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Between literary tourism and contents tourism: Marcel Proust and his madeleine as a tourist attraction

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Abstract: Marcel Proust is a famous French writer and his series of novels *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) is considered a masterpiece of French literature. Consequently, tourism associated with Proust might be considered to be literary tourism limited to specialists. However, the two main sites associated with Proust in France, Illiers-Combray and Cabourg, demonstrate characteristics of contents tourism, not only in that Proust's books have been adapted into other formats but also in that fictional narratives are associated with the tourist sites. This article describes preliminary investigations conducted at these two sites as part of a broader research project about contents tourism in France. Initial results show that the image of Proust is associated with various initiatives to promote these sites, from an accurate introduction to his fictional universe to branding that uses Proust as a popular character and plays with the image of the famous madeleine.

アブストラクト：マルセル・プルースト (Marcel Proust) は著名なフランスの作家であり、長編小説『失われた時を求めて』 (*À la recherche du temps perdu*) はフランス文学における最高傑作とされている。それ故、プルーストに関連するツーリズムは、もっぱら専門性の高い文芸ツーリズム (literary tourism) の一種と見なされるかも知れない。しかしながら、フランスにおけるプルースト関連の代表的サイトである、イリエ＝コンブレ (Illiers-Combray) とカブール (Cabourg) の二事例は、コンテンツツーリズムの特徴を示している。つまり、プルーストの小説は書籍のほか、多様なメディア・フォーマットで展開しているだけでなく、これら二事例では、フィクションの物語が観光地にも関連付けられているのだ。本稿は、フランスにおけるコンテンツツーリズムに関する研究プロジェクトの一部として実施した、これら二事例の予備調査の第一報である。具体的には、これらふたつの事例 (サイト) のプロモーションを目的とした様々な取り組みに、プルーストのイメージが結びつけられていることを示す。そうした取り組みは、彼の創作世界の精緻な参照から、プルーストをポップな形でキャラクター化し有名なマドレーヌのイメージとして活用するブランディングに至るまで、幅広く実施されている。

Keywords: literary tourism, Proust, contents tourism, imaginary, French literature, promotion, branding.

Introduction

If one asks people in France what they know about Marcel Proust, the answer might not be about his literature and his novels, which are considered complicated and are not widely read. Probably there would be more answers about ‘la madeleine’, the famous cake associated with the name of the writer in a common expression to express a memory trigger: ‘la madeleine de Proust’. The name of Proust remains famous through the association with the madeleine and memories.

However, even if *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), Proust’s masterpiece in seven volumes, is quite long and difficult to read, the novels are famous and many people have a vague idea of what they are about. Moreover, Proust is considered one of the most important French writers and his name is associated with culture and literature. Even if the books are not read by a large audience, the work is a part of French popular culture through references like the expression ‘madeleine de Proust’, or in media contents like television (Proust’s questionnaire is a famous personality questionnaire written by Proust and was adapted into a sequence for a TV show in the 1980s) and pop music (a famous song titled *Du côté de chez Swann*, the same as the first novel of *In Search of Lost Time*, was released in 1975).

Proust’s connection with contents tourism

This research note about the tourist sites associated with Marcel Proust forms part of a larger study about contents tourism in France exploring its development and definition. Following the definition of Seaton *et al.* of contents tourism as ‘travel behavior motivated fully or partially by narratives, characters, locations, and other creative elements of popular culture forms, including films, television dramas, manga, anime, novels and computer games’ (Seaton *et al.* 2017, p. 7), contents tourism includes visitation to sites associated with a narrative world, regardless of its perceived position within high/low culture.

Analysis of tourism associated with Proust can benefit from using the framework of contents tourism, along with other sites explicitly connected to media contents (for example, the castle of Cheverny, which is associated with the Belgian comic *Tintin*, and the Café des Deux Moulins in Paris, which is associated with the movie *Amélie*). Marcel Proust is a writer, so tourism connected to his work and life can be defined as literary tourism, as can be visits to places related to famous authors, usually their houses (for example Victor Hugo or Balzac in France, Ernest Hemingway in Cuba, or Edgar Allan Poe in Philadelphia). The research question here relates to the possibility of considering Proust-related tourism as contents tourism. The difference between literary tourism and contents tourism lies in the vision of the author and the book(s): in literary tourism they are the sole objects of interest, while contents tourism is an approach that considers the entire narrative world that combines the author’s life and novels, plus all the derivative productions, related locations, and adaptations. This is the approach of Seaton *et al.*, who introduce various cases in Japan (for example sites related to *The Tale of Genji* or writers like Shiga Naoya or Matsuo Bashō) and also mention Jane Austen as a case of contents tourism (p. 8). Proust-related tourism does not only focus on the author and his novels. The destinations are simultaneously the places where the author lived and the settings of the fictional world he created. Visiting these sites, therefore, is also travel to real places that appear in the fiction. Imaginary plays a large part in visits, which is a characteristic feature of contents tourism (p. 5). From this perspective, I will examine tourism connected to

Marcel Proust through the lens of contents tourism, with the aim of bringing new elements into the definition and the analysis of fiction-related tourism.

This study focuses on Illiers-Combray and Cabourg, two cities that are explicitly promoting their connection with the life of the writer and with the fiction itself. Proust took his inspiration from his personal life, so many places described in the novels have equivalents in reality. Illiers-Combray and Cabourg are the most famous and are named Combray and Balbec respectively in the fictional world of the books. In this research note, I introduce the two sites and their specificities as tourist sites. I show how the House of Aunt Léonie in Illiers-Combray is emphasizing the pilgrimage aspect, while the city of Cabourg is trying to use the image of Proust as a tool for city branding and attracting tourists.

Illiers-Combray: the tradition of famous writers' houses

At the very beginning of *In Search of Lost Time*, in the volume named *Swann's Way*, the narrator describes the holidays he spent at his aunt's house during his childhood in the small town of Combray. This is modelled on Marcel Proust's childhood. He spent holidays at his aunt's (and uncle's) house in the small town of Illiers between 1877 and 1880. Proust took his inspiration from these memories, not only from the house but also from the surrounding landscape (for example, *Swann's Way*, the promenade the characters follow among the hawthorns, is modelled on a place called Le Pré Catelan). The most famous passage of the novels, the episode of the madeleine, appears in this volume and it is strongly related to the house. As an adult in Paris, the narrator is given by his mother some tea in which he soaks a piece of madeleine. The taste triggers a strong feeling of well-being and nostalgia, and he suddenly remembers his childhood, when his aunt in Combray used to give him a piece of madeleine soaked in tea. This is the source of the expression 'la madeleine de Proust', which refers to triggering a memory.

The aunt's house is an important setting in Proust's work, so Proust's friends and admirers decided to preserve it and to open it to the public. In the novel, the narrator's aunt is a childless widow who always feels sick and stays in bed all day. But reality was a little different. The house belonged to Jules Amiot and his wife (Proust's uncle and aunt) and their children sold the house in 1912. It was requisitioned by the city in 1954 and Société des Amis de Marcel Proust et des Amis de Combray (SAMPAC, Society of Friends of Marcel Proust and Friends of Combray)¹ obtained the right to rent it. They opened it to the public in 1956 (Saurier 2013, p. 38).²



Figure 1: La Maison de Tante Léonie – Musée Marcel Proust (December 2016, under renovation)

In her book about the house of aunt Léonie as a site of heritage and memory, Delphine Saurier explains that the general idea that guided the opening of the house was initially oriented towards sacralization and the ‘mystical’ immersion of visitors into Proust’s universe, a perspective confirmed by Mireille Naturel (2009). The interior was reconstituted as far as possible to how it was described in the novel, and a visit was considered to be an immersion into Proust’s universe and literature. It was declared a form of pilgrimage and promoted as such by Philibert-Louis Larcher, the general secretary of SAMPAC from 1947 to his retirement in 1969 (Saurier 2013, p. 43). Larcher wrote a book titled *Le parfum de Combray: pèlerinage proustien à Illiers (The Perfume of Combray: Proustian pilgrimage in Illiers)* in which he frequently used the vocabulary of sacralization and pilgrimage. This language was also used in SAMPAC bulletins, creating a ‘semantic network of devotion’ (Naturel 2009, p. 833). Larcher was also the first guide of the house. Consequently, only readers and admirers of the author were considered to be a good audience and ‘tourists’ not deeply connected to Proust’s art were not favored (Saurier 2013, p. 87; p. 111). However, in 1986 Anne Borel was named as the new general secretary of SAMPAC and she oversaw a new direction that emphasized the need to diffuse culture to the public. Financial considerations were also a factor. The house was reorganized and the declared goal was to draw a wider audience to Marcel Proust’s writings. The mystical pilgrimage was no longer encouraged and the connection of the house to Proust’s life (instead of the fictional world of Combray) was sought (Saurier 2013, p. 153). However, as Saurier describes it, the direction taken by Philibert-Louis Larcher to blur the frontier between fiction and reality (an approach also followed by the city — Illiers officially took the name of Illiers-Combray, after the fictional name of Combray, in 1974), was too strong to be erased (p. 153). The house remained ‘the house of Aunt Léonie’ as in the novels, and not the house of M. et Mrs. Amiot, Proust’s real life uncle and aunt.

I visited the house in December 2016 (Figure 1). Visitors are admitted every day (except Mondays), with three entry times a day in the summer (July/August) and two a day during the rest of the year. I went in December on a weekday, so I was not expecting other visitors. But a couple joined the same tour and together we followed the guide around the house. The explanations mixed details about Proust’s life and his family with allusions to and reconstitutions of the fictional world of the novel. For example, we heard about the history of how the house was built by Jules Amiot (Proust’s uncle), but then this narrative led into an explanation about a plate with pictures of asparagus in the kitchen (asparagus is related to a famous episode about Françoise, the family servant in the novels). Furthermore, the guide said that the bed in the room of the aunt was put close to the window ‘as in the novel’ (in the novel, aunt Léonie spies at the street all day from her bed), and in a display case there is a cup of tea and a madeleine ‘to evoke the famous episode’. In the attic, portraits of famous people who inspired the characters of *In Search of Lost Time* are displayed, and another room (which has the status of ‘Musée Marcel Proust’ – Marcel Proust Museum) on the ground floor shows portraits and souvenirs of the Proust family.

After the tour, I talked with the two other visitors and guide. The discussion suggested an initial typology of visitor motivations. First, there are Proust admirers, who keep the sacralized aspect of the pilgrimage. Our guide told me that sometimes people ask her for permission to touch things, like Proust’s writing case, or they ask for some time alone among the portraits to meditate. Another type of visitor is engaging in more casual cultural tourism. These visitors are more or less familiar with Proust’s writings and they are interested in learning more about his life and inspiration, either because they like the author or because they want to acquire more knowledge. The woman in the couple I met belonged in this category: she was a teacher of French literature and took the opportunity of being close to the house to pay a visit. She said she did not like Proust’s novels that

much, but she felt it was interesting and valuable to learn about him. She did not have the pilgrimage approach and depth of emotional feeling that characterizes the first category of visitors. The third category are the tourists who are not familiar at all with Proust. They visit the house as a cultural activity, but without really connecting it to the fictional world presented in the house. For example, the husband of the French literature teacher, who was probably just following her for the tour, was curious about architectural details, such as the materials and the period of construction. He did not ask at all about the writer. After they left the guide confessed to me that she does not like visitors who pay no attention to the fictional world and ask about trivial facts. In this category I would put another type of visitor, namely those who are interested in having a cultural experience but have little specific knowledge about the culture they are engaging as tourists. The guide related that some tourists have a list of famous writers' houses and they go from one house to the next. She explained that sometimes people lack detailed knowledge of Proust and his works, for example they think the madeleine episode takes place in the kitchen, or they condemn the discrete allusions to Proust's homosexuality.

As can be seen, visitors to the house display various characteristics as identified in the broader theoretical literature on the motivations of cultural tourists (for example, McKercher and Du Cros 2009). These categories highlight the importance of the imaginary and its connection to the fiction, or, in other words, the contents that draw visitors to this site. It can be related to the model presented by Seaton *et al.* who (drawing on McKercher and Du Cros' categories) distinguish contents tourists by the strength of their motivations, ranging from 'purposeful' visitors to those who are interested but not passionate (the 'sightseeing' visitors) and 'casual' visitors, who have little knowledge and are not deeply engaged in the experience (Seaton *et al.* 2017, p. 40).³ The preliminary typology formed during the exploratory fieldwork at the House of Aunt Léonie shows strong similarities with this model, and further investigation will be conducted to add detail to this preliminary analysis.

Cabourg: branding via Proust and the madeleine

The city of Cabourg appears in Proust novels as Balbec, a seaside resort located on the Normandie coast. In the novels the narrator spent his summer vacations there as a teenager to cure his asthma. In reality, Proust spent time in Cabourg as a teenager, came back to the city regularly as an adult, and wrote part of his masterpiece in his room at the Grand Hotel (Figure 2). The depiction of Balbec in *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* is strongly inspired by Cabourg as Proust knew it as an adult. There is a precise depiction of the Grand Hotel and its restaurant, which he called 'the aquarium' for its large window with a direct view of the beach.

Nowadays the city of Cabourg is a small seaside resort. It is not as famous and prestigious as the nearby city of Deauville, but it attracts tourists during summertime because it is quite close to Paris (two hours by car, three hours by train). Unlike Illiers-Combray, Cabourg is not completely immersed into Proust's fictional universe, but the associations with the writer are promoted. The fact that the writer loved Cabourg and used it as a setting for his novels is presented on Cabourg's official website as one interesting cultural aspect of the city (Ville de Cabourg n.d.) and the expression 'the Proustian city' is used. Information is given explaining Proust's love of Cabourg and the reputation of the city at the beginning of the twentieth century, while the images and information posted on the city's social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram) sometimes quote Proust. However, when I visited the city in August 2017, the connection seemed stronger than these first impressions and was oriented to a broader audience than just Proust admirers.



Figure 2: The Grand Hotel

Proust is not the only attractive cultural aspect of Cabourg that is promoted, but the city openly uses Proust's image in several ways. First, the classic image of the writer and the connections to his fictional world are presented in a similar manner as in Illiers-Combray. The grand Hotel and its restaurant (named L' Aquarium after Proust's use of the name in his work) make many references to the novel. There are information boards and displays, and room 414, in which Proust stayed numerous times, is called 'souvenir Marcel Proust' (Memory Marcel Proust). Furthermore, the seaside walk is called Promenade Marcel Proust, the restaurant at the seaside called Café de la Digue (Figure 3) is decorated with Proust portraits, and souvenir shops sell postcards and magnets with photos of Cabourg and Proust, sometimes supplemented by a quote from the book or the words 'the Balbec of Marcel Proust'. There is also a little train tour of the city and the guide mentions Proust, saying that he wrote 'the wonderful pages of *In Search of Lost Time* at the Grand Hotel'.



Figure 3: The restaurant Café de la Digue

But, along with these accurate references, some initiatives seem to be less connected to literature and rely more on the image of Proust in popular culture. The most striking example is the shop named La Madeleine de Proust (Figures 4 and 5), which sells food wrapped as souvenirs, including cakes in boxes decorated with a picture of Proust and madeleines in various packaging (Duval 2016). As described above, the episode of the madeleine is not related to the fictional Balbec, but is

the most famous element of Proust's work and is widely known in French popular culture. Moreover, the references to Proust's work are used more as a sort of label in a manner inconsistent with the sacralization that characterizes pilgrimage and admiration for the writer. For example, the beach shop is called 'À la recherche du temps perdu' and there is a madeleine contest organized by a bakery downtown. These uses of Proust references are quite far removed from the creation of an accurate atmosphere in which Proust admirers on a pilgrimage can be immersed. In short, both sacralized and commercialized elements seem to coexist in Cabourg.



Figure 4: The shop La Madeleine de Proust in Cabourg.



Figure 5: Proust souvenirs on sale

The city and its tourism department seem to be developing the connection to Proust through various initiatives. A statue of the writer was installed in the front garden of the Grand Hotel in July 2017. There is also a project to open a museum and the local government has made a call for donations from private actors. The image of Proust in a pamphlet describing the museum project epitomizes the mixed use of Proust in Cabourg. Proust is pictured as a cute caricature that might seem inappropriate from a sacralization perspective, but is quite appealing from an entertainment perspective (Figure 6).

While visiting Cabourg, I felt as if I was observing the beginning of a branding campaign based on Proust's reputation. Proust is a famous reference and the connection with Cabourg gives a strong and original image to the city. At the same time, the campaign would be oriented toward a limited

audience if it promoted Cabourg only as a site of pilgrimage. The addition of a new museum will enlarge the cultural and literary orientation of the city brand, and it could attract a larger audience than just ‘pilgrims’. As in the case of the house of Aunt Léonie, the declared mission of a museum would be to diffuse knowledge and information about Proust, his life, and his writings, a mission that might appeal to all types of visitors interested in cultural tourism. At the same time, the promotion of the madeleine and the use of Proust’s image in places like souvenir shops desacralize this cultural and literary image of Proust and make it more accessible to a general audience. Moreover, as a form of branding (Anholt 2007; Govers and Go 2009) the use of Proust’s image gives Cabourg a kind of logo and specificity which are easy to disseminate and are easily associated with the city.

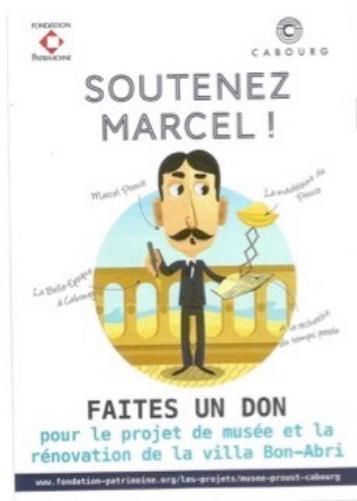


Figure 6: The pamphlet used by Cabourg City to call for donations for the future Marcel Proust Museum.

Following this exploratory fieldwork, I plan further investigations to learn more about the aims of Cabourg in promoting the connection with Marcel Proust and the audience they want to reach, and also to question the perceptions and reactions of tourists. But the research results thus far indicate that the effort to brand Cabourg using the fictional world created by the writer differs from the way that Illiers-Combray has sought to treat an important site connected to Proust as part of its cultural heritage. Both towns, however, play on the connections between the real world of Proust the author and the fictionalized world of his novels. Consequently, this research illuminates the making of a tourism imaginary and the incorporation of elements from a fictional universe to a real place. The use of a contents tourism approach with a focus on the narratives, characters, locations and other creative elements of ‘Proust’s world’ seems pertinent on various levels. Pilgrimage has been studied from the perspective of popular culture (Couldry 2005; Reader and Walter 1993; Segré 2004) and is part of contents tourism (Seaton *et al.* 2017, p. 10). Moreover, the branding campaign that seems to have begun in Cabourg is also an important component of contents tourism, and invites comparisons with the Cool Japan campaign and its tourism-related initiatives. This exploratory research confirms that there is benefit in viewing literary tourism through the lens of contents tourism, and that there are many cases outside of Japan that will enhance the ongoing study of contents tourism.

Notes

- ¹ SAMPAC was created in 1950 from the fusion of two associations, one dedicated to Proust and the other dedicated to the preservation of 'Combray' (Saurier 2013, p. 29).
- ² The house was later bought by the SAMPAC in 1976 (Saurier 2013, p. 38).
- ³ The model is completed by the 'serendipitous contents tourist', who discovers an affinity with contents via tourism, and the 'incidental contents tourist', for whom the visit is incidental and has no meaning (Seaton *et al.* 2017, 40).

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Clothilde Sabre researches the anthropology of tourism related to pop culture. She is an associate researcher at the Center for Advanced Tourism Studies (Hokkaido University) and at Clersé CNRS laboratory (Lille, France). She holds a PhD in Anthropology and Ethnology from the University of Lille1, France, and a degree in Media Studies. Her main research themes are the anthropology of tourism, contents tourism, imaginary, exoticism and representation, and popular/fan culture. She has been conducting ethnography among French fans and tourists in Japan for many years. Her previous research focused on the connection between the international success of Japanese pop culture and tourism in Japan, and she has published academic articles and book chapters on this topic in French and in English. Her current research aims to compare contents tourism in Japan with cases in France and Belgium.

クロチルド・サブレ。専門はポップカルチャーの側面から見た観光人類学。北海道大学観光学高等研究センター研究員、Clersé CNRS laboratory（フランス、リール）研究員。リール第一大学（フランス）にてPhD（文化人類学）を取得。主な研究領域は、観光人類学、コンテンツツーリズム、イマジナリー、エキゾチシズムと表象、ポピュラーカルチャーとファン文化。長年、フランス人を対象として、ファンや訪日ツーリストのエスノグラフィ調査に従事。現在、海外における日本のポップカルチャー人気と日本におけるツーリズム振興との関係性に着目した研究を展開中であり、関連研究成果をフランス語・英語の学術論文・学術書（章担当）として発表している。今後は、コンテンツツーリズムの国際比較研究（日本とフランス、ベルギー）を実施していく予定である。

About the *International Journal of Contents Tourism*

The *International Journal of Contents Tourism* (<https://contents-tourism.press>) is an open-access, refereed scholarly journal exploring the phenomenon of ‘contents tourism’, defined as travel behaviour motivated fully or partially by narratives, characters, locations and other creative elements of popular culture forms, including film, television dramas, manga, anime, novels and computer games. IJCT publishes articles of various lengths, from original research papers through to short blog entries. It is based at Hokkaido University, Japan, and the editors-in-chief are Professor Philip Seaton (Research Faculty of Media and Communication) and Professor Takayoshi Yamamura (Center for Advanced Tourism Studies).