Avoiding the (tourist) gaze: pursuit of the 'authentic' in the Tbilisi edgelands

Emit Snake-Beings

Published online: 18 Aug 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ⬚

View related articles ⬚

View Crossmark data ⬚

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Avoiding the (tourist) gaze: pursuit of the 'authentic' in the Tbilisi edgelands

Emit Snake-Beings[a,b] (iD)

[a]Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand; [b]Fiji National University, Suva, Fiji

ABSTRACT

The making of *Micro-district II*, a digital film made by the author in the edgelands of Tbilisi, Georgia, is used as a vehicle for exploring the tourist gaze and the observer's paradox amongst ethnographic filmmaking methods and documentary modes of observation. The observer's paradox describes how the receiver of the gaze may become influenced through the processes of being observed, altering the quality of observing 'naturalistic' events. The tourist gaze is a similarly two-way process where the pursuit of the authentic is negotiated or constructed according to the type of gaze encountered. Whilst this article is more about the observation of urban landscapes, architecture and street ephemera, than human subjects, the mode of observation and the gaze play a vital role in the author's personalised accounts of ways of 'avoiding the gaze' and getting to what is perceived as filming an 'authentic' experience of the ex-soviet micro-districts of Tbilisi. Through a process of autoethnography the author examines ways of avoiding the tourist gaze including navigating the streets, filmmaking techniques and by experimenting with documentary styles of realism. Drawing on the field notes of the author/filmmaker, the problematic quest for the 'authentic' and 'naturalistic' experience of the tourist are discussed, in terms of the complex elements which determine the constructive gaze, with a conclusion that suggests the impossibility of avoiding the tourist gaze.

摘要

作者在格鲁吉亚第比利斯的边缘地带制作了数码电影《微型区II》, 藉此探索游客的凝视和观察者在人种学电影制作方法和纪实观察模式之间的悖论。观察者悖论描述了凝视的接收者如何通过被观察的过程而受到影响, 改变观察"自然主义"事件的质量。游客的凝视也是一个类似的双向过程, 在这个过程中, 对真实性的追求是根据所遇到的凝视类型来协商或构建的。虽然这篇文章更多的是对城市景观、建筑和街道的观察, 而不是对人类的观察。观察方式和凝视在作者的个人描述中扮演着至关重要的角色, "避免凝视", 并获得被认为是拍摄第比利斯前苏联微型地区的"真实"体验。通过一个自我体民族志的过程, 作者研究了避免游客凝视的方法, 包括漫步街道, 电影制作技术和通过实验现实主义风格进行拍摄。根据作者即电影制作人的实地记录, 讨论了探索游客的"真实"和"自然主义"体验的不确定性, 根据决定建设性凝视的复杂元素, 得出的结论表明, 避免游客的凝视是不可能的。

"They were rambles that reminded me that travel is often more about the particular than the panoramic; it's about paying attention" (Watson, 2021).

The way we look at something, and the effect that this gaze has on the thing we observe, has often been situated as an obstacle in pursuit of the 'authentic'. Avoiding the destructive effect of the gaze promises an 'authenticity [which] enables the traveler to overcome the tourist gaze' (Woodside, 2015, p. 375). However, our methods of observation are part of what, I argue, is the constructive gaze of the observer: a two-way process in which both observer and the observed co-construct an 'atmosphere' of the authentic. Examples of this two-way gaze, from a variety of disciplines, include: the Heisenberg Effect in physics (Salkind, 2010), otherwise linked to the 'observer effect' (Baclawski, 2018); cinema and Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' (Heath et al., 2004); as a particular way men observe women on screen; the panopticon of Michel Foucault (1977), which explored the power relationship inherent in the gaze of surveillance; and in tourist studies 'the tourist gaze', a two-way process which enables locals to provide what they perceive as an authentic experience for tourists (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011).

This article utilises and explores two forms of observation and their effects relevant to tourism studies and ethnographic video: the tourist's gaze and the observer's paradox. In ethnographic accounts the observer's paradox, a phrase introduced by William Labov (1972), describes how the receiver of the gaze may become influenced through the processes of being observed. The observer's paradox is framed as a negative consequence of observation which alters the 'naturalistic' (*or authentic*) scene, so that the observer becomes an unwanted part of the data collected. In ethnography the authentic experience is related to the observation of events which would have occurred even if the observer had not been there: Jonathan Potter's test stating that the true naturalistic data would still exist had' the researcher not been born' (1996, p. 135); meaning that there should be *zero* effect resulting from observation. In comparison with the observer's paradox is John Urry's concept of the 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011), whereby the gaze contains the 'expectations that tourists place on local populations […] in the search for having 'authentic' (*or naturalistic*) experiences' (Woodside, 2015, p. 373). In both cases, the *authentic, naturalistic* experience of the space is polluted through the act of looking, and in both cases there is serious doubt that this is unavoidable. For Urry, the tourist gaze is enmeshed within 'the exercise of power [which] perpetually creates knowledge' (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b, p. 52): a constructive gaze which both organises the sensory impressions of the tourist, as well as reflecting back a particular power relationship for the inhabitants of the place to see.

In this sense, the tourist gaze is a two-way process, influencing tourism heavy locations and their inhabitants to provide *that* which the tourist is *looking for*, and at the same time, informing the tourist of what it is they have *found* echoing their expectations. The two-way nature of the tourist gaze, which, according to Arch Woodside, obstructs the reception of 'authentic experiences' is also echoed in the observer's paradox, whereby the actions of intrusive observation affect the behaviour of participants: a contamination of the field resulting from the participatory actions of the researcher (Hazel, 2016, p. 447). In each case, the pursuit of 'authentic' and

'naturalistic' experiences depend on 'avoiding the gaze' - a problematic exercise guiding my exploratory processes of observing and filming the Nutsubidze Plateau II outer suburbs of Tbilisi, Georgia.

Seeking a place to stay in off-season Georgia, whilst awaiting my next work assignment as a video ethnographer, it was a chance event that a friend's family NGO happened to own a small apartment, located far from the usual tourist locations in the run-down soviet-style housing district Nutsubidze Plateau II, a place I had never heard of (Figure 1). I stayed for one month, alone in an unfamiliar outcrop on the far edges of the city, living in a sprawling housing estate, in an area which geographer Marion Shoard would identify as the 'edgelands […] characterized by a sort of utilitarian disregard […] areas through which we usually pass, unthinking, on the place to somewhere else: they are literally hidden in plain sight' (Shoard, 2001. Cited in Dickinson, 2017, p. 226). As I looked around the area I wondered what sort of gaze would an observer need to develop an understanding of the edgelands 'hidden in plain sight'?

Living for years on a run down council housing estate in East London during the nineties I was particularly intrigued when, through a series of unexpected events, I found myself spending the month of December 2018 in the outer suburbs of Tbilisi. The micro districts of Tbilisi drew many visual parallels with nineties East London: as places of socio-economic neglect and low-budget social housing projects dominating the skylines, creating an atmosphere of low expectations and diminutive human scale. With the cold mornings of winter approaching and increasing scatterings of snow on the surrounding hills, I wondered what I would do for this month of residency, which looking back, seemed like a situation similar to our present days of COVID-19 lockdowns of limited opportunities and isolation.

One way for the traveller to 'overcome the tourist gaze', according to Woodside, is to become a 'native-visitor' (2015, p. 375), something which I attempted to project in my movement through the space, walking with an appearance of purpose and using inner-city streetwise to keep a detached peripheral gaze and return greetings

Figure 1. Soviet era house estate in Nutsubidze Plateau II, Tbilisi (©2020 Photograph: Author).

to strangers if deemed appropriate. In terms of Woodside's sliding scale of native-visitor, my invited stay at the local apartment of friends and my own ethnographic interests, would place me somewhere between a 'honorary native-visitor' and a 'scholarly tourist' (Ibid), affecting my own self-image in relation to the surroundings, the sense of 'homeliness' I felt and the type of tourist gaze through which I saw the surroundings. Other factors affecting the tourist gaze included being a lone traveller, middle aged, male, dressed in locally obtained clothing, lacking any signs of overt prosperity and the months I had already spent travelling and working locally, in a similarly low key fashion, in Armenia, India and Nepal. Another major factor affecting the tourist gaze was the relatively large amount of time I had allocated for the visit to the Nutsubidze Plateau, one month, my low budget and my relatively low expectations of what there was to see, and do, in the cold approach of winter.

The tourist gaze is constructed of many such complex factors including 'differing tourist motivations and expectations, including the desire for pleasure, excitement, recreation, spirituality or education [which all] construct alternate gazes' (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021, p. 345). In this sense, my time in the Nutsubidze Plateau was an ambiguous form of tourism which did not fit neatly into the typical tourism frames, motivated not by the pleasure seeking gaze, nor that dark tourism which derives pleasure from observing the suffering of others (Hartmann et al., 2018) nor ruinenlust potentially evoked by the 'council estate' type surroundings (Beswick, 2015). Inhabiting a form of 'edgelands' tourist category, intersecting with my interests in video ethnography, my time spent exploring the area was driven by the question: is it actually possible to avoid both the tourist gaze and the observer's paradox to get to the 'authentic' beneath the construction of knowledge? In pursuit of the authentic my aim was to capture an impression of the surroundings through video ethnography, immersing the viewer in a 'deep topography' (Rogers, 2011) to suggest some form of guiding ideology in the 'atmospheres' of the Tbilisi edglands.

Tbilisi is the capital city of Georgia, located east of the Black Sea; historically regarded as the crossroads between Russia, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, an area largely neglected since the exit of the soviet union in 1991. The side-tracking of economic investment and the visible processes of material decay resonated with my experiences in east London and unexpectedly I felt somewhat 'at home': the poverty of both east London and post-industrial Georgia sharing similar ghosts where, according to Tim Edensor, 'modernity is haunted in a particularly urgent fashion by that which has been consigned to irrelevance but which demands recognition' (2005). In the 'irrelevance' of Tbilisi's edgelands was a space where historical impacts connected with economic decline, where the ideological flight of the soviet union had left its mark in the decaying architecture and the material of the everyday.

The tourist's search for 'home', albeit a temporary pause between destinations, according to Yu Wang, is connected with the production of 'customised authenticity' (2007): a constructed feeling by the visitor which defines the perception of realistic contact with place and people. The feeling of performing everyday activities, cooking food at home, going to local shops, walking around the local area, in contrast to the pursuit of the spectacular, eating out and being transported to numerous tourist sights and places of interest, added to my own sense of authenticity dwelling in an area which at first glance seemed to have little in terms of an obvious tourist

destination. Authenticity, a highly problematic concept in tourist studies, can also be linked to a sense of 'disorientation', a feeling of entering into the everyday life of an unfamiliar culture and unfathomable circumstances (Tiberghien et al., 2020), although this may be more connected to more direct social contact, which was absent in the mainly deserted streets of the Nutsubidze Plateau.

The edgelands of Tbilisi

The edgelands of Tbilisi were not my choice of tourist destination, nor somewhere I planned to be, but my unexpected residence in the area grew to become a focus for an urban investigation using video as a means of heightened observation, edited into a short called *Micro-district II*. Mainly out of a combination of boredom and curiosity, I took to the routine of daily walks around the area, using walking itineraries such as: following unknown streets, taking public transport without fully knowing the destination, discovering alleyways through trial and error, walking towards the edges, and by using google maps and satellite images to find unexpected connecting footpaths across wastelands between urban areas.

Whilst Milka Ivanovaa and Dorina-Maria Budab may describe my wanderings as 'implicated in the development of an unwanted and uncomfortable form of communist heritage tourism' (p. 5), my feeling of 'homeness' within the utilitarian surroundings, the lack of any other tourists and the unobtrusiveness of a lone middle-aged traveller felt markedly different to the kind of dark tourism, as a voyeuristic gaze upon poverty and suffering, which Duncan Light ascribes to heritage tourism (2017). However, much as I could claim to feel at 'home', doing routine walks, the fact remained that I was there in the Tbilisi edgelands as a temporary (if 'stranded'), curious observer, with a far different outlook to permanent residents of the location. It would be difficult to deny that the power balance between observer and the observed were equal, the root of the tourist gaze being Foucault's link between 'the exercise of power' and the construction of 'knowledge' (Foucault, 1980a, 1980b, p. 52), in the pursuit of the 'authentic' experience of a space, one aspect of the tourist gaze which I struggled to avoid.

Walking was the main activity, it didn't occur to me to search the internet for places of interest, as I ignorantly imagined that this forgotten zone of Tbilisi wouldn't have any. I walked the streets, I kept a lookout in case of unforeseen dangers, and I observed. Rather than take still photographs, as I travelled the area I began to collect video 'portraits' of objects, buildings and urban landscapes using a Canon 550D, preferring the slight movement of handheld camera and the captured sound bites of these video snapshots over still images. It interested me to capture the most mundane aspects of the city, in a heightened state of observation, which found interest in the details of the city. In this way, it took me a while to realise the historical, social or political significance of the utilitarian ex-soviet architecture of the surrounding housing estates, but I started to notice that the atmosphere created by the buildings was beginning to become a more noticeable attraction for my observations. The aim of my routine walks became centred around the desire to document the immediate district, its architecture, environments and atmospheres whilst at the same time, recording my impressions and imaginations triggered by observant experiences within an urban landscape.

The wandering gaze: walking strategies

I began by taking video snapshots of the walls, near to the local bus stop, where I couldn't help but be amazed by the chance encounters generated by decaying layers of unfamiliar typefaces, political posters, informal adverts, telephone numbers and crumbling walls (Figure 2). The video snapshots captured a trace of the observer: the eye of the camera searching the details of decaying street walls; the gaze of a disoriented tourist, both creating and then consuming 'found art', tourist attractions and the cultural icons of a street gallery. In many ways this experience of finding 'art in the walls' was similar to Tiberghien, Bremner & Milne's 'authentic experience': as '"unexpected events" […] as being serendipitous moments' (2020, p. 7), unexplainable events brought about by 'disorientation induced by the visit to unfamiliar environments [which] can lead to visitor' perception of authenticity of the places and people they encounter' (2020, p. 2). I found that these 'unexpected' moments grew from a state of heightened observation bordering on disorientation: the chance stumbling across evocative scenes in unfamiliar streets, in a part of the city which did not specifically cater to the production of tourist attractions. Finding disorientation amongst the unfamiliar contributed to these states of heightened observation: the long takes used in making the video *Micro-district II* became a record of the length of time I stood still, in deep meditative observation.

For me, in the making of the video diary, the lens of the camera became an explorative form of 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011), that is, following a form of cultural tourism and developing an educational gaze or 'museum gaze' (McLean & Cooke, 2003; Cf. Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021. p. 350), whereby cultural preservation, through video documentary, becomes part of the learning experience of the observer. Although mass tourism has the potential to transform this type of

Figure 2. Street 'facade'- decaying posters, faces, adverts and phone numbers revealing hidden brickwork beneath the plaster. Nutsubidze Plateau II, Tbilisi (©2020 Photograph: Author).

one-way tourist gaze into a culturally 'destructive process' (Woodside, 2015, p. 373), the lone traveller, in an off-season climate and on the edge of town seems to pass unobserved by the limited number of local foot traffic. In addition to images taken from *Micro-district II,* I will also draw upon *production diary notes* made at the time of filming to describe the processes of making: with the aim of presenting an informal autoethnography which reveals some of the 'personal experience[s]' involved in making the film in relation to tourism studies:

> not speaking the language and having very little opportunities for social interaction in a brutalist landscape, I have become shy and introverted, even going to the local shop has become an ordeal. I make myself inconspicuous so that nobody will notice me. I wander the streets and capture video from a small hidden camera at waist height. Walking, observing, being inconspicuous and capturing video unobtrusively, letting the atmosphere, the landscape and the architecture speak for itself by using long takes. The situation is absorbed slowly through a meditative gaze that places the viewer into the standing space of the streets (video production diary notes of author, 2018).

My own technique for being in the landscape was a meditative gaze, facilitated by the camera and the making of the video project, which allowed me to 'absorb' the surroundings in a very internal and personalised way. These practices gave me a sense of 'authenticity' experienced through the materials of the surroundings, resonating with what Ning Wang calls 'existential authenticity' (2000): 'where the personal dimension plays a significant role in authenticating a site' (Tiberghien et al., 2020, p. 2). Having recently watched John Rodger's documentary 'The London Perambulator', the multi-layered images on the walls of Tbilisi took my thoughts to Nick Papadimitriou's idea of 'deep topography'[1] (Rogers, 2011): in some ways I was emulating the mysterious walking practices of Papadimitriou, which he claimed were part of a process used to reveal layers and energies from beneath the 'topography' of the urban landscape. One strategy I used in my walking was to set direction using a Japanese compass I had acquired during my travels.

This strategy of exploring the suburbs was more vague than using GPS mapping, which I had started to rely on as an aid to navigating foreign cities when walking with purpose. The advantage of the compass bearing was that it provided the bare minimum of purpose: to follow the setting until something interesting happened, whilst at the same time allowing 'mistakes' to happen. For example, I could find myself in a dead-end alley, or in front of an obstacle which barred my way, or occasionally I would stumble into private land, the back of housing blocks or abandoned factories. This inefficient form of urban navigation often provided me with a source of edgelands which I may not have found except through error. The use of the compass also became an excuse to be lost in places I had no reason to be in: a distinct advantage over the GPS map which warned me far in advance that the street I was following was a dead end. This became a useful alibi if questioned by a landowner, since I could simply show them the compass and demonstrate that I was following its needle towards an unstated destination, a useful visual prop in the sign language which results from a lack of common language.

My own intention for making the video was something which would span the disciplines of documentary filmmaking and ethnographic video where, as Nandini

Sikand recognises, 'both methodologies look to document and understand the human experience' (Sikand, 2015, p. 42).

The making of the video was also influenced by 'personal documentaries and diary films, [where] one encounters the world and others through a screen' (Savin & Shoshan, 2019): as a subjective search for 'authenticity' by recording the details of the neglected spaces of the edgelands, just as a tourist might film an art gallery in the more pic- turesque old quarter of Tbilisi. By looking outwards into the environment, diary films and personal documentary implies something about the unseen observer, presenting an implicit autobiographical first-person point-of-view, displaying something of the character of the filmmaker and the situation they find themselves in. In this way, many of the impressions in this article do not necessarily lead to an understanding of the greater events and ideologies which have shaped the landscape, but are instead more localised situated knowledge reflecting the gaze, and the avoiding of the gaze, of the filmmaker as: 'a portrait of another […] [which] nonetheless informs the film- maker's sense of him or herself' (Lebow, 2012, p. 1; cited in Savin & Shoshan, 2019).

In this sense, *Micro-district II* is tourism of the internal self: 'auto-ethnographic research' through which to explore the types of tourist gaze used in observation (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021, p. 348). This tourism of the internal self uses 'personal experience in order to understand cultural experience' (Ellis et al., 2011): a portrait of subjective experiences and impressions reflected through the making of a video, in contrast to geographical knowledge about the space, historical or socio-economic forces which shape the Tbilisis edgelands. The highly subjective itinerary of my so-called tourism in the Tbilisi edgelands, the amount of time spent at each 'attraction' and the use of idiosyncratic techniques of spatial movement can be related to Weimin Zheng and Zhixue Liao's use of 'personalized tour routes' (2019) towards the discovery of something uniquely unexpected.

Adopting a realist gaze: camera work

When I first discovered the ex-soviet housing blocks during a long aimless walk, I was quite surprised by the intensity of the handcrafted look of the buildings adding the individual element to the larger than human scale of the tower blocks (Figure 3). A sense of disorientation came from the inability to situate the experience of the housing estate with anything I had experienced before, with perhaps the exception of living for many years amongst a similar wreckage on the nineteenth floor of a concrete block I called 'Cockroach Towers', in East London. However, the main form of disorientation came from the sense of an ideology shaping the soviet-style utili- tarian architecture, this feeling of the social and political embedded within the mate- rials. I was surprised that this part of the city has been the focus for local tour operators, advertising 'brutalist architecture tourism' (Brutal Tours, 2019; Concrete & Kitch, 2019), a semi-commercial enterprise in many ways encouraging a tourist gaze with the potential for the production of dark tourism (Sharma, 2020).

Caught in the moral ambiguity of wanting to observe the everyday spaces in the Tbilisi edgelands, the feeling of soviet ideology embedded within the Nutsubidze Plateau II and my own ambiguous situation as both 'honorary native-visitor' and 'scholarly-tourist' (Woodside, 2015, p. 375), suggested to me that a conscious approach

Figure 3. The urban edgelands of Nutsubidze Plateau II, Tbilisi (©2020 Photograph: Author).

to filming needed to be taken. I was looking for a mode of observation which would echo back the depths of the surroundings. A visit to the Tbilisi Museum of Soviet Occupation revealed that over the long reign of the Soviet occupiers a particular style of artistic expression called Socialist Realism had been enforced onto all forms of visual works. I decided to formulate some rules for engaging with the landscape, a way of observing what I assumed to be an authentic voice of the landscape, deciding on several strategies for the making of *Micro-district II*:

- I would record voices speaking in public spaces.
- I would employ street musicians for music.
- There would be no excessive editing.
- No theatrical lighting.
- No camera movements.
- I would let the ideology of the landscape and the architecture speak for itself.
- (author's production diary notes)

I felt that these guidelines gave me the outline for a limited expressive palette of filmmaking which would minimise aspects of the tourist gaze to produce something 'spectacular' and therefore illusionary. My attempt to capture the authentic hinged on the limitation of filmmaking techniques which would distract from the observer's experiences of being immersed in a space which was allowed to speak for itself. Some of these above strategies bear resemblance to the stipulations of the Dogma95 manifesto, written in 1995, by Trier et al. (2019a), as a call for realism which questions that the 'supreme task of the decadent film-makers is to fool the audience' (Trier et al., 2019b). Amongst the rules for Dogma95 are the following rules:

Shooting must be done on location.

The camera must be hand-held.

The film must not contain superficial action.

Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden.

My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings

(Trier et al., 2019a).

Of the above stipulations I find there is a parallel with the aims of deep topography and the Dogma95 rule which states 'my supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings'. Despite the lofty goals of Dogma95, my aim wasn't to create some form of objective 'truth' from the surroundings, but to convey something of the subjective, sensual, experience of the Tbilisi edgelands through experimenting with avoiding an explicit tourist gaze. In practice these Dogmatic rules of realism were complimentary, and often overrun, by more practical decisions made spontaneously in the streets: where decisions to turn a corner, walk a road or explore an area would be made using a variety of elements, such as; the perceived safety of the area, whether people were observing me, if there was a cold wind blowing which would make it uncomfortable to stand capturing images, could I manage to film without being observed, or any number of 'attractions' or repellent aspects which unconsciously affected the filmmaking process.

So, instead of following strict rules to *avoid the gaze* I found that situational forces made me hold the camera at an unobtrusive waist height, meaning that access to the viewfinder was minimal, therefore, framing became intuitive. The mode of filming made camera movements more difficult, resulting in frozen static shots, as a meditative gaze originating from the lower chest or stomach. The gaze of the camera echoed that of an observational documentary, where 'staging, arrangement, or composition of a scene became sacrificed to observing lived experience spontaneously' (Nichols, 2001, p. 110). Observation was, therefore, thought of as a complex mix of Dogma rules and spontaneously improvised and chance-filled walks: drawing on the influences of psychogeography in which: 'we rediscover complexity and are forced to return, again and again, to the messy and open-ended matter of provisional, tactile, haptic, olfactory, and always in-process life' (Dickinson, 2017, p. 228).

The meditative gaze: deep topography

'the brutal functionalism of concrete as the servant of cold ideological concerns'

(author's production diary notes).

Seeing habitation stripped to the raw concrete (Figure 4) reminded me of the street posters peeling to reveal the bare walls beneath (Figure 2), a hint of the fabric of society beneath and outside of the well-funded tourist zones. Merlin Coverley describes such explorations as an attempt at 'exploring those marginal and forgotten areas often overlooked by the city's inhabitants […] seek[ing] to reveal the true nature that lies beneath the flux of the everyday' (2006, pp. 12–13: Cited in Richardson, 2015, p. 17). My motivation to understand the hidden depths of the decaying spectacle of architecture of *Micro-district II* drove me to be patient and suspend narrative until

Figure 4. The 'social fabric' of renovated windows in *Micro-district II* (©2020 Photograph: Author).

the landscape could reveal itself to me. It was a particular gaze which represented the difficult task I had set myself: to be free enough from the rules of documentary filmmaking to be able to allow the hidden depths of the streets to come through without the disassociation of the tourist camera; and to somehow bridge the gap between observer and subject to produce a deep connection with the landscapes of *Micro-district II*.

The intention of the observational process was that 'I hoped that ideology would be made visible through being present in a mundane situation of everyday life, observing and experiencing the everyday beyond the threshold of the boredom of the familiar' (author's production diary notes). By observing the everyday, through the meditative gaze of long video shots, the objects began to reflect the gaze back to me: getting beneath the surface and mapping the resonances between outer landscape and inner experiences, reminiscent of Papadimitriou's deep topography, so that 'ordinary features of the everyday world—manhole covers, concrete posts, walls, fences, rusting debris—here assume a mysterious significance' (Dickinson, 2017, p. 223).

To facilitate observation over a prolonged period of time, waiting for impressions to arise, I would sit or stand in a location for what seemed a long time, with the appearance of waiting for a bus, before the camera was removed from its unobtrusive shoulder bag. I would watch the street and the movements of the people, visually and mentally framing a shot based on prolonged observation and minimal intrusion. In a sense, the slow moving video was a way of making the overlooked become visible, similar to the dérives of the Situationist International, in which: 'the randomness of a dérive is […][to discover new] psychogeographical attractions […][and] new habitual axes' beyond that of the everyday (Debord, 1956). For me, the 'psychogeographical attractions' are undoubtedly the housing blocks located in the Saburtalo District, north of Nutsubidze street, designed by the architects Otar Kalandarishvili and Guizo Potskhishvili and constructed between 1974–1976, the 'sky bridge walkways' (AdamXphotos, 2018), which display a particularly brutalist style of functionality over design, as seen below:

Daily walks often took a route to deliberately pass these (Figure 5) 'psychogeographical attractions' as a way of setting the gaze for filming *Micro-district II*, recording that, 'the walkways between these rough concrete tower blocks have an unearthly, almost ghostly feel to them. Also the scale of the ceilings and room spaces which appear to be barely over two metres between stories' (author's production diary notes). I was frequently drawn to the location of these buildings, fascinated by the utilitarian design, the colour and texture of the materials and curiosity about the inhabitants who dwelled within, of whom I only saw from a distance. Lacking humanistic elements in the video content seemed appropriate since my main focus was on landscape and the human thought patterns and ideologies which allowed these large scale architectures to manifest as 'concretised ideologies' (author's production diary notes). The lack of human contact during my stay was also an element that affected my gaze, my long walks in the cold wintery air and the social isolation of a foreign language and written script. Sometime in the third week, during one of these walks I found a child-like mural painted on a retaining wall, representing a line of simple figures moving between stylised tower blocks, rolling wheels across the bridges (Figure 6).

As a contrast to the brutality of the environment, the simple industrious figures, shown above, have a peacefulness which also permeates the Nutsubidze Plateau housing estates. In many ways the lack of human contact in the study, usually depicted through interviews, echoes the perceived lack of humanistic elements inherent in the landscape, a tourist gaze constructing an abstracted image of social activities seen from afar. As before, I observed a practice of no camera movement. The procedure was to stand still in the location for 30 seconds, often with my face looking in a different direction to where the lens was pointed, as an added

Figure 5. 'Concretised ideologies' in the ex-soviet housing blocks of Nutsubidze Plateau (©2020 Photograph: Author).

Figure 6. Two shots forming a cross dissolve in *Micro-district II*: a child-like wall mural seemingly depicting the bridges joining housing blocks of the Nutsubidze Plateau (©2020 Photographs: Author).

precaution to being observed as recording the scene and therefore interfering with it. Avoiding the gaze, everything had to be hand-held as a tripod would draw too much attention. The challenge was to be able to hold the camera still enough for half a minute at a time. This was difficult in the cold, and there was a feeling that I was in some way stealing images from the uninhabited cityscape mixed in with the risk of being discovered and branded as a tourist gazing on a scene of misery. There were further dilemmas as I looked for places where I could stand for a minute or more without being noticed, by trying to avoid replicating the tourist gaze, when I found a good spot, I didn't lift the camera to my eye, like I had seen the tourists do, but instead tried to be unobtrusive and meditative in my observation of what I perceived to be ideologies beneath the surface image: looking with wonder at the brutalist landscapes of social edgelands.

The heightened gaze: cathedrals of ideology

My observations of the ex-soviet buildings started to assume the form of what I noted as *cathedrals of ideology*: as representations of ideas I began to unconsciously formulate the historical experiences of the inhabitants and the kinds of ideologies which had formed the landscape. The ideologies remained mysterious despite the numerous experiences of the architecture in the Nutsubidze Plateau and being driven by an assumption that 'the edgelands have much to teach us about the larger forces that shape us in profound but often invisible ways' (Dickinson, 2017, p. 226).

Filming in the Nutsubidze Plateau was, therefore, driven by a heightened experience of observation of the edgelands, a gaze which urged me to hold the camera static at waist level and stand meditatively in front of an empty factory, a broken wall or abandoned car wreck, within the vast cathedral-like expanses of the soviet housing blocks. No longer was it possible to avoid the tourist gaze which constructs the landscape, instead I became accustomed to viewing the landscape as 'the art museums of decay and churches of obscure ritual ideology' (author's production diary notes), a gaze which transformed the everyday streets into works of art, employing the same 'intensive gaze usually reserved for works of great art, landscapes of extreme beauty and architectures such as the Taj Mahal' (author's production diary notes). Avoiding the gaze was a difficult proposition, the observer's paradox was such that the prolonged observations of what seemed to be mundane and overlooked, transformed the edgelands into an object of fascination, an attraction constructed through the tourist gaze of an ambiguous observer (Figure 7). The edgelands became transformed from 'graffiti-covered concrete abutments and derelict corners [to that which] bear the indelible fractures of time, money, energy, power, surveillance, and economic violence, and are stained by the spectral afterimages of their workings' (Dickinson, 2017, p. 229).

As I realised the edgeland qualities of the architecture, naturalistic gazing became less possible and less desirable than what could be imagined beneath the surface image: the tourist gaze became a constructive force superimposing a narrative over what is an otherwise invisible, unnoticed space. The act of looking initiates the production of narratives, the act of recording begins the process of filmmaking.

Conclusions

The 'tourist gaze', as well as the 'observer's paradox' has been described as a two-way process, where the observer influences the observed. However, in the case of observing the materials and buildings of the Tbilisi edgelands the effect of the gaze
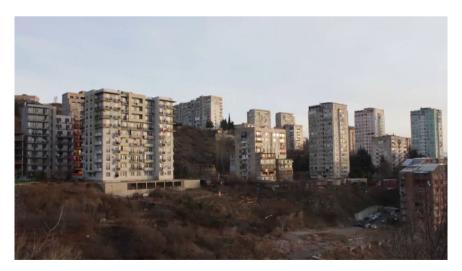

Figure 7. 'Cathedrals of ideology' in the concrete of the Nutsubidze Plateau (©2020 Photograph: Author).

cannot be reflected back directly, but instead through the representations recorded in the video. In looking at the processes used in making the film *Micro-district II,* I have attempted to avoid the tourist gaze by using various strategies of filming techniques which limit the expressive potential and attempt to convey a sense of realism: a stylistic realism which can also be seen as a particular frame through which to gaze.

Linked to the first-person diary film, *Micro-district II,* has been a mode of documentary which was driven by rambling walks and a sense of heightened observation of details: as if the observer was looking at relics in an art museum rather than the details of a marginalised edgelands. This heightened observation of the landscape, resulting in the long takes characteristic of the film *Micro-district II*, was used as a method of surpassing the threshold of observation and entering into a state of deep topography where subjective experience mixes with the so-called objectivity of realist-style observational documentary. In this article these processes have been explored under the idea of two concepts of observation, the observer's paradox which indicates the way that naturalistic data is lost through the process of observation, and the tourist gaze, which is a constructive form of observation emerging from a number of complex situational elements.

The production notes, visual materials[2] and personal recollections have been used in this essay to build up a picture of the complex layers of intentions, limitations and obstacles, which have been influential in creating an observational mode which avoids the two-way influencing of the tourist gaze and the observer's paradox. These complex interwoven processes of exploring the urban space represent methods in which we, as researchers, can construct an interdisciplinary approach to urban investigation, using combinations of ethnographic video approaches ranging from tourist video to ethnographic and documentary approaches.

In each case the motivation behind the research has been to find ways in which the gaze can be more closely entwined with the materials of the space: as an exploration of the edgelands which is not influenced by a particular gaze of the observer. The problem in each case has been the desire, both of tourist and ethnographer, to access the authentic experience of the space, a problematic if not impossible task.

Notes

1. The term "deep topography" is connected with modern adherents of psychogeography, such as the British writers Will Self and Iain Sinclair, who have been influenced by the urban drifts and verbal ramblings of Nick Papadimitriou in the film *The London Perambulator* (Rodgers, 2011).
2. *Micro-district II* is currently doing a round of documentary film festivals and a draft version is available for viewing at https://youtu.be/i4C1AnYtaik

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Emit Snake-Beings is an educator, researcher and practitioner in the field of DiY (Do-it-Yourself) digital creative technologies and media ethnography. His interest is in combining digital media with the practical, hands-on and material focused approaches of critical maker culture. Emit's

own practice as research circulates between interactive media, film, video, soundscape and location sound recording.

ORCID

Emit Snake-Beings 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5828-4603

References

AdamXphotos. (2018). *Urban exploration and photography*. https://adamxphotos.com/2021/05/04/bonus-post-nutsubidze-plato-1-skybridge-apartments-laguna-vere-swimming-pool-tbilisi-sunset-and-soviet-mechanics-murals-tbilisi-georgia-october-2018/

Beswick, K. (2015). Ruin lust and the council estate. *Performance Research*, *20*(3), 29–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2015.1049034

Baclawski, K. (2018). The Observer Effect. IEEE *Conference on Cognitive and Computational Aspects of Situation Management* (CogSIMA) (pp. 83-89), 2018, https://doi.org/10.1109/COGSIMA.2018.8423983

Brutal Tours. (2019). In Concrete we trust | Brutalism and Adventure travels in Post-Soviet Georgia, Ukraine & Belarus. (n.d.). Retrieved August 12, 2019, from http://brutaltours.com/

Concrete & Kitch. (2019). The Soviet Architecture Nerd's Guide to Tbilisi, Georgia. Retrieved August 12, 2019, from https://www.concreteandkitsch.com/2017/08/01/soviet-architecture-tbilisi/

Coverley, M. (2006). *Psychogeography*. Pocket Essentials.

Debord, G. (1956). Theory of the Derive. *Situationist International Online.* Translated by Ken Knabb. https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html

Dickinson, P. (2017). Biographical and critical overview of the works and career of London writer Nick Papadimitriou. *British Writers*, *Supplement XXIV*, 223–236.

Edensor, T. (2005). The ghosts of industrial ruins: Ordering and disordering memory in excessive space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *23*(6), 829–849. volume pages https://doi.org/10.1068/d58j

Ellis, C. & Adams, T. & Bochner, A. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research. 12. https://doi.org/10.2307/23032294

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1980a). Prison talk. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interview and other writings 1972–1977* (pp. 37–54). Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1980b). Two lectures. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interview and other writings 1972–1977* (pp. 78–108). Pantheon Books.

Hartmann, R., Lennon, J., Reynolds, D. P., Rice, A., Rosenbaum, A. T., & Stone, P. R. (2018). The history of dark tourism. *Journal of Tourism History*, *10*(3), 269–295. https://doi.org/10.1080/1755182X.2018.1545394

Hazel, S. (2016). The paradox from within: Research participants doing-being-observed. *Qualitative Research*, *16*(4), 446–467. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115596216

Heath, S., MacCabe, C., & Riley, D. (2004). Laura Mulvey, Visual and Other Pleasures (1969). In S. Heath, C. MacCabe, & D. Riley (Eds.), *The language, discourse, society reader. Language, discourse, society*. (pp. 224–243). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230213340_15

Labov, W. (1972). The study of language in its social context. In J. B. Pride and J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 180–202). Penguin Books.

Lebow, A. (2012). *The cinema of me: The self and subjectivity in first person documentary*. Columbia University Press.

Light, D. (2017). Progress in dark tourism and Thana tourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism. *Tourism Management*, *61*, 275–e301. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.01.011

McLean, F. M. C., & Cooke, S. (2003). Constructing the identity of a nation: The tourist gaze at the museum of Scotland. *Tourism Culture & Communication*, *4*(3), 153–162. https://doi.org/10.3727/109830403773043710

Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to documentary*. Indiana University Press.

Potter, J. (1996). Discourse analysis and constructionist approaches: Theoretical background. In J. T. E. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*. (pp. 125–140). BPS Books.

Richardson, T. (2015). Introduction. In T. Richardson (Ed.), *Walking inside out: Contemporary British Psychogeography, Part of the series Place, Memory, Affect* (pp. 1–30). Rowman & Littlefield International.

Rogers, J. (2011). *The London Perambulator*. [Documentary film]. Retrieved August 12, 2019, from https://youtu.be/TNGskCNrBHY

Salkind, N. J. (2010). *Encyclopedia of research design* (Vols. 1-0). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412961288

Samarathunga, W. H. M. S., & Cheng, L. (2021). Tourist gaze and beyond: State of the art. *Tourism Review*, *76* (2), 344–357. https://doi.org/10.1108/TR-06-2020-0248

Savin, L., & Shoshan, B. (2019). Filming the world from home: Windows in personal documentary films in Israel/Palestine. *Studies in Documentary Film*, *14*(2), 81–98. DOI:/10.1080/17503280.2019.1614269

Sharma, N. (2020). Dark tourism and moral disengagement in liminal spaces. *Tourism Geographies*, *22*(2), 273–297. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1713877

Shoard, M. (2001). Edgelands. In J. Jenkins (Ed.), *Remaking the landscape: The changing face of Britain* (pp. 117–146). Profile Books.

Sikand, N. (2015). Filmed Ethnography or Ethnographic Film? Voice and Positionality in Ethnographic, Documentary, and Feminist Film. *Journal of Film and Video*, *67*, 3–4. https://doi.org/10.5406/jfilmvideo.67.3-4.0042

Tiberghien, G., Bremner, H., & Milne, S. (2020). Authenticity and disorientation in the tourism experience. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*, *30*, 100283. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2020.100283

Trier, L. V., Levring, C., & Kragh-Jacobsen, S. (2019a). The vow of chastity: dogma95. Retrieved August 12, 2019, from http://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity/

Trier, L. V., Levring, C., & Kragh-Jacobsen, S. (2019b). *Dogma95 – The Manifest*. Retrieved August 12, 2019, from http://www.dogme95.dk/dogma-95/

Urry, J. (1990). *The tourist gaze: Leisure and travel in contemporary societies*. Sage.

Urry, J., & Larsen, J. (2011). *The tourist gaze 3.0*. Sage.

Wang, N. (2000). *Tourism and modernity: A sociological analysis*. Pergamon.

Wang, Y. (2007). Customized authenticity begins at home. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *34* (3), 789–804. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2007.03.008

Watson, P. (2021). *Ireland: Life under one of the harshest lockdowns in the world*. https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2021/jun/03/ireland-life-under-one-of-the-harshest-lockdowns-in-the-world

Woodside, A. G. (2015). Advancing tourist gaze research and authenticating the native-visitor: Introduction to a special issue honoring work by John Urry. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *9* (4), 373–378. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCTHR-08-2015-0083

Zheng, W., & Liao, Z. (2019). Using a heuristic approach to design personalized tour routes for heterogeneous tourist groups. *Tourism Management*, *72*, 313–325. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.12.013