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The Leaning Tower of Pisa and the smartphone of the post-tourist

Jean-François Staszak
Traduction de Daniel Hoffman

Cet article est une traduction de :
La tour de Pise et le smartphone du post-touriste [fr]
We are in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, an iconic building if there ever was one.

Many tourists are taking pictures: of the structure, of course, but also of themselves in front of it. It isn’t however a matter of the classic photograph, where one poses full-faced, smiling at the camera, with one’s back to the monument, nor of its modality, the ‘selfie’. Rather, it concerns playing with linear perspective —right there where it was invented in the quattrocentro. Back then, on the backdrop of a theatre stage, or in the background of a painting, they learned to indicate the remoteness of an object by reducing its size. It is this code that is appropriated and diverted at Pisa: visitors position themselves far in front of the monument, which they then pretend to touch, creating the impression that the person depicted and the tower are in the same plane, forming the illusion that the one is hardly any larger than the other. By placing one’s hands - or, less frequently one’s feet – and pretending to support the tower—or less often, to help it to fall—they appropriate a second, much more recent code: that of the snapshot. Photography, capturing an instant, makes movement invisible, and it is up to the viewer to recreate it. And here we are induced to believe that this photograph doesn’t depict an improbable leaning tower, but rather a (small) falling tower, seemingly confirmed by the body dynamic of the individual.

This complex tourist practice presupposes a digital camera: one must be able to review the image, making several attempts in order to achieve the desired result, which would be difficult with a film camera. Furthermore, one certainly would have hesitated to waste film in order to obtain such a make-believe image. The result isn’t a photographic souvenir that we bring back from a journey to place in an album, along with other more or less serious images, but rather a playful view dedicated to be shared immediately (Gunthert 2015), and to be consumed, we could say, on social networks. In fact, this practice, which forms part of a new visual culture, requires a smartphone: this kind of image likely was born with Facebook and especially Instagram. Be it in the taking, or the sharing, of the photograph, this practice attests to an evolution in the tourist gaze; the camera in
no longer just that through which a tourist sees, it is (also) that with which he or she does, in the context of a bodily performance (Urry and Larsen 2011).

The practice is ubiquitous, but it must be adapted to each monument. Here, it is the inclination of the tower that seems decisive; at the Eiffel Tower, which tourists enjoy pretending to hold between their fingers, it is the play on the size of the monument which creates the comic effect. In both cases, the effect of course arises from the obviousness of the manipulation (one isn’t trying to fool anyone) as well as the absurd pretension of the subject to be super-powerful. There’s an element of tongue-in-cheek and self-mockery to the practice, which can be placed along with "post-tourist performances" (Edensor 2001). The monument - the tourist attraction - passes, materially and symbolically, to the background; the foreground being occupied by the tourist, who is the true subject of the image and reduces, materially and symbolically, the monument to an accessory and object with which he or she juggles or dances. Through their cameras and by inserting their bodies, visitors transform tourist sites into stages for their own performance.

The author of these lines and the photograph therefore decided to give it a try, as an exercise. The idea occurred to him because he saw other tourists doing it. And this leads one to wonder how the practice reproduced, day after day. Would we need to wait, in the morning, for the first tourist to whom the idea comes to mind, in order that others then reproduce it? Does the angle of the tower constitute a sufficiently clear invitation that the idea imposes itself? In any case, there is no instruction manual. This photographer didn’t understand, for example, that for the effect to work best, the image should be framed such that the ground doesn’t show: it gives unwanted depth to the image, ruining the illusion of perspective. Or was the inclusion of other tourists also being photographed intentional, motived by the practice being interrogated in this post? It is photogenic enough to not have escaped the ironic eye of Martin Parr (1995), who made a specialty of taking photos of (post?)-tourists in real-life situations.

**Bibliographie**

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