# (Re)branding cities. The Culture of consuming places and virtual reiterations of space in promotional touristic websites

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**Résumé**: En subissant à la fois le statut d'un homo urbanus et d'un homo touristicus, on prend en considération une analyse interdisciplinaire des liaisons établies entre l'homme et l'espace urbain qui nous concerne en tant qu'observateurs, chercheurs et consommateurs de la culture visuelle projetée, cette fois-ci, par la cité anglaise réinventée sous le signe du tourisme. Dans une société globalisatrice où l'avancement de la technologie informationnelle rend possible la consommation virtuelle des cités-destinations sans le déplacement proprement-dit, on révélera à travers des exemples, la différence engendrée par la stratégie discursive promotionnelle (présente au niveau du signe textuel de même que visuel); c'est-à-dire une stratégie quasi-virtuelle responsable pour le transfert du virtuel (les sites web) au réel, au point où se forme l'impulse motivationnel vers une expérience directe dans la destination, accompagnée par une série de conséquences spécifiques au niveau des sens et des significations.

**Mots-clés**: tourisme urbaine, consommation, sémiotique, site Internet, identité de groupe, évasion.

## 1. Introduction. Leisure – cultural perspectives

As Richard Sennett defined the city as a "human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet" (quoted in Bauman, 2000: 94), leisure became the pretext and the object of this almost mythical urban *rencontre*[1]. An activity in itself and also a research field, leisure is to a great extent shaped by spatial politics, which 'work' in order to position people within patterns, geometries, or exclusion and inclusion (McDowell, 1999: 214). Leisure has been generally defined as an activity opposed to labour,

[1] Fr. 'meeting'.



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for instance left-wing historians debate leisure from the perspective of an analytical framework including gender, race, sexuality issues, with pleasure at the centre of it, in the context of gradual industrialisation and urbanisation – premises of a mechanical-type life prescribed by capitalism. Though, if we agree to that the 'pursuit of pleasure' defies engineered political analysis, we may assert that leisure is also about the pursuit of reciprocation in a hyperreal postmodern dialectics of 'togetherness' (Bauman, 2000), more or less forged by the consuming act of a group experience, described in the author's words as "*an event without a past*" and without a future, expected to be, "a story most certainly 'not to be continued', a one-off chance, to be consummated in full while it lasts and on the spot, without delay and without putting the unfinished business off to another occasion." (Bauman, 2000: 95). Bauman's irony is obvious as his concern is that the space especially designed for consumption[2] (exhibition, halls, shopping centres and cafeterias, sport activity sites, and so on) enhance on individualism, encouraging rather action and not *inter*-action (*Idem*: 97).

Furthermore, places ascribed with meaning involve a certain 'embodied knowledge' (Bourdieu), translated in a series of behaviours and attitudes moulded within the locality and eventually reflected in style and language (McDowell, 1999: 102). The place as a public arena of expression and self-expression, simulates *togetherness* through a socially preexercised intimate conglomerate of fears, dreams and wishes incorporated by a fabricated essence of *civility* (Sennett, quoted in Bauman, 2000: 95) – the *mask*. Civility – a question of private practice – represents essentially, in a preliminary phase, a feature of social setting, a must-learn of the urban environment (*Ibd*.) that facilitates communication and interaction.

We might say that the history of the individual as a place-consumer starts with the poetic image of Baudelaire's *flâneur,* archetype of urban, modern experience portrayed in the 19th century's literature, conveying thus meaning to architecture and urban planning through a reading experience. Later, the 'society of spectacle' (Debord 1994) showcased the significance of consumption and advertising as the main aspects of economic and urban development (McDowell, 1999: 159). Nowadays we might be tempted to reconsider urban context as a construction mapped in terms of gender stereotypes and labour division, shifted by hedonist pursuits, which eventually lead to economic benefits; as Linda McDowell

[2] The concept is defined in Bauman's words as "an utterly, irredeemably individual pastime, a string of sensations which can be experienced-lived through-only subjectivity" (Bauman, 2000: 97).



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states, "indeed, at the end of the twentieth century, consumption, advertising and shopping have become identified as the essence of postmodernity, in which spectacle and desire combine to produce fluid subjects who are ambiguously gendered" (*Idem*: 163). In this light, we can't refrain from framing (city)-consumption[3] as leisure, as the latter contributes to increasing life-satisfaction, whilst its frequency demonstrates the level of life-quality and life-style of the individual/group/community. Actually, one of contemporary approaches[4] is the phenomenon of "cultural omnivorousness" which studies leisure behaviour as an indicator of cultural capital (Stalker, 2011, 82). Leisure behaviour is understood under the sign of cultural consumption, reflected at the level of one's education. In addition to this, the 'cultural omnivore' can contribute to a certain 'social commitment' through leisure activity. In the context where we believe that leisure contribute to improving urban life-quality and reinforce group-structures within the city, we may take into account Sennett's pertinent view:

> "Yet to design the modern city well, I believe we have to challenge unthinking assumptions now made about urban life, assumptions which favor closure. I believe we have to embrace less reassuring, more febrile ideas of living together, those stimulations of differences, both visual and social, which produce openness."[5]

All in all, leisure as a 'modern-primitive' gesture of place consumption, erases boundaries of otherness, reuniting communities from the inside of the town, but also from the outside, as we shall see in the following pages.

## 2. The 'Act' of Visual Consumption and the 'Art' of Re-Placing Cultural Heritage within the Virtual Space

From Thomas Cook's touristic packages[6] until nowadays' sophisticated and luring campaigns, we have understood tourism as based in the movement of bodies between physical spaces (Rojek in Ringer, 1998: 34). The development of Internet led to the reshaping of space through a different perception. In the literature of the field we find concepts such as the 'electronic geography' or *cyberspace* as a larger phenomenon which engulfs and at the same time represents the very 'location' where *cyber-*

[3] From shopping to thematic parks, food&beverage specific activities, clubbing.

[4] Garcia-Alvarez, Katz-Gerro, & Lopez-Sintas, 2007; Sullivan & Katz-Gerro, 2007; Warde et al., 2007; Warde et al., 1999.

[5] Sennett: http://www.richardsennett.com/site/SENN/UploadedResources/The-%20Open%20City.pdf.

[6] England, 1860.



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*culture* or computer culture activates as a metaphorical disembodiment of the Self and reintegration within a networking community. From an anthropological perspective, the concept is linked to the idea of "cultural constructions and reconstructions on which the new technologies are based and which they in turn help to shape" (Escobar, 1994, 211). In the case of tourism, cyberspace creates the opportunity of a virtual encounter; like real touristic encounter, it relies on visual perception which works this time in order to interiorise a virtual experience within an inner mental process.

Imagination plays an important role as it triggers on our need for the virtual (or fantasia in a first phase) and is responsible for the stimulation of the travelling wish. Cyberspace speculates escapism as the major need for mind-voyaging and virtual experiencing. In fact, the consuming of cyberspace represents the consequence of our intrinsic propensity for escapism and the desire to have a break from the monotony and routine of domestic and work space (Rojek in Ringer, 1998: 34). As Plant (1993) suggests, "cyberspace is compatible with swapping identities and liberating elements within us that are repressed in face-to-face interaction" (*Idem*: 33). The nexus of tourism and *fantasia* is possible within cyberspace as the 'would-be-tourist' mood is driven by the perceptual-cognitive structure of mind, which "tries to apprehend, grasp, understand or make sense or an experienced reality from page to place" (Moir in Burns and Lester, 2010: 166). So tourism nowadays must be reconsidered within the realm of cyberspace that erases boundaries between 'home' and 'abroad', as a travelling experience is thus possible without physical relocation. What we are trying to say is the fact that in the era of Internet, tourism develops as a cyber-culture in itself, transferring emotions and cognitive processes from the real realm into a secondary reality.

Furthermore, we believe that the development of 'virtual places' (Rojek in Ringer, 1998: 33) became a "major transformation in our understanding of the central categories of everyday life" (*Ibd*.). As the relation individual-place is based mainly on visual perception, in the case of urban tourism, the 'tourist's gaze' confers tangibility to perception as it triggers on emotions that will be transferred into a consuming act. Yet, an important aspect which arises at the core of our debate is that individuals consume places at a virtual realm on a daily basis: touristic brochures, TV ads, travelling photos in magazines, visiting websites, which contain "a wealth of information about sightseeing" (Moir in Burns and Lester, 2010: 165). Still, the virtualization of touristic places, involves the risk of transforming culture (and implicitly heritage) into a mere commodity, ready to be visually consumed. The simple gesture of a taking a photo and



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displaying it on the Internet represents the first step of the larger phenomenon that the mechanical reproduction of place will engender from now on.

### 3. A semiotic approach of British cities' visiting websites: Cardiff, Birmingham, Bath, Liverpool, Brighton, Edinburgh

In the following pages we aim at analysing the manner in which "local 'geographies' may be semiotically realized or produced" (Hughes in Ringer, 1998: 24) and also try to demonstrate, in the case of visiting city-websites, how design conventions became a part of the persuasive visual and linguistic rhetoric in urban tourism promotional language. We have chosen the six cities on a basis of both geographical and cultural promotional principles that would further strengthen the idea that landscape and cultural heritage are interconnected; what tourism does is to use the geographical features that shape a certain cultural specific, which in its own turn confers historicity to a region and thus identity. This conglomerate forms in fact the competitive advantage of a destination. Tourism language is much based on uniqueness and the linguistic promotional strategies are generally concerned with emphasising on this particular aspect that eventually provides *differentiation*, transforming location into *place*, geographic area into *destination,* culture into commodity, city into product. We shall see how high culture and low culture intertwine on these visiting websites, offering the 'opportunity' for virtual consuming a range of life-styles and specific regional customs or mentalities. As we think about the idea of urban space as a definite 'domesticised' structure within a larger geographical area, we shall see how representatives towns from different important regions of the continental UK advertise themselves for certain features; the geographical dimension represents already a competitive advantage, as for instance southern city Brighton is obviously different from northern, cold Edinburgh, whilst cultural heritage provides a unique competitive advantage to Bath, that cannot be found in any other city.

We shall analyse thus comparatively the visiting city-websites starting from the very *profile* that the 'product' wants to be recognised for, frame-worked within the competitive advantages[7] that they propose to the future tourist as a positioning marketing strategy. We are actually organising the structure of our analysis based on the Alfa-ingredient in the destination that categorizes the cities on the following types of tourism[8]:

[7] Unique Selling Proposals.
[8] Reasons of travelling.



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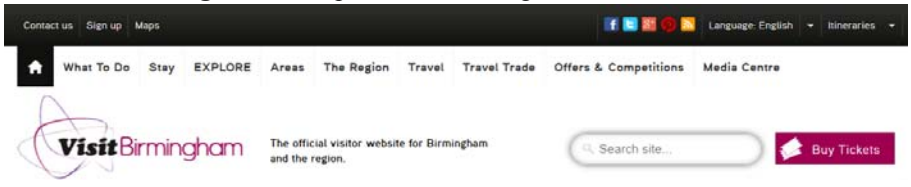
1. Cultural heritage (Edinburgh); 2. Sports (Liverpool); 3. Business and education (Cardiff); 4. Wellness and Spa (Bath); 5. Sun&Sea (Brighton); 6. Leisure (Birmingham).

The architecture of the visiting websites is built basically on the same principles; the differentiation is made by the advertised sub-product(s) which are in fact categories of locations especially created as to meet the complex and various needs of the visitor. As we can see from the following headlines websites captions, the elements in the menu and their distribution on the page, guide us into observing the common and different characteristics:

**Figure 1**. Compilation of visiting websites head-lines




Source: http://visitbirmingham.com/



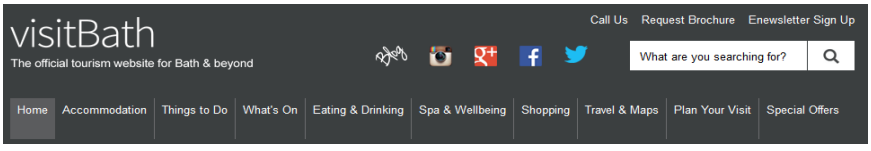

Source: http://www.visitbrighton.com/




Source: http://www.visitcardiff.com/




Source: http://www.visitliverpool.com/




Source: http://visitbath.co.uk/



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Source: http://www.visitscotland.com/destinations-maps/edinburgh-lothians/

As we were interested into analysing the content level, we have noticed that apart from a range of common rubrics in the six cases such as: 'things to do', 'accommodation' or 'eating and drinking', there are certain rubrics that remain specific to a certain city, like for instance 'Spa and Wellbeing' in the case of Bath, or WW1 (Brighton), determining us to opine that destinations are culturally determined.

**Cardiff**, the capital of Wales, *positions* itself in the mind of the future visitor as a "beautiful city" (http://www.visitcardiff.com/), with a special interest for business and study. The promotional clip inserted within the website on the right-side, presents the city in the light of a series of key-words which are visually incorporated within the space of the spot and further developed at the level of the verbal discourse; another interesting aspect is that the visual text is inscribed within certain specific *places* that are emphasised in a grammar of large crane shots; words become one with buildings designating certain characteristics of the city in connection with those that transform into *places* which exhale *meaning* and are conveyed at the same time with meaning. "Locate", "invest", "succeed", "enjoy" are the four verbs that join "Cardiff" in the first and the last image of the spot; they translate the profile of Cardiff city destination – work and business accompanied in the end with relaxation and the satisfaction of a quality business and entertaining infrastructure. Superlatives and other comparative degrees witness the satisfaction of visitors and the pride of locals: "one of the best cities in UK", "great spot, great people, great town", "shopping better than Milano".

The visiting website of **Birmingham** presents to its virtual visitors the promotional clip that was created in order to "tempt people who may have little knowledge of the city to explore its vibrant heritage, entertainment venues, culture and beautiful public spaces" (http://visitbirmingham.com/this-is-birmingham/). The reiteration of real places[9] within the virtual space of the 30-second film represents the very example of virtual place consumption, simulating the visual expression of a real idling through the

[9] Which together constitute the tangible heritage of an urban destination.



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town. A straightforward slogan ("This is Birmingham") reveals the city in a fast rhythm of locations shifting in a synchrony of nonverbal elements (gestures and clothes). The rapid change of location associated with the right piece of clothing worn by the feminine character invites the viewer to have an enriching experience into a day-to-day vivid Birmingham: Symphony Hall, Custard Factory, Jewellery Quarter and the University of Birmingham. We are even informed that during shooting, model Chelsea Killarney:

– Walked 7km across 43 locations;

– Was filmed for 60 hours during five days;

– Had 35 costume changes, and wore 10 pairs of shoes (http://visitbirmingham.com/this-is-birmingham/).

What we are trying to say is that similar spots inserted within the visiting city-websites represent a form of a *proto*-cyber-tourism; individuals are offered a brief insight into the destination – that is actually an inverted trajectory of the travelling cycle, from destination to the home environment[10] of the individual: the body stays home, whilst the mind voyages abroad. At the same time, this is also an example of *virtual interactive advertising* (in opposition to passive advertising), as the text is linguistically shaped in direct addressability, transparently communicating at the same time details of the spot's making-off.

**Bath**, a strong-branded city for the unique presence of the Roman Baths, offers on the principal page of its website a three minutes fifty-five seconds miniaturised film: "Bath in motion". In an accelerated filming, the places empty and refill as the day turns into night and the night into dawn and details are zoomed in and out as the camera transits from one site to another in a fluid movement. Important heritage sites are filmed in a spinning motion of a continuous series of aerial shots and the general rhythm of the clip is balanced by the lent soundtrack: "Night Time Written Blues" – Big Hat, an Alternative/Folk British band.

We can also easily seize linguistic intrusions from the paradigmatic axe of 'bath' at the end of the opening greeting text ("Hello and a very warm welcome to Bath and beyond"), as the verb 'dive in' translates an invitation to discover Bath beyond a city destination: "Whenever you visit, you are sure to fall in love with Bath... so *dive in*!" (http://visitbath.co.uk/). The linguistic aspect is reinforced at a visual realm, as we can grasp the meaning of this imperative in the caption below:

[10] Technologically covered.



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**Figure 2**. Thermae Bath Spa
Source: http://visitbath.co.uk/things-to-do/thermae-bath-spa-p26231

Culture, place and marketing intertwine in a grammar of promotional discursive strategy in the case of Jane Austen's Home, which is no longer a passive heritage-place, but the very example of interactive marketing as it is transformed into a commodity ready to be recreated as an accommodation. The marketing strategy relies on a matter of territorializing through cultural competence, as the offer consists in a prize for the participant who finds the most suitable *name* for the penthouse:

> "The first three apartments are aptly named after Emma, Cassandra and Mr Darcy, but the penthouse is yet to be named! We're asking you to come up with a suitably Jane Austen related name for the final apartment. The best suggestion will be picked and awarded the following fantastic prize…
> • A two night stay for two people in a boutique self-catering apartment in Jane Austen's Home.
> • A complimentary pass for two people to Bath's top attractions.
> • Dinner for two at the Roman Baths Kitchen."[11]




**Figure 3.** Competition Jane Austen accommodation offer

[11] Source: https://competitions.visitbath.co.uk/competition/name-the-apartment-and-win-a-2-night-stay/.



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It is in **Liverpool** that we find another case of place branding by cultural association. A successful project which won People's Choice Award at the Liverpool City Region Annual Tourism Awards in 2012 (http://www.visitliverpool.com/things-to-do/beatles-story-p8393), in a city that advertises itself as "a city of culture, heritage & people…" (http://www.visitliverpool.com/), The Beatles Story re-presents itself as "a unique, award-winning visitor attraction that will take you on an unforgettable, atmospheric journey through the lives and times of The Beatles" (*Ibid*.). In fact, "a meaningful place identity will entail not only substantiating those aspects of the city-as-product that are relevant to the markets in which it is to compete, but also addressing the distribution channels for marketing the destination. […] mass-market messages about a place messages are being replaced increasingly by a mass customization that involves the active search via the Internet for particular experiences which engage with individuals" (King 2002 in Donald and Gammak, 2007: 56).




**Figure 4**. The Beatles House
Source: http://www.visitliverpool.com/things-to-do/beatles-story-p8393

Though we would be tempted to label Liverpool exclusively as a sport city destination, the present season marketed under the slogan "One city, one summer" is dedicated to a mixture of culture, business and history which meet together in July during the International Festival for Business (IFB) 2014. As we find out from one of the presentation clips inserted in the bottom of the principal page, the festival includes a cultural program that ranges from "immense to intimate, from the mainstream to the marginal, from classical to contemporary" (http://www.visitliverpool.com/):

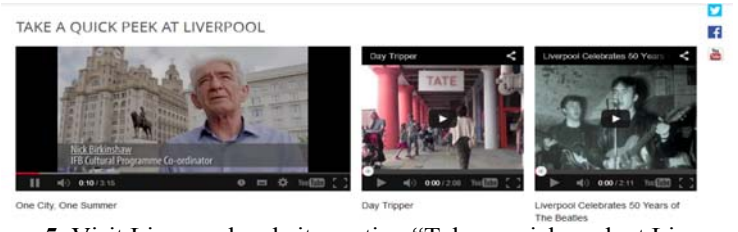


**Figure 5**. Visit Liverpool website section "Take a quick peek at Liverpool
Source: http://www.visitliverpool.com/



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The enumeration of these binary oppositions (immense/intimate, mainstream/marginal, classical/contemporary) makes the public feel *included* into an overwhelming presentation of a wide range of activities. Furthermore, the personality of Liverpool visiting website also distinguishes by the sky-blue colour of the head-line, suggesting calm and freedom; it may also forecast clear sky for the running summer season which is filled with inspiring activities for both locals and visitors, as this bright colour reinforces the emotion of hosts-guests connection, of home-destination connection, eventually of real-virtual connection. Actually, we underline the function of colour within the rebranding of cities as it has the capacity "to define perceived nature of space and the cultural and emotional characteristics of *place*" (Donald & Gammack, 2007: 115).

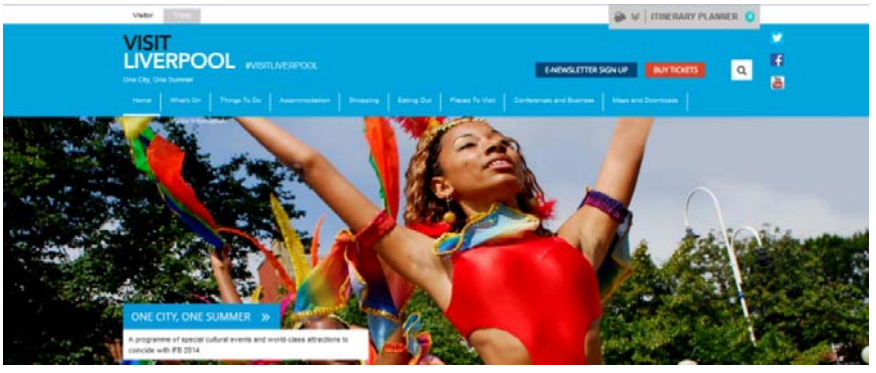


**Figure 6.** Home page of Liverpool visiting website
Source: http://www.visitliverpool.com/

The ascendant design of **Brighton** logo for the official tourism guide website suggests a playful invitation in the atmosphere of a sun and sea resort. The ascendant disposition of the logo's letters is associated with a change in colour tone. They modify from light blue to dark blue that turns into violet at the highest point of the word-construction and fades eventually into pink as the letters descend. We assert that this perfect balance between visual (logo) and textual (slogan: elements "Vibrant, colourful and creative, this is Brighton") brands Brighton a ludic image:

visitBrighton
www.visitbrighton.com

Source: http://www.visitbrighton.com/



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**Figure 7.** Home page "Summer of Fun" Brighton visiting website
Source: http://www.visitbrighton.com/

An official site of Scotland's National Tourism Organization presents Edinburgh and the Lothians as a regional entity, stressing upon the ethnic side of Edinburgh city as a touristic destination. The website front-page text is filled with adjectives like "stunning", "striking", "exhilarating", which belong to the same semantic field as the word "vibrant"[12], that we find on another websites as well. This linguistic strategy is employed in order to subconsciously imbue an energetic mood to the reader:

> "Welcome to Edinburgh, the inspiring capital of Scotland, where centuries of history meet a *vibrant*, cosmopolitan city in an unforgettable setting. Discover *stunning* scenery, *striking* architecture and fine food, and beautiful coast and countryside in the nearby Lothians. From the world's festival capital and a UNESCO World Heritage Site to world-class visitor attractions and *exhilarating* outdoor pursuits, Edinburgh & The Lothians is a must-visit on anyone's list." (http://www.visitscotland.com/destinationsmaps/edinburgh-lothians/).

Visit Scotland™
Scotland's National Tourism Organisation
Buidheann Turasachd Nàiseanta na h-Alba

**Figure 8.** Official logo of Scotland National Tourism Organisation
Source: http://www.visitscotland.com/

[12] According to Longman Dictionary definition, "vibrant"= full of activity or energy in a way that is exciting and attractive. Source: http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/vibrant.



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The dominant, intense violet and the exquisite logo imposes a certain pride and dignity sense of a community who discloses the local heroes' voices on a visiting website, the Official Guide to Edinburgh "This is Edinburgh". Interviewing Phil McHugh, a famous PR and media Scottish personality, represents a common marketing strategy of underlying the principal competitive elements that the public should become aware of. A start-type advertising, the interview's questions are essentially based on classical discursive marketing strategies meant to pinpoint elements such as: the association that the character makes with the word Edinburgh; the reason of pride for being a citizen of Edinburgh; an example of the way Edinburgh surprises him; eventually a recommendation for a perfect day start in Edinburgh and for a place to be on Saturdays (http://thisisedinburgh.com/things-to-do/local-heroes/phil-machugh/):

> (Interviewer) **"When I hear the words 'This Is Edinburgh', the first thing that springs to mind is…"**
> (Phil McHugh) "The City of Festivals. We forget how lucky we are to have so many globally renowned festivals on our door step every year. Edinburgh is the envy of most European cities boasting historic buildings, it's beautiful picture perfect landscapes and a vibrant buzz created by the hundreds of thousands who visit the us during Hogmanay, The Fringe and the abundance of events that attract visitors to return year after year." (*Ibid.)*

## 4. London between Britishness and globalisation. Conclusions

We consider *mediascapes*[13], a term coined by Arjun Appadurai in his famous article "Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy" (1990; 1996), as a relevant conceptual background for our thesis. As the author asserts in his *Modernity at Large*, whether produced by private or state interests, mediascapes "tend to be image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them in a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places" (Appadurai, 1996: 35). In this light, we believe that visiting websites as an advertising tool syncretise linguistic and visual rhetoric in a branded narrative landscape of identity re-veal to the Other. In the 'law' of accepting otherness, we believe that 'gazing' has a great impact, as we incorporate (and we can force the term up to ingestion) or become aware of it from

[13] Or visual culture.



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the very level of subconscious, through a visual impact. As for the *homo urbanus* the proximate urban space represents an exterior reality of the inner Self, the incorporation of it is due to three factors: genetic, cultural and societal. All three include loyalty (contracts), in different stages. In addition to this, we say that loyalty to the very Self represents a guarantee of identity and thus, of belonging to a certain community. Beyond the story that advertising tries to map as an identity mark in our mind we find the new global contract that brand-loyalty territorializes our daily post-modern living.

As it is obvious that we live in a world dominated by the *market* (Attali, 2013) – which has an intrinsic global feature (merchandising is free-boundaries), and in the context where *democracy* is local (it involves a nation-state, a community), crisis was bound to emerge out of this paradox involving these two fundamental piles of nowadays society.

We believe that the 'technology' of brands in the urban context conquered the world more than any other technology ever used in mankind's history, because it conferred meaning (no matter how artificially) to former ghettoized urban spaces, and reduced global spaces to *glocal* manifestations of universal human needs and desires, as eventually, advertising represents a mirror and a prescription of a society's mood at a certain moment in its history. Citizens perform in a decorum that unveils the true mobiles that trigger their existence, covered by the mask of civility.

Regardless illegal activities, we also believe that in the post-industrial era, the idea of community rises in the street. The relationship of the individual with this 'cultural' reality is transformed into a happening, an event (a strike, a concert, a graffiti run-away, a rave-party, a festival) – a mythical 'meeting between strangers', as Bauman would describe 'togetherness', as a possible definition for the urban community.

London city represents the quintessential example of a community within community story, which was branded in a more or less successfully multicultural discourse. The official visitor guide, visitlondon.com, presents a series of testimonials in the rubric "The London's Story" which strengthen the cosmopolitan image of London. For instance, Vivek Singh, an Indian executive chef and owner of Cinnamon Soho restaurant, talks about the interesting melting-pot of Soho district that inspires him in an everyday "global food capital of the world" – London (http://www.visitlondon.com/story/profile/32712626-londons-west-end-villages).

This widely yet complex view of the present analysed phenomenon, leads us to a multicultural understanding of today's urban negotiating power geographies as a matter of a reversed Colonizer/Colonized si-



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tuation. In this context, we believe that mediascapes succeeds into translating elegantly the terms of a new contract that the British *homo urbanus* must agree in the era of the visible yet subtle form of colonization that advertisers and marketers created as the utmost stage of a buying-selling capitalist process.

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