming and staging of open-ended ruins, whose meanings are then gradually fixed. Industrial ruins, for example, may be recoded as “genuine” and “cool” and turned into sites of creative energy in urban areas where the dreams and desires of artists, tourists, entrepreneurs, politicians, and real estate developers come together to form new patterns of imagination (e.g. Jansson, 2005; Tegtmeier, 2016; Fraser, 2018). However, the unruliness of ruins gets sacrificed when they are turned into heritage sites, tourist destinations, and/or aesthetic schemes of communication (Edensor, 2005). The imaginative force of porosity is lost and the open-ended ruin turned into a transitory or named ruin that no longer generates attraction among such alternative travellers as urban explorers.

MacCannell (1976) explicated these mechanisms in the 1970s in his writings on how the tourism industry works with “sight-sacralization”, meaning that genuine places are named, framed, and mechanically reproduced as tourist sights in order to attract a bigger market (cf. Benjamin, 1935/1973). In times of hyper-connectivity and hyper-circulation, when spatial representations can be spread widely by anyone carrying a smartphone, there are reasons to revisit and rethink this dilemma. As told by the interviews with urban explorers in Sweden, mediation in general, and the expanding logic of spreadable social media in particular (e.g. Jenkins et al., 2013; van Dijck, 2013), contribute to turning abandoned places into sacralized tourist destinations, thus making it increasingly difficult to approach these sites without aestheticized expectations of what to see and *how* to see these sites. The prospects for imaginative authenticity, as well as the distinctive boundaries of this type of alternative tourism, are thus threatened (Jansson, 2018a, 2018b).

Conclusion: toward a social theory of imaginative authenticity in tourism

The interviews with urban explorers verify the relevance of different forms of authenticity while also showing that it may be difficult to keep these forms apart. First, the search for open-ended ruins that nobody has touched since they were abandoned corresponds to the realist understanding of authenticity as an inherent asset of the object itself. As discussed, as soon as a site of exploration is rearranged or, even worse, staged, it loses its lure. Urban explorers themselves thus perceive of their practices in a manner resembling MacCannell's (1973, 1976) approach to objective authenticity. At the same time, second, the very idea of what constitutes a proper site for urban exploration has been continuously (re)constructed through various forms

of cultural mediation (cf. Cohen, 1988), especially since this type of alternative tourism is reliant on photographic practices and expressivity. Not all urban explorers are hardcore devotees who can only think of visiting places that have never been depicted and nobody has visited before; there are also explorers interested in certain types of derelict places whose attraction has gained aesthetic appeal through the circulation of images. In this sense, based on how urban explorers judge the authenticity of places and objects (also reflected in their attitudes to aestheticization and media circulation), it is even possible to identify different fractions of the community (Jansson, 2018b; Jansson & Klausen, 2018). Finally, existential authenticity is also important to urban explorers. The process of finding and entering abandoned places and feeling the exhilaration of time travel constitutes a particular mode of consciousness (cf. Wang, 1999). Encountering the residues of unknown people of bygone eras provides new perspectives on one's existence in the larger scheme of things.

The study of urban explorers thus confirms that authenticity is a valuable concept for understanding the motives behind tourism. It also suggests that we can more fully understand the complexity of particular types of tourism if we combine different views of authenticity. Still, as I have shown in this chapter, none of the dominant perspectives fully captures the experiential core of such an alternative form of tourism as urban exploration. Even when combined, they leave us with a picture that points to what differentiates rather than what unites this particular field. Imaginative authenticity, then, is a way of grasping the shared *raison d'être* behind urban exploration – and possibly other forms of alternative or specialized tourism. Notably, imaginative authenticity problematizes the dichotomizing view of authentic tourism experiences as related *either* to clearly defined places or to activities that have nothing or little to do with place and location. Imaginative authenticity rather captures the experience of being immersed into non-scripted imaginative travel linked to a particular location, in this case the open-ended ruin. While this is not the place to assess the relevance of imaginative authenticity in other types of tourism, there seem to be interesting parallels to, for example, pilgrimage tourism. Among visitors to places like Santiago de Compostela, the deeper experience of authenticity emerges only through the combination of an authentic environment (let alone that the way of St. James is a case of refined heritagization rather than open-ended decay) and a certain ritualized way of appropriating and reimagining space through walking and contemplation (e.g. Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2016).

More research is needed to stake out the properties of imaginative authenticity and its applicability in different contexts. Based on that, it would also be possible to go further in the theorization of imaginative authenticity. One pathway that seems particularly promising, in my view, is Bourdieu's (1979/1984) social theory of *habitus* and the cultivation of taste. While in this chapter I have tried to carve out the unique imaginative qualities of the open-ended ruin, there is good reason to dig deeper into how sociocultural

dispositions make some people more inclined than others to appreciate non-conventional tourist sights and engage in the type of spontaneous imaginative work described here. Imaginative authenticity may not by definition work as a distinctive code – but it certainly does so in those middle-class-biased settings of alternative tourism figuring in this study. Urban explorers describe their appreciation of abandoned buildings in ways that resonate with how Bourdieu (ibid: 273–283) portrays the “pure” gaze, that is, the distinctive and seemingly “natural” way of appropriating nature, landscapes, art, or other artefacts, which only those with certain resources (typically of an intellectual kind) can present – and only after having spent long time naturalizing the legitimate cultural schemes. As Austin (2007) demonstrates in an essay on 19th-century British tourism, the classifying role of the “pure” gaze – which I see as a close sibling to imaginative authenticity – has been integral to the definition of touristic behaviour for a very long time. According to influential writers of the time, tourism was never to live up to the “pure” pleasures of spontaneous visual and spatial consumption but rather relied on mimicry and standardized replications of the “picturesque”. From such a neo-romantic standpoint, which can also be detected among urban explorers, tourism was (and still is) not only vulgar but also a source of embarrassment to those involved.

In sum, imaginative authenticity provides a way of gaining deeper insights into the role of imaginative work and imaginative pleasure as drivers of tourism. Furthermore, the outline presented here should serve as a stepping-stone for the development of a relational approach to authenticity in tourism and thus (to paraphrase Bourdieu) to a social critique of the judgement of touristic taste.

Note

- 1 The interviews were carried out by PhD candidate Tindra Thor as part of the research project *Cosmopolitanism from the Margins*, funded by the Swedish Research Council and led by Professor Miyase Christensen, the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. Parts of the current chapter have been published previously (Jansson, 2018c).

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