



**The economization of urban living
in the global tourism age:
Extractivist and alternative paths in Naples and Brussels**

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Declaration

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Statement of conjoint work

I confirm that chapter 1 was jointly co-authored with Professor Ugo Rossi.

Brussels, 1st June 2026

Eva Sporer

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'E' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

*...und immer wieder, wenn das Lichtlein
oben brennt,
- Nachschauen und Nachschrauben...*

Papa, immer wieder

Meriti molto più di metafore o similitudini,
Su tutto ciò che dai e tutto ciò che prendi,
Su tutto ciò che ti danno e che prendono da te.
Mi sveglio con gli echi di ciò
che si dovrebbe pensare di te.
Grazie per mostrarmi in modo coerente
che sbaglio,
Grazie per avermi guidata con una mano
gentile.

field diaries, Naples, November 2024

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the place-specific patterns that fuel the economization of precarious urban living in today's culture-driven tourism industries and conversely initiate alternative approaches to urban knowledge production 'beyond' the tourist city. I show how the first set of patterns is highly dependent on the generation of 'Southern' urban imaginaries targeting the economic value-extraction of 'urban forms of life', whereas I attribute the latter to the surge of resident-oriented tourism and trends to 're-know the city'. The dissertation consists of three stand-alone but interrelated chapters, each addressing a distinct phenomenon of today's urban tourism reality while jointly contributing to a wider contention. The first chapter investigates the extractivist economization of precarious living in Naples in the platform-mediated tourism industry via the case of a local slum tourism startup. It questions the revisionist proposition of Southern urbanism's affirmative notions of precarity and informality as drivers of agency and resilience. The second chapter explores the mutually reinforcing relationship between the film and tourism industry in the urban revival of a previously marginalised Neapolitan neighbourhood by introducing the concept of a 'film industry-tourism complex', that reifies the Neapolitan urban fabric as a precarious 'living stage'. The final chapter centres a counter-position to the previous tendencies through an exploration of alternative practices of urban knowledge production, looking at critically-minded urban tours in Brussels. It discusses the role of 'niche-producing' knowledge within a post-tourist debate, between grand promotional urban narratives and 'lived' everyday experiences. Methodologically, this research combines ethnography, interviewing and participant observation. Ultimately, it shows both how the subsumption of precarity of urban life into value-extractive industries equally reinforces the precarious status of local industries themselves, as well as how possibilities of thinking tourism and the city 'anew' can be fostered.

Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract.....	vi
Introduction.....	1

1. STARTUP PRECARITY:

The Extractivist Economization of Precarious Urban Living in Naples	19
1.1 Introduction.....	20
1.2 Reappraising precarity and informality in Southern urbanism	21
1.3 Inventing the platform economy in the 2010s.....	27
1.4 Startup precarity: economizing precarious urban living in Naples	31
1.4.1 Slum tourism with Neapolitan characteristics	35
1.5 Conclusion	44
References - Chapter 1	46

2. THE FILM INDUSTRY-TOURISM COMPLEX:

The Reification of the Neapolitan Urban Fabric as a Precarious Living Stage	52
2.1 Introduction.....	53
2.2 Imagining the ‘Southern City’: the role of cultural industries in a touristifying European South.....	55
2.3 Thinking towards a ‘film industry-tourism complex’: Naples’ cinematic gaze	60
2.4 Rione Sanità – ‘a city in the city’: film location and tourist destination	68
2.4.1 ‘This neighbourhood is a constant set’: From precarious living to precarious industries	73
2.4.2 Animated urban space: The ‘living stage’ of Rione Sanità and its reification....	78
2.5 Conclusion	83
References - Chapter 2.....	86

3. RE-KNOWING THE CITY:

The ‘niche-producing’ practice of alternative urban touring in Brussels.....	92
3.1 Introduction.....	93
3.2 Conceptualising urban knowledge in the ‘niches’.....	95

3.3 Urban touring: between critical practice and resident-oriented tourism.....	101
3.3.1 The case of critically-minded urban guiding in Brussels.....	106
3.4 Conclusion	118
References - Chapter 3	121
Conclusion.....	127

Introduction

Contemporary urban tourism patterns have spurred a series of debates concerning long-term urban sustainability and the risk of over-touristification. Today, mass overtourism causes a multitude of studied and scrutinized negative effects, such as severe housing shortages, infrastructural strain, the replacement of local jobs with low-wage, seasonal gig work, overcrowding and resulting local resentment. Contrarily, alternative tourism is increasingly viewed as a possible path to reclaiming the use-value of urban life for residents and a more reflective engagement with the city. What unites both dimensions of today's global tourism age, is their expanding interest in urban living as a source of value-extraction.

This dissertation revolves around a critical examination of urban tourism and its ambiguous relationship with the commodification of urban precarity and informality as cultural heritage, on the one hand, and the possibility of alternative approaches to urban knowledge production beyond the tourist city, on the other. In such, for its part, it explores two dimensions of today's urban tourism phenomena, one with outwards-looking extractivist tendencies and one with an alternative inward-looking resident focus. From one perspective, it sets out to scrutinize the existing threats of an extractivist economization of local life in a variety of highly culturalised urban tourism-related industries, while from a contrary viewpoint, it looks towards the potential of post-tourist sentiments 'in the making', represented by alternative practices of producing knowledge about the city.

To grasp the economization of urban life in today's global tourism age, let us turn to the origins of our common understanding of the economy. In tune with Timothy Mitchell, I echo questioning the meaning of 'economy' before the making of 'the economy' (2022). Looking at society and economy as processes rather than reified objects, Max Weber's (1922) *Vergesellschaftung* speaks of 'forming society' and equally, 'economy' ought to mean *Wirtschaften*. The English word 'economising' however fails to capture the German one, which indicates the 'efficient disposition of resources' or simply 'to budget' in a colloquial sense today, conveying the idea of 'acting with frugality' (Mitchell, 2022: 838) over that of a bounded system. Tracing how the eventual disappearance of this

understanding of economy as ‘economisation’ in a Weberian sense transformed into the economy as an object, recasts *Wirtschaft* as an ‘economic system’ (see Weber, 1947 interpreted by Parson) as we know it today. This ‘system’ then can be considered a mid-20th-century invention of socio-technical practice and corporate organization, discursively ‘fixed’ through models and statistics, and the academic discipline of economics itself (Mitchell, 2008; 1997). This not only proves the performative understanding of economics, in which the ‘economy’ is not a timeless, pre-given domain but it enacts the very world it studies (ibid) but it ultimately describes how ‘economization’ today can be understood as the creation of an economy based on measurable wealth (Mitchell, 2022). Modes of valuation, using calculative tools and metrics like efficiency and profitability, are then crucial in shaping how things can be valued, re-valued and circulated.

Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon (2009) have proposed to examine ‘processes of economization’ via empirical investigation. Through these processes, behaviours, organizations, cultural values and more generally objects are being constituted as ‘economic’ (Miller, 2014). Economization has been interrogated by scholars, often looking into market constructions (Çalışkan and Callon, 2010; Callon, 1998; MacKenzie et al., 2007), the assembling of society (Rose and Miller, 2008) and the ‘environment’ (see for instance Macnaghten and Urry, 1998) or ‘life’ itself, pointing towards a biopolitical logic behind the governing of population for national economies (Murphy 2017). The neoliberal shift has also subordinated cultural and artistic production to the logic of quantifiable economic value, like tourism and urban regeneration (see also De Valck 2014, Lamont and McGuirk, 2017). It becomes clear then, that the logic of the free market has increasingly spilled over from the world of enterprise and business into every aspect of daily life. In line with these research endeavours, I propose to look into how by extension, space-specific ‘forms of life’ (Moisio and Rossi, 2024) become part of an economization process, being reified and evaluated using economic logics, specifically via commodification, that I consider to be a specific subset of economization.

However, tourism does not automatically ‘commodify’ a place in the straightforward way it is often assumed. The commodification of tourism that I highlight here tries to differentiate value-producing tourist commodities from rent-extracting ‘pseudo-commodities’ echoing the work of Martin Young and Francis Markham (2019). Iconic

attractions like national parks, cathedrals or other landmarks are then not commodities in the Marxian sense, even if they charge admission. They bear a price but no value because they rely on enclosure and the extraction of rent, rather than generating surplus value through labour (like hotels, theme parks, events, moreover, places where capitalistically organized labour produces the tourist product in situ and it can be separated from its context). This clarifies much of mass tourism's spatial political economy today and illuminates why tourism-critical movements increasingly focus on urban space, and the distribution of rents, rather than solely on sites of touristic production, shifting from a view of exchange value to one of use value (ibid). This matters for this work insofar as, unlike ordinary commodities that are designed for sale, 'pseudo-commodities' often have prior social lives and per-existing meanings that resist complete market capture (ibid). Urban living or specific urban atmospheres and places are then not 'produced' for the market, but the 'experience' of it is sold in tourism, highlighting its experiential role.

In this thesis, I consider urban living a 'pseudo-commodity' by being appropriated without remuneration of existing resources and living labour (for instance the emotional labour of local residents), hence extracting and predating value without creating a new one. These patterns ultimately contribute to the preparation for its exploitive economization; a view that is often obscured by orthodox economics.

Following this call, I focus on the economic and moreover ethical revaluation of historically stigmatized sites of precarious urban living in today's cultural-driven tourism industries and tourism-driven cultural industries alike, in such emphasizing their mutually reinforcing trajectories in the reification of urban living, and the extraction of a 'scenic economic value' from urban society.

Previous research has established many links between the economization of culture in mass tourism more broadly, by looking at the process of assigning a market value to cultural assets, traditions, and heritage to drive economic growth (see for instance Graham Dann's 'language of tourism', 1996 or Noel B. Salazar's 'tourisimification', 2009). These works have proven that the economization of culture does indeed not just operate through market structures but through representational processes. However, the literature still struggles to understand the subtly place-specific nuances of how urban living itself becomes a focal point for the preparations of extractivist economic logics to the detriment of place-

specific local cultural industries themselves. My thesis aims at investigating this gap using qualitative ethnographic research methods, ultimately demonstrating the risks of culture-driven urban tourism trajectories today. Conversely, it also sets out to follow the motivation of alternative paths to this tendency, as a possibility of ‘becoming stronger and limiting the grip of established forces’ (Callon, 2005:18). Providing two contextual settings for these developments, I firstly (Chapters 1 and 2) observe the highly touristified historic centre of Naples, an epitome of the urban condition in the European South, and secondly (Chapter 3) Brussels, colloquially called the ‘capital of Europe’, increasingly attempting to shift from a traditionally ‘business’ tourism destination to one of culture and leisure.

In the touristic historic centres of the European South in particular, niche forms of experiential tourism (a set of tourist activities emphasizing active participation and cultural immersion in a destination of interest rather than ‘passive’ sightseeing and observation) have long gained traction. With their goal to induce affective experiences in contrast to a traditional monumental tourist gaze, they are highly responsive to the generation and maintenance of spatial imaginaries of ‘Southern’ place-specific ‘forms of life’ (Moisio and Rossi, 2024). The latter encompasses highly visible components of precarious urban life that have been paralleled with an increased demand to experience them as an essential and inherent part of the ‘authentic Southern city’. Urban areas of the European South, already struggling with structural weaknesses and a peripheral position in national political economies and the Eurozone, have disproportionately been affected by an over-reliance on tourism-driven ‘growth’ paradigms and are highly prone to the extractivist economization of precarious urban living in tourism economies of today’s neoliberal urban capitalism (Rossi, 2022). Here I exemplify these trajectories both via the example of local entrepreneurial articulations of platform-mediated tourism patterns, through the case of a slum touring startup, and the mutually reinforcing effects between the tourism industry and other creative cultural industries contingent on an orchestrated urban scenery, looking specifically at the film industry and its imaginary-generating forces. This work highlights these phenomena through the case study of the city of Naples in Southern Italy, a city that continues to be referenced as coping with permanent urban precarity in creative, self-sustained ways, the so-called ‘art of making do’ (Pine, 2012; Pardo, 1997; Belmonte, 1979).

Another aspect of recent tourism trends is the rise of resident-oriented tourism patterns and proximity tourism. These patterns, derived from the work of Jane Jacobs, import urbanism ideals on vibrant, density-facilitated neighbourhood development (for instance ‘the 15-minute city’), highlighting scepticism towards top-down urban renewal (Jacobs, 1961). By prioritising short-distance travel to familiar locations, they aim at re-evaluating everyday environments in contrast to traditional tourism’s focus on ‘non-usual’ experiences. Here my contribution aims at positioning these phenomena within a larger post-tourist city debate. By taking the example of critically minded urban tours in Brussels, I show how such practices contribute to alternative knowledge production about the city. I consider them an ‘in-between’, in terms of the respective knowledge itself as neither representing grand promotional narratives about the city nor the lived knowledge of residents. In such, they ‘carve out’ a ‘niche’ that both looks towards new ways of thinking and knowing the city (a potential post-tourist *Zeitgeist*) while at the same time confronting itself with the existing one and its challenges.

The internal logic of my research therefore follows a reading of the political economy of urban imaginaries by introducing the conceptual framework of an economization of urban living within today’s global urban tourism era. Leaning on a performative, rather than timeless, understanding of the economy, I focus on the subtle mechanisms and articulations of how such economization is being prepared and plays out in the context of a Southern European mass tourist destination and how a capital city with increasing resident-focused approaches to knowing the city can stand as a potentially hopeful counternarrative to these tendencies. In such, I take on two complementary lines of enquiry: a critical account of the economization of precarity and informality in urban tourism and a more aspirational exploration of alternative approaches to urban knowledge production. An analytical lens traced throughout all three chapters is the generation and conversion of urban imaginaries into economic processes. Therein, I move from platform-mediated imaginaries to film (or more generally media)-mediated ones, while lastly arriving at urban imaginaries mediated by ideas of alternative urban knowledge.

More specifically, the objectives pursued in this work are: a) to show how urban tourism industries increasingly depend on the extractivist economization of precarious life b) to interrogate how tourism and other culture-intensive urban industries are intricately

enmeshed and mutually reinforce each other c) lastly, with a look towards a post-tourist era, to evaluate how alternative approaches to urban knowledge that sit between ‘grand promotional urban narratives’ and everyday ‘lived’ knowledge of residents, open up possibilities of understanding the city ‘in the niches’.

To address these objectives, this dissertation is structured as three independent, stand-alone but closely related chapters. Building on the view that urban living is often exploited without compensation, the first two chapters encourage an inquisition of the economic as well as ethical revaluation processes of precarious urban living forms in today’s culture-based tourism industries. Chapter 1 investigates the extractivist economization of precarious living in Naples in the platform-mediated tourism industry via the example of a local slum tour variant. The notion of ‘startup precarity’ coined in this chapter represents the conceptual starting point of the thesis by highlighting the dual precarity of culture-based enterprises that on the one hand depend on the monetization of vulnerable livelihoods and the emotional labour of inhabitants and on the other hand are faced with fragile economic survival themselves. The choice to start here is also a chronological one. Chapter 1 outlines how the onset of the platform economy captured Southern European urban political economy in the early 2010s, setting the scene for the advent of mass tourism and the ethical and economic reappraisal of urban precarity, later picked up and continued in Southern urbanism scholarship. This introduces the first mechanism through which urban living becomes an object of value extraction and positions the subsequent chapters (investigating more recent phenomena) within an analytical framework that centres the role imaginaries of urban living play in the political economy of contemporary cities in a global tourism age.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus to Naples’ ‘film-industry tourism complex’ as a set of mutually reinforcing dynamics giving rise to urban revival in marginalised neighbourhoods, heavily dependent on culturalised accounts of ‘Southern’ urban living. This chapter equally echoes a double challenge, in this case for visually intensive local cultural industries like film, both making up and being dependent on film-induced tourism yet being threatened by the very functioning of the latter. This is shown by the existential interdependency of tourism growth imperatives and the work of cultural industries, warranting the conceptualisation of an industry complex. This aligns with the duality of precarity put forward in Chapter 1. Moving from the impact of platform-mediated imaginaries of

precarious urban life on the culture-based startup sector in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 transfers the focus onto film-mediated imaginaries of ‘Southern’ urban life. Lastly, Chapter 3 evaluates critically-minded urban touring in Brussels as a knowledge-producing practice in the ‘niches’, ‘carved out’ between mainstreamed promotional city narratives and everyday ‘lived’ knowledge. The third and last chapter aims at encouraging a debate on the possibilities of thinking ‘beyond’ tourism, with one eye towards the unsustainable features of the existing tourism world and one towards the aspirations and making of a post-tourist one. The first two chapters interrogate phenomena that represent the extractivist tendencies of today’s urban tourism era, whereas the last chapter stands as its counternarrative, giving way to scrutinize potentially alternative paths of ‘knowing the city’.

Before further introducing the three chapters with their distinct case studies, let me lay out the reasoning behind selecting these two cities to address the work’s theme. My rationale for choosing Naples and Brussels, two cities seemingly contrary to each other at first glance, is fourfold. Firstly, I consider both urban centres as new tourist cities, emerging as tourist destinations in the last one to two decades, in a rapid and abrupt manner like in Naples and with a steadier pattern in the case of Brussels. In the case of Naples, airport passengers steadily increased after 2010 and exploded after 2015, quadrupling in the last 20 years, and re-bouncing in record speed after a pandemic dip in 2020 with a 66.8% increase the year after (Naples Airport, 2025). This paralleled an image upgrade of the brand of ‘Naples’ and a more culturally based urban development approach of city administration. Although Naples has always witnessed a touristic gaze, with one of the largest, oldest and most densely populated historic centres in Europe, known for retaining a ‘popular characterization with strong identity connotations’ (Iovino, 2021), it was for long rather limited to elite travellers such as writers, philosophers or cinephiles and otherwise intermittently off-limits to tourists. Its conversion into a mass tourism hotspot is a recent phenomenon, with the intensification of tourist flows driven by the expansion of short-term accommodation offers, with a 65% increase of STR units between 2016-2018 alone, the highest figure in Italy after Milan, ranking 4th in Europe in terms of revenues from this sector (Airdna, 2020).

Brussels, serving two airports, Brussels Zaventem and Brussels South in Charleroi, has seen a continuous steady increase in visitor numbers especially in the last 10 years, excluding the pandemic crisis. Although Zaventem, the airport closest to the city centre, handles over twice the passenger volume, Charleroi serving almost exclusively low-cost flights has seen a bigger and faster increase in numbers overall (Skeyes, 2024). The city is continuing to gain recognition as a prominent tourist destination within Europe, with a recent peak in the city's tourism sector in 2024, surpassing the previous pre-Covid record numbers of 2019. Conventionally viewed as a 'business city' and 'diplomatic hub', housing the European Union headquarters and related offices with a large number of expatriates working in the respective sectors, city stakeholders speak of a newly established 'maturity' of the tourism sector after 2024, with an increasingly prominent cultural scene, putting the once-underestimated city, usually described as dull and bureaucratic, on the tourist map. Whereas ten years ago, most overnight stays were related to business travels, in recent years, the city has actively shifted its focus from business tourism to leisure.

A second point uniting the two, is the fact that historically both cities can be described as 'slow economies'. Albeit being the third industrial city of Italy, Naples shows the highest unemployment rate in the county, frequently hovering over 20%, with youth unemployment being especially severe and exceeding 30%. The city's historical combination of economic weaknesses, underemployment and informal employment are important to account for here. The latter make up a notable portion of the city's labour, with roughly a sixth of jobs estimated to operate off the books (Iovino, 2023). Brussels' historically slow economic job growth stems from a rapid deindustrialization and a geographical mismatch between its highly skilled, multilingual workforce and the specific needs of the majority of local workers, employed in other sectors. As the administrative heart of the European Union, the city's economy shifted to high-value services, yet this growth generated fewer localized jobs and contributed to stark social inequalities. Correspondingly, although to a diverging extent than in Naples, informality in Brussels is deeply rooted and widespread throughout the city's economic activities, typically evolving around neighbourhood-level trade, black-market services and alternative transport. (Kesteltoot and Meert, 2002; Boels, 2014).

Thirdly, both cities suffer from an unsustainable tourism pressure in their historic centres more specifically. Let me offer one poignant example in each city. Besides Naples' suffocated tourist-clogged streets all year around, the historic centre shows another aspect of overtourism characteristic of the European South. Here, I speak of the performative enactment of paradoxical 'local' traditions without any locals, leading to the description of Naples' tourism reality as a 'Disneyfication' or 'playground' city (Squires, 2025). Among many examples, I point to the 'good luck' ritual of rubbing the nose of a bronze statue, which ought to represent a trickster named *Pucinella*. The statue was only erected in 2010 at the beginning of the tourism surge, with an invented folkloric backstory to attract tourists. The city of Brussels experiences an even higher tourist density per resident than Barcelona due to its geographically compact historical centre. This creates a disproportionately high friction between visitors and locals trying to navigate their daily commutes. Although the tourism management of Brussels aims at preventing over-tourism around the central hotspots (like *Grand Place* and *Manneken Pis*) via attempts to localize new tourist attractions in neighbourhoods outside the city centre, an increasing number of contested central urban spaces previously designated to public use and civic functions, have been converted into tourism-oriented enterprises. This rent seeking approach to financing the city instead of the stabilization of productive economies of liveability has led to local perceptions of the city centre as an open-air 'theme park' (Lyons, 2024). A prominent example is the conversion of the *Bourse* (the former stock exchange) at the heart of the city that has long been dormant and unused, into a beer museum (*Belgian Beer World*). The transformation faced intense controversy, as a privatization of a civic heritage building, causing damage to underground archaeological sites and disregarding the many alternative plans proposed by both urban planners and civil society. As we will see further, these plans have been heavily opposed and made transparent by the tour initiatives and associations observed in the Brussels case study of this work.

A final shared trait to be named is that Brussels besides Naples also experiences a 'bad' reputation and an image of degradation and visual disorder. However, what separates these two representations is that whereas Naples is commonly viewed as dangerous and a breeding ground for crime and malice in the national, international and global narrative, Brussels is especially seen as hazardous in the national imaginary. This view of a 'city of

danger' is a highly polarized cultural and political trope, amplified by social media rage-baiting tactics. While the city's actual crime rates are comparable to other major European capitals like Amsterdam or Berlin, the perceived rate of crime is remarkably higher among residents (Mincke, 2010). This narrative contrasts the idealized vision of a safe, utopian 'capital of Europe' with growing domestic concerns over high rates of mismanaged migration, drug-related gang violence, soaring homelessness numbers and fragmented urban integration. Especially already marginalised areas bordering central neighbourhoods (such as parts of the canal zone in *Molenbeek* and *Anderlecht*) and major transport hubs (like *Brussels-Midi* station or *Gare du Nord*) suffer from this rough reputation. Unlike in most European cities, highly marginalized and impoverished communities are located squarely in the city centre rather than in the suburbs. This urban core of disadvantage is commonly referred to as the 'poor crescent' (*'croissant pauvre'*) wrapping around the historic city centre, from the west to the northeast.

Besides the city's depiction as dull and bureaucratic, this representative component encourages the very initiatives I examine in the thesis's work on Brussels. By addressing these images of the city not with the aim to neutralise or ignore them, the resident-focused approach interrogated here tries to look into how knowledge about the processes behind these views can be generated, information that is not aimed at a promotional rhetoric of the city, traditionally associated with tourism.

Although both cities are relatively new to high tourism influx, the dynamics and timelines of this touristic interest are greatly diverging, as is each city's tourism management. Naples does represent the context of a mass tourist city with increased risk of overtouristification and pressure on the local economic and social urban fabric, leading to a series of negative externalities such as an unprecedented surge in housing prices, privatization of public spaces and waterfront, loss of citizen services, waste and atmospheric and acoustic pollution levels, among others. The lack of sufficient economic diversification and existing poor quality of public services to buffer the latter, has sparked debates on the construction of a tourism monoculture, demonstrating how tourism growth in Naples takes place in a rather chaotic and deregulated way. The local government has so far adopted a *laissez faire* strategy, in the illusion of offering opportunities for income integration to the impoverished low-income population. Whereas in Brussels, tourism has

traditionally been understood as balanced between business travel, international conferences, and leisure. However, especially the opening of major new infrastructures, highly contested within urban public debate as many are developing in formally marginalised areas near the city centre without a clear overview of benefits to the local communities, have increased the international visibility of Brussels. One defining aspect for the most current tourism management of the city (with the beginning of 2025) is the ongoing federal governmental shift towards stark austerity measures implemented within the Brussels-Capital Region. These measures both affect the cultural and tourism sector, more particularly because cultural infrastructures and organisations are managed by the city's tourism agency, with the funding cuts ultimately leading to the outsourcing of tourism responsibilities to the private sector (The Brussels Times, 2025).

Throughout this collection of chapters, I aim at integrating a view towards economization of urban living, either from an extractivist perspective or from a counter-positioned alternative standpoint. The goal of this work thus is not comparative in its essence but aims at investigating how today's urban tourism trends take on shape in their respective local variance. Having said that, the emphasis of this work is placed on the city of Naples, with the Brussels case study serving as a complementary example of opening up a practical possibility of thinking 'beyond' the tourist city. In such, the final chapter stands as a response to the experienced pressures of a global urban tourism age and its increasing economization of urban living, challenging the very notion of what it means to live and to visit the city. This chapter thus stands as a reflection on how the observed alternative practices challenge, negotiate and partially escape the extractivist dynamics analysed in the previous chapters while at the same time spotlighting their organisational and structural pressures, limitations and dependencies.

The remainder of this introduction presents both my methodological grounding and the key arguments emerging from each case study. Below, I briefly introduce each chapter, with its respective theoretical framing and main conveyed message. Although each chapter is designed to stand as a single piece with a detailed exploration of each case study, I move from extractivist paths of culture-driven tourism industries towards an alternative and potentially aspirational course. In such, this shift moves the analysis from a neo-Marxist and extractivist reading of tourism into post-structural perspectives. My intent here is the

conviction that the enrichment of this research lies in holding both possibilities together – extraction and enablement, while still avoiding a pure dichotomous framing or a solely optimistic stance common in alternative tourism rhetoric.

In the following, I equally address my methodology, encompassing the dissertation's overarching epistemology, research ethics and analytical approach, marking how the three chapters relate to one another methodologically. Given that this research dissects how 'knowledge' and 'imaginaries' about the city, neighbourhood, community and the life within it is shaped by historical, political, and economic power relations, I aim at not just describing urban phenomena but interrogating how dominant narratives about the city (e.g., 'gentrification as revitalization', 'informal settlements', 'the aberrant city') come to be accepted as truth, and whose interests those narratives serve. In such, this work considers reflexivity as an epistemological practice, questioning how urban knowledge itself gets institutionally and imaginatively produced (by planners, city agencies, tourism promoters, media) but also the potentialities of re-making and un-making the latter. Epistemological leaning is crucial in this work given that the final chapter thematically centres the very status, promise and ambivalence of urban knowledge production in itself.

Methodologically rooted in qualitative research designs with an eye towards critical ethnography, all chapters are based on extensive fieldwork on site, employing both narrative walking interviews and semi-structured interviews, as well as (participant) observation. The analytical angle taken to the interviews and observational material draws on the one hand on neo-Marxist readings of authors like Frederic Jameson, Marshall Berman as well as a leaning towards a performative understanding of the economy based on authors like Timothy Mitchell. On the other hand, it feeds on post-structuralist sensibilities that draw attention to discourse, subjectivity, and the instability of meaning.

This combination generates its own ethical demands, paying particular attention to research ethics beyond standard procedural compliance. It needs to be addressed that with my role as a researcher, being a white, cisgender woman that is an EU citizen, educated, able and institutionally affiliated, I occupy a privileged position in the field that allowed me to approach, meet and talk to most actors involved in my case study contexts. Further, being grounded in critical urban theory and heterodox economics, I acknowledge that my insights are shaped by ethical and moral convictions and an attention to power relations,

that both constitute my study of interest and inevitably inflect my interpretive lens. In such, I echo critical ethnographers (Madison, 2005; Haraway 1988) that understand knowledge as situated and produced from a particular vantage point rather than a ‘view from nowhere’ (ibid: 581). My own positionality is thus considered epistemologically relevant, rather than a bias to be eliminated. Accordingly, this work is not one of neutral observation but a critical reflexive inquiry. Given the commitment to exposing structures of power and inequality, particular care was taken to avoid reproducing the very hierarchies under study. In practice this meant foregrounding interviewees' own framings of their experiences rather than imposing external theoretical categories prematurely, and by being transparent about how my own social location (outlined above) shaped not only access but also rapport and interpretation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout, but this study also recognizes the tension between protecting individuals and accurately representing structural conditions that may be identifiable even when names are changed.

I detail the respective methods used for each chapter below. This multimethod approach forms the groundwork of a long ethnographic engagement with the Naples’ case studies conducted between June 2023 and December 2024, followed by episodic returns to follow-up. In the case of Brussels my research is based on a consistent confrontation with the field between September 2025 and March 2026, accompanied by a visiting period at the local Cosmopolis centre for Urban Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels. Alongside fieldwork, extensive desk research was carried out across websites, films and social media, regarding background information on all three cases, particularly Naples' cinematic history, the origins of the precarious housing tenancy of the *bassi* and the emergence of urban touring in Brussels.

The first article, coauthored with Ugo Rossi, critiques Southern urbanism's revisionist views on precarity and informality by examining the extractivist economization of precarious living in Naples' platform-mediated tourism, focusing on a local slum tourism startup offering tours of the *bassi* (precarious street-front housing). It introduces ‘startup precarity’, encompassing both the subsumption of urban precarity into value-extractive tourism and the precarious status of the startup itself. The piece concludes by urging critical reflection on the representation of precarity and informality as engines of agency and resilience amidst socially extractivist platform capitalism. This work, although providing

evidence of the findings with reference to the case study of the so-called Vascitour startup, is based on a larger engagement with the field between 2022 and 2024, entailing informal conversations and exchanges with residents of the *bassi* as well as participation in local activist campaigns. The informal talks included *bassi* residents across different areas all throughout the historic neighbourhoods of Naples. Additionally, the viewpoint of ex-inhabitants was noted, as they provide an evolutionary perspective and insight into everyday life in the *bassi* of the past until now. To complement the findings and to aid my navigation of the historic legacy of the *bassi*, I conducted eight expert interviews with relevant local researchers, authors and journalists. In two cases, the role of expert and former inhabitant overlapped. The first encounter with the startup Vascitour happened through online contact and led to the participating in their tour offers led by different guides and a series of interviews with the respective founders.

Focusing on the Naples' Rione Sanità neighbourhood, the second chapter explores how culturalized accounts of Southern urban life fuel a 'film industry-tourism complex', prompting tourism-led urban revival. This 'complex' reifies precarious living forms into a global commodity, a process I term the 'thingification of precarious living' drawing on Federic Jameson's concept of 'reification in mass culture' (1979). The analysis firstly details the local film industry's precarious operation despite growing economic interest and secondly shows how the dense neighbourhood functions as a 'living stage', producing atmospheres and economies that the complex commodifies.

This work is based on fieldwork carried out throughout the entire year of 2024, encompassing 28 in-depth in-person interviews with 'qualified actors' directly or indirectly involved with the local or foreign film industry and related audio-visual production scene of Naples and more specifically Rione Sanità, such as film producers and production studio representatives, the regional and urban film commissions, directors, actors, independent filmmakers, screenwriters, cultural workers, the tourist management stakeholders and film critics. The selection of contacts was aided through a snow-balling approach. As I quickly realized at the onset of my interviews, that the active circle involved in the film industry is highly interlinked and in general limited in number of actors, a comprehensive and relatively complete coverage of representation of the industry informs the empirical insights. As many of the interviewees do not have permanent offices, apart from the official

representatives, the interviews were held in public places like cafes and libraries, and private homes. This fact also highlights the highly situated and spontaneous nature of the industry and its adjustments to local conditions of creative work. In the case of walking interviews, I followed the interviewees throughout a portion of their daily work activities, including the meeting with colleagues, scouting of filming spots and administrative work. Additionally, a series of six online interviews were carried out, with qualified informants rarely present in the city as well as authors familiar with the local theme and the film industry at large.

To sketch a short overview of the contents discussed, it is important to note that the themes were adjusted according to the interviewee's involvement, agency and relation within and towards the film or tourism industry. Contents ranged from production processes, choice of scenery, involvement of tourist activities, changes in organization and permissions on filming, importance of neighbourhood changes, interests of different production studios and official municipal and regional stakeholders, local engagement with and in film industry practices. Additionally, the longer talks evolved more intensively on narratives and imaginaries, both projected in audiovisual products and in the touristic staging of the city of Naples in other diverse cultural outlets, and Neapolitan forms of life as consumable experiences on and off the screen, and more specifically those of the neighbourhood of Rione Sanità and its dynamically shifting importance in the city's tourism landscape.

The interviews were complemented by multiple informal encounters in the field, namely with filming crew members on set and residents during periods of film shooting. The brief talks revolved around the daily practices of work related to filmmaking, the involvement of residents and businesses and the perceptions of the everyday impact in the immediate neighbourhood area. The opportunity to come across filming spots was at times provided by hints and tips of entrusted filming staff or interview partners; in other occasions it happened by chance, or during my active scouting of the neighbourhood guided by familiar film sceneries.

The third chapter analyses critically-minded urban touring, focusing on socially-aware alternative tours in Brussels. It positions this alternative practice, between mainstream narratives about and lived knowledge of the city, within debates on post-tourism and resident-oriented tourist trends. Employing Marshall Berman's *'All that is solid*

melts into air' (1983) as a way of attempting to grasp an understanding of ongoing urban changes, I define the knowledge that the tours produce as a knowledge in the 'niches', creating a 'hollowed-out space' juxtaposing unsustainable mass tourism with emerging post-tourism possibilities. The work explores the knowledge value of the 'niches' and discusses the positionality of these practices within urban knowledge regimes. This work is based on qualitative fieldwork, including walking interviews and semi-structured interviews, as well as participant observation during the tours themselves. The interview partners consisted of representatives of tour initiatives and associations, freelance and 'volunteer' tour guides, as well as city officials. They mostly happened right after the tours, in the interviewees' respective offices or in public spaces and homes if the latter was not a given. The tours mainly centred themes such as past and present plans for new urban projects, the history and causes of urban inequalities, and an overview of lesser-known urban dynamics of change, among others. During my own participation in the tours, I observed both the reactions and questions of other participants in relation to the contents discussed. Additionally, I joined the initiative's internal meetings on three occasions. These meetings provided me with insights on organisational challenges and the respective internal working ethics.

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1. STARTUP PRECARITY:

The Extractivist Economization of Precarious Urban Living in Naples

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Abstract

This article offers a critique of Southern urbanism's revisionist propositions of precarity and informality. It does so through the lens of the extractivist economization of precarious living in Naples in the platform-mediated tourism industry. Empirically, the article focuses on a local variant of slum tourism in Naples, investigating the trajectory of a highly celebrated local social startup that offers guided tours of the so-called *bassi*, the precarious, street-front housing units in the historical neighbourhoods of the city. Conceptually, the article puts forward the notion of 'startup precarity', indicating not only the subsumption of the precarity of urban living into the value-extractive machinery of the platform-mediated tourism industry, but also the precarious status of the startup enterprise itself. The article closes with a discussion on the need to critically reflect on the risks involved in the representation, in Southern urbanism literature and beyond, of precarity and informality as promised engines of agency, empowerment and resilience at a time of socially extractivist platform capitalism.

keywords: urban precarity, urban entrepreneurship, startup precarity, platform urbanism, Southern urbanism, extractivism

1.1 Introduction

The goal of this article is to offer a critique of the affirmative reappraisal of precarity and informality in Southern urbanism literature. It looks at the ways in which the contradictions of Southern urbanism's revisionist propositions of precarity and informality, particularly in housing and labour, can be observed through an analysis of the extractivist economies that have emerged around the platform-mediated tourism industry in the urban South, broadly understood, and in the European South more specifically. As empirical evidence for this argument, the article draws attention to the extractivist economization of the precarious ground-level street-front housing units—the so-called *bassi*—in the historical neighbourhoods of Naples in southern Italy.

Economization is understood here, drawing on a definition by political theorist Timothy Mitchell, as the creation of an economy based on measurable wealth, as reflected in statistical enumeration and representation (Mitchell, 2008). Due to its political-economic marginalization, the city of Naples epitomizes the peripherality of the 'south of Southern Europe' (or, the European South, as defined, e.g. in Rossi, 2022), both historically and in the present conjuncture. In recent years, Naples has been increasingly viewed within a burgeoning urban scholarship as an exemplar of informality in citizen–government relations and the everyday management of regulatory frameworks, in ways that are evocative of debates over informality in Southern urbanism literature (Esposito and Chiodelli, 2020; Pinto *et al.*, 2023; Tulumello, 2023; Lieto, 2024). Naples has also become a much-cited example in the international mass media of the ongoing touristification wave experienced by Southern European cities, as a result of the advent of the short-term rental business and of related threats, particularly in terms of dissipation of local identity (see, for instance, Kaval, 2023; Sapio, 2025).

In this context, the empirical focus of the article is a local variant of slum tourism, specifically looking at a cooperative startup known as 'Vascitour' that was widely celebrated in the local popular media at the time of its ascendancy in the second half of the 2010s. The article introduces the notion of 'startup precarity' to indicate not only the subsumption of the precarity of urban living into the value-extractive machinery of the platform-mediated tourism industry, but also the precarious status of the startup enterprise itself, despite its

popularity. It ends with a critical discussion about the affirmative reappraisal of the precarity of urban living in the Southern urbanism literature and its dangers, against the backdrop of the extractivist economization of place-specific forms of life in the European South and in Naples in particular.

1.2 Reappraising precarity and informality in Southern urbanism

The new Southern urbanism theses that started appearing around the mid-1990s, becoming increasingly more vocal in the subsequent two decades (Robinson, 2006; Oldfield and Parnell, 2014; Pieterse, 2015), have prompted the academic community to spell out a radical rethinking of the received epistemologies in the field of urban studies and particularly of their geographies in terms of knowledge and theory production (Roy, 2009; McFarlane, 2010). With the comparative and postcolonial turn in urban studies, urban scholars writing ‘from the South’, in particular, have joined in dismissing any implicit or explicit role as mere importers of urban concepts and planning rationalities ‘from the North’, reclaiming the autonomy of urban theory not just from the South but from any ‘elsewhere’ across the planet (Leontidou, 1996; Watson, 2009; Schindler, 2017; Müller and Trubina, 2020; Robinson, 2022). The advent of the new Southern urbanism has instigated a larger critique of urban studies as an academic field of investigation centred on a narrow circle of so-called paradigmatic cities, believed to exemplify ‘*general directions* of change’ across the global urban system (Nijman, 2000: 335, emphasis in original).

There is no doubt that the new Southern urbanism theses with their radical critique of dominant paradigms and related epistemologies have brought a breath of fresh air into urban studies, a field traditionally forged by concepts (such as gentrification, residential mobility, suburbanization, global cities, etc.) deeply enmeshed in Anglo-American countries and their urbanization and broader socio-economic patterns (Wyly, 2017; Maloutas, 2018; Kong and Quian, 2019; Shin and Morales, 2023). An aspect that continues to be overlooked in contemporary debates on Southern urbanism, however, has been the societal and epistemological implications of the new techno-capitalist economy, a highly expansive one driven by colonizing logics of social extractivism. This economy has radically transformed global capitalism and its relationship with urban societies. Extractivism has now become

generalized in today's global capitalism. It is no longer limited to the predation of physical resources (minerals, energy, land), as it was historically in the so-called 'developing world', but has been extended to forms of life that can be sold on the global marketplace through the socially extractivist dynamics of platform economies (Rossi, 2022). As we will see, cities and urban areas in the global South have been major destinations for global platform capitalism and its value-extraction dynamics.

In this context, in the last 15 years, precarity and informality have no longer been represented as merely residual or pathological phenomena but have become increasingly normalized in contemporary economic discourse. Their presence has become ubiquitous, no longer circumscribed to a specific part of the world, such as the global South (Rossi and Wang, 2020) or to service sectors such as fast-food restaurants, retail chains and cleaning services that have traditionally served as reservoirs for low- paying and unskilled jobs in consumption-based economies.

The globalization of precarity and informality has happened at the same time as proponents of the Southern urbanism theses in the 2010s committed to revising the common wisdom regarding these notions, re-signifying them in affirmative terms centred on the reappraisal of the agency of people coping with a precarious and informal condition. In this critical engagement with Southern urbanism's theses, we ask whether there is a risk that Southern urbanism's affirmative rethinking of precarity and informality can contribute to the novel imaginary of spontaneous entrepreneurship that is at the heart of the rise of extractivist digital platforms.

As a starting point for their analyses, proponents of Southern urbanism have built on the critique of emancipatory conceptions of precarity and informality associated with the academic and political left. Two Marxist-inspired theorists of precarity and informality in particular have attracted criticism in the Southern urbanism literature: Guy Standing, the author of *The Precariat* (Standing, 2011), a book that has exerted strong influence on public and scholarly understandings of precarity, including in social movements in the UK, Europe and generally across the global North; and Mike Davis, an iconic urbanist known for visionary books on urbanization and environmental colonialism, author of a short book titled *Planet of Slums*, in which he warned about the material deprivation associated with the

unprecedented expansion of slums in the global South (Davis, 2006). Standing and Davis are not just academic scholars but have been widely recognized as public intellectuals of the left and radical left. When they published their essays, they had in common a conception of the growth of labour precarity and housing informality (the slums), respectively, as illustrations of how capitalist societies tend to exacerbate the impoverishment of larger portions of humanity. In doing so, they echoed related concerns raised by international organizations such as the International Labour Organization and UN-Habitat. Despite both being explicitly concerned with providing a politically engaged contribution to transformative social change, these authors are depicted in the Southern urbanism literature as ‘agency-blind’ in their analyses.

Proponents of Southern urbanist theses have not limited themselves to ‘negative’ critiques of the work of Standing, Davis and other established theorists on the left and from wider critical circles, they have also pursued the more ambitious goal of offering an ontologically affirmative way of conceiving precarity and informality that wants to get rid of any kind of preordained thinking through the pursuit of ‘grounded knowledge’, a new buzzword in this literature stemming from the idea that ‘the canons of urban theory need jostling from below, and that the agentic power of cities demands an evolving, yet deeply grounded and relational, account and politics of the urban’ (Amin and Lancione, 2022: 2). The grounded approach to urban theory has emanated from a larger dissatisfaction amongst postcolonial urbanists with Marxist-inspired and other so-called ‘structuralist’ approaches to critical urban studies, particularly their reliance on universalizing concepts and their alleged neglect of agency. ‘Urban neoliberalism’—arguably one of the distinctive terms in the field of critical urban studies in the last three decades—has also been the object of criticism in urban scholarship about the global South. According to Sue Parnell and Jennifer Robinson, inflated use of the notion of urban neoliberalism originating from the Anglo-American context in particular prevents appreciation of ‘the agency of the local state as potentially developmental, even progressive’ in contexts of the urban South where there are ‘multiple drivers of urban change’ in play beyond the conventional neoliberal rationale (Parnell and Robinson, 2012: 594).

The so-called ‘problem of agency’ raised from a post-structuralist viewpoint has long been at the centre of heated debates in a variety of social science domains, particularly after

the appearance of structuration theory in sociology in the 1980s (Giddens, 1984), which postulated that structure does not exist ‘out there’ but is a constant product of our social activities: of our talk, our practices, our doings (Elliott and Lemert, 2022). Southern urbanism scholarship has brought the question of agency to the fore in debates in urban studies too, which until that moment remained relatively untouched by discussions over structure/agency dualism. Guy Standing, in this perspective, has been associated with an ossified view of ‘precariats’ that portrays precarious subjects ‘as largely victims of structural exploitation within contemporary insecure labour markets’, a view that leaves little room for imagining and conceptualizing the ‘political agencies of those caught in webs of precarity’, as Tatiana Thieme (2018: 537) has argued. According to the same author, the disempowering view of precarious subjects that is prevalent in the social sciences and in public debates alike originates from the work of French sociologist and public intellectual Pierre Bourdieu and is rooted in ‘theories of structural deprivation and dispossession’ that depict ‘precarious lives as inadequate versions of the more “modern”, “formal”, institutionally recognized and well-resourced counterparts’ (Thieme, 2021: 1095).

The question of ‘political agency’ is also central to Southern urbanism’s critique of Mike Davis’s view of the slums. Urbanist Ananya Roy—a leading voice in the postcolonial turn in urban studies—has associated Mike Davis, and what she has characterized as an ‘apocalyptic account of a ‘planet of slums’’, with an ‘older usage of informality’, stuck in old-fashioned conceptions of ‘informal survivalism’ (Roy, 2011: 228 and 233). The critique of allegedly obsolete conceptions of urban informality has been, for Roy, the point of departure for an in-depth reappraisal of slum dwelling and urban informality as expressions of a ‘subaltern urbanism’ which, in her view, has remained long overlooked in mainstream accounts of urban social movements. In a similar vein, elaborating on the critique of victimizing conceptions of precarity, Tatiana Thieme has put forward the enticing notion of ‘hustle economy’, a form of economic organizing that arises, in her description, from the pragmatic search for ‘livelihood strategies in the face of uncertainty’, in urban precarious contexts, outside formal education, employment and service provision (Thieme, 2018: 536). Working along the same lines of harsh criticism accompanied by injections of imaginative thinking, Edgar Pieterse and Abdoumalig Simone in a book evocatively titled *New Urban*

Worlds have redefined precarity as a double-sided condition capable in their opinion of opening up entirely novel avenues in the ways in which we have been accustomed to conceiving the urban experience. In a chapter of the book titled ‘Precarious now’, they write:

precarity and uncertainty represent a material and psychic threat, but they may also provide an opportunity to reimagine and re-enchant the world (Simone and Pieterse, 2017: 31).

According to these authors, recognizing the possibilities ingrained in the complicated daily lives of residents and the intricacies of their living environments in cities and urban areas outside the Western world requires getting rid of the established categories in critical, dialectical urban thinking:

it is necessary to go beyond the old antagonisms that inform how we understand and emplace residents and how we regard the built environment. It is too easy to see the mega-developments as bad and the popular self-built neighbourhoods of the working class as good, to read everything in terms of gentrification, ruin, renewal, entrepreneurialism, sharing economy, cooperatives, or public or private property’ (*ibid.*: 178).

As we have seen, proponents of the Southern urbanism theses converge on the denial of what they perceive as the inflexible structures of dialectical thinking that in their opinion have long underpinned the foundations of critical thought in the social sciences in general and urban studies in particular. The openness of urban practices, as observed ‘from the ground’, is offered by these authors as an epistemological alternative to the dialectical rigidities of structuralist thinking (Bhan, 2019). Southern urbanism proponents have not been alone in reappraising agency and practices and their performative power in the urban South. Beyond academic scholarship more narrowly understood, the emphasis on practices and their diversifying effects on urban spaces and modes of urban living characterizes Richard Sennett’s (2017) theorization— particularly influential among UN-sponsored international organizations such as UNESCO and Habitat, as well as the wider public—of what he calls ‘the open city’. Sennett (2018) locates his conceptualization of the open city

in a constructivist urban design perspective where mundane, everyday practices of open urbanism are suggestive of an intrinsic aspiration to a form of urbanism in which traditional barriers between planners and residents are superseded.

The notion of the ‘open’ has become increasingly central to Southern urbanism. In this literature, the idea of the open is presented, in epistemological terms, as a way of generating knowledge of urban processes, rather than as a methodology for urban design practices, as in Richard Sennett’s work. Pieterse and Simone, for example, in *New Urban Worlds* invoke a ‘spirit of openness and generosity’, which they describe as a kind of anti-ideological therapy, or as they put it, as an expression of the ‘willingness to work with the details of how everyday life, institutions and technologies actually operate without necessarily rushing to envelop the details in ready-made ideological or interpretive frameworks’ (Simone and Pieterse, 2017: xviii). In a similar vein, writing from a ‘post-categorical’ perspective of decolonial urbanism, Ash Amin and Michele Lancione propose the idea of openness as a key entry point in their deconstruction of the urban ground and its ‘grammars’, as they make sense of what they define as ‘the social’, understood as ‘open to immanence, uneasy about enclosing relational developments into specific ontological categories or treating them as matters of cause and effect’ (Amin and Lancione, 2022: 7). To illustrate their open idea of ‘the social’, Amin and Lancione look at the field of ‘urban economy’ as well. Their revisiting of this notion is outlined as a coming together of what they define as ‘new value circuits’ and ‘unrecognized interdependencies of value creation’. To make sense of these conjunctions of value creation trajectories, they invite attention to the ways in which ‘economic life’ and the ‘calculus of urban economic management’ attend to ‘the powers of infrastructure, the performances of technology, the circulations of passion, the differentials of social performativity, and the heavy weight of legal and property relations’ (*ibid.*: 11).

The expansive conception of value generation and circulation that Amin and Lancione emphasize is resonant with the ways in which platform economies have been represented since their appearance. A distinctive feature of the so-called ‘platform revolution’ has been associated by management theorists with the extra-firm creation of economic value, as platform business multiplies mechanisms of value production through the network effects it generates (Parker *et al.*, 2016). However, both Amin and Lancione

and the mainstream theorists of platform business management recognize the expansive reach of value *creation*, but not that of economic value *extraction*. This article, for its part, will present the example of a local social startup that has created a form of slum tourism in Naples centred on the extractivist economization of the ground-floor, street-front housing units where the urban poor have traditionally lived in precarious and informal conditions in the city's historical neighbourhoods. In the context of urban 'touristification', and particularly its initial stages, the emotional labour of the residents in the '*bassi*' has turned their dwellings into a 'performing home' (Roelofsen, 2018), functioning as a source of surplus value extraction: their ingenious forms of precarious urban living have been actively performed in the newly invented slum tourism business, even though the measure of their living labour has remained uncalculated as they have been enrolled without remuneration into the productive machinery of the platform-mediated tourism industry.

Before zooming in on an empirical exploration of the economization of precarious urban living in Naples, the next section of the article looks back at how the sharing economy of the short-term rental sector that made its appearance in the early 2010s became a 'proper economy' in the second half of the decade. The mid-2010s and the second half of the 2010s are indeed a crucial conjuncture from our perspective, as that is when the local variant of slum tourism in Naples, which is under scrutiny in this article, was initiated.

1.3 Inventing the platform economy in the 2010s

Since the early 2010s, cities in the South have become a key frontier for platform-mediated economies and their fast growth in consumption-intensive sectors such as real estate, tourism, mobility and food. The short-term rental business is particularly illustrative of the role of cities and urban areas of the global South in the planetary expansion of platform capitalism. In this article, through a case study of the ascendancy of a local variant of slum tourism in Naples, we focus our attention on the formative stages of this still young sector. More concretely, we look at how this phase reveals the founding aspects of the

short-term rental sector, particularly the ways in which it was invented as an economy within contemporary societies. This conjunctural view allows us to understand the way in which the platform-mediated tourism industry has come to constitute an economy understood in a capitalist sense, rather than a mere ‘sharing economy’ with ‘economy’ being used in its original sense of ‘the intentional saving of money’, which can still be found in standard dictionaries (see, for example, Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). As Timothy Mitchell has shown, the notion of the economy understood in the contemporary capitalist sense emerged only between the 1930s and the 1950s, as ‘the field of operation for new powers of planning, regulation, statistical enumeration and representation’ (Mitchell, 1998: 62)

What Timothy Mitchell defines as ‘statistical enumeration and representation’ has played a prominent role in the constitution of the platform-mediated tourism industry, particularly at a time marked by the explosion of data analytics and statistical information more generally, which was enabled by the digitization of social and economic life. With the rise of digital platforms, despite the persistence of corporate rhetoric based on the sharing economy and aimed at money saving and also ‘having fun’, the appearance of professional investment surveys signalled the fact that short-term rental and similar platforms were going beyond the original idea of the sharing economy (lay residents hosting guests in order to pay the bills) and taking shape as a proper ‘economy’. This meant that in the space of a few years the sharing economy transitioned towards a process of ‘economization’, understood as the creation of an economy based on measurable wealth (Mitchell, 2022). An important signal from this perspective was the rise of consulting firms offering statistical information for aspiring investors in the short-term rental sector. The US-based AirDNA emerged in 2015 as a data and analytics platform providing informed advice to investors and consumers, which rapidly became a popular service in the short-term rental industry internationally.

During the second half of the 2010s, the publishing landscape around digital platforms, particularly short-term rentals, became populated by a growing number of statistical exercises, such as city and country rankings, since location is key to property valuation (‘location, location, location’ is the mantra in the real estate industry). It is interesting here to note how cities and urban areas in the global South became a highly visible presence in the landscape of the short-term rental industry and its investment

calculations. For instance, the survey published in 2017 by Nested, a British real estate consultancy firm, calculated that cities and urban areas in the global periphery (in Africa, Asia, South America, Eastern and Southern Europe) offered the most attractive investment opportunities in terms of expected rent gap, compared with the more saturated housing markets of urban areas in the global North (Nested, 2017). This meant that the profitability of investment in short-term rentals in Durban, Lagos and Cairo (the three highest-ranked cities in the Nested listing at that time) largely exceeded that of conventional tourist destinations in the Western world, such as London, New York and Paris. As Mitchell noted (2008), calculations, particularly those relating to economic activities, make a decisive contribution to the bringing into being of the world they calculate: they are a key factor behind the invention of ‘the economy’. Surveys and calculations, in turn, offer the knowledge base that prepares the ground for the rise of semiotic constructions, imaginaries and discourses that construct the development of an economy.

In this article, we look at the subsumption of the ‘creative’ precarity of urban living into the imaginary of mass tourism in Naples, at a time when this city started appearing in high positions in city rankings measuring the profitability of the short-term rental market. In the 2010s, more precisely starting from 2014–15, like other cities across Southern Europe and the world, with the advent of digital platforms for short-term rentals, Naples underwent a process of fast growth in urban tourism. While in the past it used to be only a stopover for travellers heading for the archaeological sites and sea resorts in its surroundings, Naples is now ranked fourth nationally in terms of profitability in the short-term rental market, following Florence and Rome, two traditionally hyper-tourist cities in Italy, and Milan, a superstar city in the Italian real estate market (see Airbtics, 2025a). Naples’s recent tourism boom is customarily associated with its heritage sites as well as its experiential component (aptly fitting with Airbnb’s ‘live like a local’ motto) with its relatively well-preserved forms of life, particularly in the historical neighbourhoods, as the city has been relatively untouched by gentrification (Rossi, 2022). However, an overlooked factor behind the short-term rental boom in Naples is the fact that its built environment in the historical neighbourhoods has a high percentage of privately rented housing (contrary to Italy’s standard housing tenure in which homeowners predominate) and that the housing stock in these areas is largely composed of tiny apartments, including the *bassi*. The

parcelization of the housing stock is due to the fact that landlords historically maximized their rents through the subdivision of their properties into smaller units. With the sudden advent of the short-term rental sector, the small size of properties has ended up fitting well with the expectations of the short-term rental providers: ‘small property but big returns’, as recommended by Airbtics (2025b), another data analytics consultancy for investors in the short-term rental market.

Similarly, these processes of datafication describe how diverse sources of data function as actual (startup) capital for platform capitalism rather than merely fuel (Sadowski, 2019). This rebuts accounts of data extraction like the one of Shoshana Zuboff (2019) considering the latter a novel economic logic rather than continuous with capital accumulation (*ibid*). Building on Zukin’s paradox of ‘authenticity’ and gentrification (2010), Peter Törnberg develops the idea of ‘platform placemaking’, claiming that platforms like Airbnb don’t just list existing places, they actively remake how urban neighborhoods are imagined and experienced by mobilizing user-generated data (reviews, descriptions, host stories) besides statistic numeration. This work’s contribution within the larger dialogue of platform capitalism then lies in dissecting how the political economy of platforms (extraction, rent logic and algorithmic pricing) makes examples like Airbnb not neutral marketplaces but an active driver of value extraction from not only housing but neighbourhood life itself by bringing forward other entrepreneurial business models dependent on the very generation of platform-mediated imaginaries of local life such as the startup enterprise interrogated in this work. The latter’s operability therefore does not only compare to the value extraction of Airbnb but is contingent on the ‘opening up’ of a playing field for the experimentation of cultural startups. This also puts into perspective and supports recent work on the politics of platform-mediated imaginaries, by reframing how such imaginaries are negotiated among multiple stakeholders (platforms, users, publics) rather than a top-down story the platforms themselves control alone (Richter and Peoll, 2023; Hill, 2024, Raffa and Pronzato, 2021).

1.4 Startup precarity: economizing precarious urban living in Naples

In this section of the article, we present a peculiar, yet increasingly popular form of mass tourism in Naples centred on the economization of the traditional precarious living quarters of the urban poor: the street-front housing units at ground level known as the *bassi*. Along the lines of the aforementioned understanding of the economy, by ‘economization’ we mean here—drawing again on Timothy Mitchell (2022)—the becoming-an-economy of what was originally defined as a sharing economy, understood merely as a money-saving activity. By extractivism, we mean the appropriation without adequate remuneration of existing resources, including labour and what is viewed here as the emotional labour of local residents, as we will show in this article.

In the context of Naples, the economic and ethical revaluation of precarity and precarious urban living, particularly of its agency, has been crucial to this process of becoming an economy, as we will see. Manifestations of the so-called ‘art of making do’ that are characteristic of Neapolitan urban living in lower-income communities (or *arte dell’arrangiarsi* in traditional parlance) are no longer associated with residual survivalist practices. Rather, in ways that are evocative of the Southern Urbanism theses, in recent years ‘making do’ practices have been depicted by international urban ethnographers focusing on Naples as artful ways of undertaking a precarious business that can nonetheless result in a standard economic value production, albeit rife with contradictions, particularly in terms of compliance with law (Pine, 2012). In contrast to the idea of a city perennially stuck in pre-modern ways of life, practices of ‘making do’ are viewed in this international scholarship on Naples as indicative of place-specific skills and capabilities, such as ‘the alertness, adaptability, and celerity that are awakened by a challenge’ (*ibid.*: 23).

This international ethnographic literature is symptomatic of a wider change in attitude towards local forms of life in Naples, an attitude that emphasizes the ingrained entrepreneurial value of daily practices of ‘making do’ (Arvidsson *et al.*, 2025). This changing attitude has created fertile ground for the growth of the platform-mediated tourism industry

in Naples, globally centred on the ‘live like a local’ motto. From this perspective, we explore the case of a cooperative startup firm experimenting with a local variant of slum tourism as an illustration of the economic and ethical revaluation of precarious living in the *bassi* in contemporary platform-mediated tourism.

The *bassi* have provided the living infrastructure for the economization of precarious urban living that we investigate here. They historically represent an impoverished, precarious housing archetype of makeshift dwellings at ground level, omnipresent and visible throughout the historic neighbourhoods of Naples. They are tiny homes facing the street, usually damp and dark because of the lack of windows, densely packed and with insecure housing tenure. In a way they can be considered the epitome of precarious urban living. Dating back to ancient times, the *bassi* were originally intended to serve as store rooms, stables and shop venues. In the modern era, overpopulation in Naples’s central districts induced the use of the *bassi* as dwelling spaces. Over the centuries, they came to represent the lowest level in the vertical social stratification that characterizes urban living in Naples (Dines and Mattiucci, 2022; Pfirsch, 2023). Vertical social stratification is a residential pattern centred on the coexistence of different socio-economic groups in the same building that scholars of urbanization in Southern Europe consider either a manifestation of micro-segregation (Maloutas, 2024) or, more positively, a sign of the spontaneous social mix that characterizes Mediterranean cities (Leontidou, 1993).

Before their recent revaluation, the *bassi* were customarily viewed as a vivid illustration of the miserable condition of the urban poor in Naples, associated with poverty, wretchedness and disease (Fava, 2024), particularly at the time of the deadly cholera epidemics that hit the city in the late 19th century. US historian Frank Snowden, in a detailed study dedicated to these epidemics, has described the situation of the *bassi* at that time as follows:

the full horror of the Lower City was the condition of the apartments located at ground level and known as *bassi* ... Here, sleeping on straw mattresses on mud floors, two families normally shared one room of an average size of seventy to eighty cubic metres. A population as large as the city of Bologna lived in such accommodation (Snowden, 1995: 20).

The cholera epidemic of 1884 paved the way for an unprecedented slum clearance intervention known as *Risanamento*, a programme that drew inspiration from similar interventions across Europe and particularly in mid-19th century Paris, one of the three most populated cities in Europe along with London and Naples at that time. *Risanamento* led to the dismantling of some of the densely populated settlements inhabited by the urban poor in the city's historical neighbourhoods. However, compared with Paris, where Haussmannization extensively transformed the city's central and eastern neighbourhoods, the effects of *Risanamento* were limited to specific areas. As a result, Naples retained the vast majority of its historical settlements, including the *bassi*, and the city's current urban structure is not dissimilar to its 17th-century one.

In the 20th century, the ground-level living of the urban poor in Naples started being seen in a more positive light, especially by foreign intellectuals fascinated by the scenery of local everyday life. The accounts of foreign commentators in many respects laid the foundations for the subsequent reappraisal of the economic value of the *bassi* and their forms of life, as these authors have been enthusiastically rediscovered in recent times. The emerging generation of German critical theorists—later known as the Frankfurt School—became particularly interested in Naples and its life forms during the 1920s (Mittelmeier, 2024). Walter Benjamin was intrigued by the wide range of ground-floor activities that could be observed in Naples, such as dwelling, trading, eating and selling, in a place where everything does indeed 'hang out' (Benjamin, 1978: 171). This fluid, multifaceted way of inhabiting urban environments, beyond the conventional public–private dichotomy of Western cities, was famously defined by Walter Benjamin along with Asja Lācis (1925) as the 'porous city', a term that is evocative of the soft volcanic sandstone—the yellow tuff—traditionally used in local building activity in Naples. Tuff is a highly malleable but also precarious material, known for being at the same time resilient to shocks but vulnerable to erosion. In the same years that Benjamin and Lācis coined the notion of the porous city, the crumbling infrastructures of everyday life in Naples inspired narratives that valued improvisation and the local residents' ability to adapt to the precarity of everyday life, such as the so-called *Ideal des Kaputten* (ideal of the broken-down) proposed in 1926 by another German critical theorist, Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1926). According to Sohn-Rethel, machines

in Naples start to function only when they are broken, showing how human individuals must improvise non-technical solutions to make life work (Hui, 2023).

After World War II, critical independent intellectuals were replaced by professional social scientists undertaking more systematic field research in Naples's struggling communities, as we have seen. The so-called *economia del vicolo* (street- corner economy) based on the *arte dell'arrangiarsi* (art of making do) attracted the attention of many scholars. Among them, international ethnographers studying Naples looked at the resilience of local residents in the *bassi*. In a lyrical portrayal of life in the *bassi* in the 1970s, US anthropologist Thomas Belmonte (1979) described it as a daily fight to 'defeat bread'. 'Bread' here is used as a metaphor for the necessities of life, understood as residents' livelihoods. Belmonte's work resonates with contemporary ideas in Southern urbanism, suggesting that people (in this case the Neapolitans living in the dark alleys of its historical neighbourhoods) cannot maintain order or stability due to the everlasting struggle for 'bread' and this consequently changes the rules of mainstream society, making the workings of Naples's informal economy, such as intermittent thieving and the hustling of the young, a subject of scientific investigation for the first time (see Pardo, 1996).

One century after the 1884 cholera epidemic, another major disaster hit the city in 1980. An earthquake severely damaged vast portions of the built environment, leading to the forced relocation of several residents of the historical neighbourhoods, including those of the *bassi*, to newly built housing projects on the outskirts. However, as the repopulation of Naples's historical quarters rapidly gained ground in subsequent years, the *bassi* have continued to exist in significant numbers until today, being a testament to the city's high overcrowding and deprivation indices in housing as well as its poorly preserved built environment (Ufficio Urbano, 2016; Esposito and Chiodelli, 2020). Since the late 1980s, a growing number of the *bassi* have been inhabited by lower- income immigrants, many of them of South Asian descent. Some of these international immigrants are known today for residing in the most deteriorated *bassi*.

Parallel with the onset of an exponentially increasing mass tourism influx into the city in the last decade, the *bassi* have experienced an economic and ethical revaluation. The position they have acquired within the platform-mediated tourism industry can be

described through the lens of two observed phenomena that illustrate the emergence of an extractivist economy utilizing Southern urban precarity as part of its imaginary. The first is the refurbishing and external embellishment of the *bassi* to make them into short-stay accommodation rentals, ultimately contributing to the aestheticization of the precarious home (Dines and Mattiucci, 2022). This Neapolitan variant of the ‘touristification of the residential’ (Esposito, 2023) reinvents in new forms the cheap materiality of poor-quality housing, opening the doors to ongoing potential speculative valorization of even the worst conditions of urban dwelling. The material condition of the homes here represents an essential selling point. Although they are polished and refurbished to provide all kinds of hospitality comfort to visitors, spatial scarcity, lack of privacy and the permeability of the street are branded as part of the Neapolitan and wider Southern domestic experience. The second phenomenon, on which we focus our attention here, is the incorporation of the *bassi* into a spontaneous form of the startup urbanism culture of a self-governing ‘enterprise society’ (Rossi and Di Bella, 2017) that brings together Airbnb-sponsored experiential tourism with a type of tourism that involves visiting deprived areas in ways that are evocative of slum tourism in cities of the global South, but that have their own characteristics too. The guided tour project known as ‘Vascitour’, in particular, represents a new segment of experiential tourism in Naples, started in the mid-2010s, at the same time as, more globally, the sharing economy became an economy in the proper sense, as we have seen.

1.4.1 Slum tourism with Neapolitan characteristics

What is commonly known as ‘slum tourism’ can be seen as a manifestation of the longstanding exoticism of Western traditional culture in its relationship with the ‘other’, instrumental in the reproduction of European colonial power (Said, 1978). Slum tourism precedes the advent of digital platforms and has customarily focused on guided tours of slums in urban areas of the global South, particularly in South America and South Asia (Steinbrink, 2015). In this section, we draw on our fieldwork to explore the trajectory of Vascitour in Naples, a cooperative startup firm created between 2015 and 2016 by three co-founders (two women and one man) after participating in a startup ideas incubator

project run by the local university of Naples. Vascitour offers guided tours of the *bassi* (*vasci* being the transliteration of *bassi* in local dialect) and is especially illustrative of the ‘becoming-an-economy’ of precarious urban living in Naples. Since its appearance, Vascitour has been a successful enterprise in terms of recognition, winning various social innovation prizes and attracting significant mass media coverage, as well as in terms of the number of customers using its services. However, the fact that it is not a professional tour operator has forced Vascitour into a permanent condition of indeterminacy and therefore of precarity in its status, as we will see.



The online advertisement of the *Vascitour* startup promotes the experience of ‘living like a true Neapolitan for a day’, offering to sleep in, eat in and visit *bassi* homes and neighbourhoods. (Source: *Vascitour*, 2024)

On a preliminary basis, we can identify three distinctive characteristics of the Neapolitan *Vascitour* within the larger landscape of slum tourism: first, guided tours of the *bassi* take place in the southern periphery of the global North, rather than in the global South conventionally understood; second, their ascendancy has been concomitant with that of digital platforms, giving rise, as we said, to a peculiar hybridization of slum tourism with Airbnb’s experiential tourism; third, guided tours of the *bassi* focus on central-city areas where heritage sites are also concentrated, rather than on suburban areas or on separate enclaves of central urban areas as in the case of slums in cities of the global South conventionally understood.

Our field research, encompassing both experience as participants in the tour and more formalized interactions with tour organizers in the form of interviews, suggests that attempts to re-signify Southern urbanism in an ontologically distinct manner are highly dependent on the affirmative repositioning of precarious urban living as inventive and therefore generative of economic value. Although here we provide evidence of our findings particularly with reference to the Vascitour case study, our research is based on a larger engagement with the field, particularly from 2022 to 2024, that has entailed informal conversations and exchanges with residents of the *bassi*, as well as participation in activist protest campaigns resisting the displacement of lower-income residents in the historical neighbourhoods of Naples, including many *bassi* dwellers.

Tours like the ones we observed involve a high level of performativity that is rehearsed and practised on a regular basis. Vascitour is the most famous of a wider set of spontaneous social enterprises—many of them remaining informal—that offer a wide range of sightseeing touring services outside the conventional circuits of professional travel agencies. These services promise ‘experience’ of the Southern city via walking tours across the historical, impoverished and now rapidly touristifying neighbourhoods of Naples. In the case of Vascitour, the tours consist of guided visits along streets densely populated with street-front housing units or can consist of short stays in actual *bassi* homes, culinary interactions with residents, and other ‘live like a local’ experiences. These ‘experiences’ involve the creation of a broader business ecosystem around the tours: temporary partnerships with local restaurants or informal eateries, souvenir vendors and other service providers. Consequently, they are not merely voyeuristic though they are characterized by an explicitly senses-driven and tactile character (*cf.* Chen and McFarlane, 2023). Further, while they entail planned exchanges with residents, they also involve prying behaviour, a feature that seems to have become inevitable with the high presence of tourists and the inescapably ‘open’ nature of the dwellings, blurring the private and public character of life and work in them. A conversation with one of the residents, who has spent most of her life residing and working in a *basso* describes this feeling of fatigue in the following:

I need to clean the floor daily. These are the cleanest homes in Naples; when you live half on the street, you have half of the dust in your kitchen, so I won’t have

anyone tell me it's dirty. Especially when people watch you all the time now, it's like a TV series for them. It's already physically exhausting at my age, with the dampness and the swollen legs, without the tourists, for me, they don't leave me with much. When you grow up here, you see everything because there is not much that is private (I., informal talk with the authors, 13 June 2022)

Besides material and infrastructural frailties, socioeconomic deficiencies such as uncertain and precarious working and living conditions and their resulting informalities are often staged as meaningful aspects of an 'authentic' way of life in Naples that the tours promise visitors they will be able to immerse themselves in. In line with descriptions by official tourism outlets, promoting the *bassi* as 'a discovery of the true soul of Naples' (Napoli Sotterranea, 2025), when it first appeared Vascitour started to cater to a niche market of experiential tourism in Naples, making ground-level living not only a symbol of resilience and continuity but approachable, personalized and fun. This fictional relatedness is reflected in their 'the guest is one of us' motto. The founder of Vascitour summarizes their approach as follows:

Our objective is to help the visitor see Naples behind the scenes and to live like a Neapolitan for a day. We try to do this in an immersive way. We want people to look at the city from the basso, to smell it, to taste it. They are a manifestation of everything that is negative in the city, a place to avoid, to be ashamed of. Contrarily, I wanted to show how they have sustained so many poor Neapolitans and how our local culture is forged by the life in them. We wanted to make the formerly unvisitable parts of the city become an attraction (Vascitour founder and guide A.T., interview with the authors, 8 March 2024).

The commercial attraction of the *bassi* today lies in exactly the forms of life that they still embody and that can be sold as exoticized lifestyles (Jaeggi, 2018; Rossi, 2022). This fictional 'authentic' and 'ungentrified' character of the heart of Naples orchestrates precarity and informality as an inherent element of the everyday experience of 'life work' of residents—an emotional type of living labour, in Marxian terminology (Dussel, 2001; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Spangler, 2020)—and, furthermore, renders it as no longer a negative condition but a transformative, potentially dignifying aspect of Southern urbanity.

Spontaneous startups like Vascitour essentialize the Southern urban character turning it into a commodity consumable in ‘experienceable’ packages (Paulauskaite *et al.*, 2017). This reframing of the Southern urban character for consumption purposes takes shape as a combination of the contradictory imagination of physical decay (the disorderly materiality of the built environment proverbially associated with Naples) and social energy, thus turning a precarious living infrastructure like the *bassi* into a vibrant ‘lively infrastructure’, to use a popular definition in Southern urbanism scholarship (Amin, 2014).



A *bassi* home advertised as an ‘authentic home kitchen’ as part of the regular Vascitour itinerary. (Source: authors, 2024)

Precisely on account of the lack of the glossy and polished aesthetic of the classic gentrified neighbourhoods of the North American and European heartland, the living conditions of *bassi* residents are speculated on via a rebranding as the ‘real’, creative and self-made life of locals by short-term rental providers and operators of tours alike. The often-referenced character of Naples’s self-sufficient way of creative livelihood-making is

picked up equally as a guiding principle of Vascitour. The ‘state of operability’ of ‘making ends meet’ is also reflected in the recycling of material and social resources and a reputation of creative adaptability to regulatory frameworks and planning norms (Lieto, 2024) that both contributed to the establishment of services like Vascitour and are essential dimensions of the extractivist economy they fuel. Sohn-Rethel’s aforementioned ‘ideal of the broken-down’ introduces us to the notion of ‘chance’ embodying functional dysfunctionality that ‘comes to the rescue at just the right moment’ (Sohn-Rethel, 1926: 35). This affirmative performativity resonates with the tour’s narrative of precarity and material demise as a potentially transformative power able to bring into being creative arrangements for livelihoods. A tour guide’s take on this aptness to recycle resembles what Sohn-Rethel terms a constant ‘tinkering’ process (*ibid.*: 34):

This readiness to find solutions and to not know what the day will bring makes you sharp. People are able to turn defects into advantages, but the next day you have to look again for another trick. Nothing is guaranteed, but many things are possible. People are always on alert to seek them out. It’s playful in a way. They creatively manage to do it: to live and actually get on in almost impossible circumstances, and they do it with wit and with candour. This is often an enlightening experience for visitors. That hustle creates this city (Vascitour founding member G.M., interview with the authors, 6 March 2024).

Likewise, Aquilar (2018) speaks of ‘repair and maintenance as a ritual practice’ of the Neapolitan poor (see also Locorotondo and Fishwick, 2026), a means of coping with limited resources, again reinforcing an understanding of the *bassi* as intrinsically resilient. Likewise, the habit of self-recruiting local informal guides can be considered a prerequisite of Vascitour. Residents started to employ this common practice in the early stages of mass tourism in the hope of contributing to their livelihoods. We observe how a certain fetishism in a Marxist sense (Geras, 1992) takes place in Vascitour by imputing social relations to things or people as inherent characteristics, especially when describing the theatrical nature of indigenous residents in Naples. This not only contributes to a mystification of ground-level living but further renders it as something almost desirable, with a potential force of enabling enchantment in line with Simone and Pieterse’s (2017) reinterpretation of

precarity. A Vascitour founding member sketches out how this reflects itself in the depiction of 'being Neapolitan':

We are native experts in our neighbourhoods. We are theatrical and know how to turn something miserable into entertainment. We are lively and joyful, and it's contagious. It has always been like this; it's inscribed in our history. We have the right attitude to deal with hardship, even me, and I don't come from a *basso* (Vascitour founder and guide, A.T. interview with the authors, 8 March 2024).

As precarity and adaptability to struggle are seen as intrinsic elements of Neapolitan urbanity, they represent a 'home-brewed' entrepreneurial quality resonating unsurprisingly well with the mainstream startup imaginary of the urban field as an open laboratory for social innovation (Moisio and Rossi, 2024). When looking into the Vascitour startup's beginnings in the mid-2010s, we observe how the founding members themselves had to creatively adjust to navigate in the business environment beyond formal employment opportunities. The partial upfront financing of the initial startup resulted from winning a small sum of money as a prize in an entrepreneurial competition that followed the preparation of the pitched startup idea in the aforementioned entrepreneurial business course offered by the local university. However, Vascitour founders were unable to receive official tourist guide status due to high fees and limited initial resources as the founding guide explains in the following:

The issue is that we are not licensed tourist guides officially, because in Italy you must take a specific course, and we could not afford that, but we could get a similar certificate abroad, it's easier and cheaper. There is a lot of competition in the tourist guide business, which makes the licences very expensive. So, I am not an official tourist guide but a socio-environmental guide. For me, the locations are not touristy in themselves, but they are an experience; you just need to find the 'key to access', and that's what we do. And we do it our way, more informally and more directly than a tourist guide. Again, we also 'make do' ... and digital platforms and social media were key for us to spread the word; only later did the official tourism channels become interested in us. Tourism became the new focus (of the economy) of the

city, this was clear by then. That was something to look into (Vascitour founder and guide A.T., interview with the authors, 20 March 2024).

Accordingly, in the case of the *vasci*-tours, we observe an economization of precarity simultaneously in the precarious status of the startup enterprise itself and in the unremunerated appropriation of the emotional labour (the living labour in Marx's theory) of residents and their precarious forms of urban living. These observations motivate us to speak of startup precarity in a dual sense. While Vascitour uses and extracts economic value from both the precarity of *bassi* life and its users, it struggles to exist itself due to its uncertain professional status and its dependence on the daily performativity of permeable informal arrangements in socio-cultural, legal and economic terms. Precarity, therefore, becomes the object of the business activity but also the defining feature of its operability.

The urban experience of the European South not only favours high-rent revenues for the short-term rental sector and related business operators that facilitate platform-mediated business conduct, such as property management companies, but, notably, unlocks a performative force for experimenting with highly place-specific startup trials, such as Vascitour, that exceed conventional professional classifications insofar as they cater to or promote ideas of living 'the Southern way'. This makes already vulnerable societies of the European South potentially lucrative targets for the extraction of economic value from relatively preserved forms of life such as those of the inner-city residents of Naples. The preservation of supposedly premodern ways of life echoes throughout the description of the Vascitour 'success story' according to one of its members:

It's like people are longing for these creative ways of life that in their minds have vanished and no longer exist in other tourist cities of Europe, so it might be fetishized a bit, but also, there is a demand for seeing how Naples lives. People long to see this lost urban character (Vascitour founding member G.M., interview with the authors, 6 March 2024).

The tendency to use the unpaid or poorly remunerated emotional labour of local residents becomes apparent in the depiction of the practical beginnings of Vascitour and the initiation of contact with *bassi* dwellers as a tour guide sketched out below. In the early

stages of the process of becoming an economy, street-front living in the *bassi* and the life of its residents as such served as unpaid or poorly remunerated labour, being justified in the name of local residents' proud rediscovery of place attachment. At this time, the emotional labour of residents provided unmeasurable surplus value for an extractivist economy nurtured by narratives and imaginaries of Southern city life. However, at a later stage, now that the touristification process has normalized, the remuneration issue has come to the fore and the process of 'becoming an economy' has started to materialize, though retaining its characteristics of precarity and informality. As a member of Vascitour recalls:

Now, after 10 years, many things have changed. Previously, when we started, we asked in the Quartieri Spagnoli, for example, whether it bothered them (the residents) because then it was not normal to see so many tourists. They were still living a very reserved way of life. So, we tried to speak to them and make them become part of the tours, they said, 'But what is there to see here? Nothing'. But we imagined the *bassi* to be a source of income, for them and for us, a mutual benefit. To begin with, we had to do our own discovery of the *bassi*. After a few months of walks, we 'recruited' the people most prone to entertain, talk ... (Vascitour founder and guide A.T., interview with the authors, 8 March 2024).

In more recent times, the value-creating chain has expanded beyond the tour of the *bassi* narrowly conceived. While local residents are increasingly more reluctant to offer their unpaid or poorly remunerated life-work to the tourism industry, including Vascitour, the same tourism businesses are diversifying their activities, adapting to an emerging scenario of over-tourism, which entails growing displacement of local residents, or what one of our interviewees explicitly calls 'gentrification', in contrast to the commonly held belief about Naples being not only ungentrified but also 'ungentrifiable' due to its low quality of living.

We are now in a new phase of gentrification that exploded after Naples won the national football cup (in 2023). Because of this, we had to invent and adapt to a new interest for tourists, football tourism, so we do Maradona tours, etc. It was always our creative force and advantage to read potential

moments and events and use them to create a new tour (Vascitour founder and guide A.T., interview with the authors, 8 March 2024).

The processes laid out above show how the precarity and informality of urban living that are at the centre of the Southern urban imaginary and its becoming-an-economy process have in turn generated a business activity and a larger socio-economic ecosystem characterized by new forms of precarity and informality. What we have therefore defined as startup precarity becomes the defining feature of Naples's touristifying urban environment in its constitutive elements.

1.5 Conclusion

Through evidence obtained from the case study of a place-specific form of slum tourism in Naples, the Vascitour, our article has explored the extractivist economization of precarious urban living in the context of the becoming-an-economy process of using digital platforms for short-term rentals during the 2010s. Along these lines, we have identified a crucial shift in the mid-2010s from the so-called 'sharing economy' towards an extractivist economization process in the short-term rental industry, testified by the appearance of data analytics companies for professional investment in short-term rentals. Cities in Southern Europe have played an especially important role in this process of economization, along with other cities in the global South and the global periphery more generally, as different sources of statistical evidence signalled at that time their higher profitability for the short-term rental industry compared with more established tourist destinations in the Western world.

Against this backdrop, we have explored how the process of economization of the short-term rental industry took place in the context of Naples, looking at the economic and ethical revaluation of historically stigmatized sites of precarious urban living in the historical neighbourhoods of this city. The case of Vascitour—a cooperative startup firm created in the mid-2010s—is illustrative of a peculiar kind of spontaneous startup urbanism in the European South, which extracts economic value from the emotional labour of local residents. We have defined this peculiar manifestation of startup urbanism as 'startup

precarity', due to the subsumption of precarious urban living into the machinery of value extraction in the platform-mediated tourism industry, but also to the indeterminate operationality of this cooperative firm that exceeds conventional professional categorizations. The indeterminacy of Vascitour's business activity is a local reflection of the larger indeterminacy of the platform-mediated tourism industry globally, constantly struggling for recognition in the hospitality sector and the public sphere more generally. At the same time, the startup precarity investigated in our article has, on the one hand, confirmed the idea put forward by Southern urbanism scholarship, namely the agency of precarity, in this case of precarious urban living. However, on the other hand, it has shown how, in the absence of emancipatory aims (i.e. emancipating people from precarity as such), precarity is generative of other precarity, albeit in new forms, in a kind of a compulsion to repeat, particularly in the context of constitutively precarious economies such as today's platform-mediated urban tourism. In doing so, our case study has offered empirical evidence for our critical reading of Southern urbanism literature and particularly of the dangers of its optimistically affirmative approach to precarity and informality and, more specifically, of its quick dismissal of emancipatory critiques of precarity and informality from the academic and political left. As such, the insights from our case study findings provide evidence for the necessity to scrutinize and critically reflect on increasingly affirmative characterizations of precarity and informality within Southern urbanism theses and other strands of social science literature. Following this motivation, in the last instance, we consider our contribution a plea for caution when precarity and informality are economically instrumentalized as promised engines of agency, empowerment and resilience, particularly at a time of socially extractivist platform capitalism.

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2. THE FILM INDUSTRY-TOURISM COMPLEX:

The Reification of the Neapolitan Urban Fabric as a Precarious Living Stage

Abstract

This chapter explores how culturalised accounts of Southern urban living lie behind the rise of a ‘film industry-tourism complex’, foregrounding its significant role in the process of tourism-driven urban revival. Empirically, it looks at the re-emerging interest of film makers and related touristic activities in and around Rione Sanità, a historical Neapolitan neighbourhood, emblematic of Naples’ rapid transformation due to the advent of mass tourism since the last decade. This urban area is highly illustrative of Southern imaginaries, with some of them, namely the ‘porous city’, originating from Naples itself. Showing how the Southern representation of urban life is generative of a film industry-tourism industry ‘complex’, I illustrate how the latter incorporates the characteristics of the urban society, particularly its precarious living forms. Building on Jameson’s concept of reification of mass culture, I introduce the notion of a ‘thingification’ of precarious living. In doing so, I firstly dissect how the local film industry is shaped by precarious practices of operating amid increased economic interest in filmmaking. Secondly, I show on the one hand how a socially dense urban neighbourhood acts as a ‘living stage’, producing atmospheres, images and economies and, on the other hand, how the film industry-tourism complex reifies this animated landscape onto an image to be sold on the global marketplace.

Keywords: urban precarity, cineturismo, urban tourism, film industry, cultural economies, geographical imaginaries, Naples, Southern City, Southern Europe

2.1 Introduction

In recent years, the use of film and audiovisual products has become increasingly decisive in raising awareness of urban environments, disseminating its characteristics and place-specific ‘forms of life’ (Moisio and Rossi, 2024). These products foster the ability to convey specific images and conceptions that fix urban reality (Leigh and Kenny, 1996; Shiel and Fitzmaurice, 2001; Haas, 2024). In public as well as scholarly debates, the phenomenon of film-induced tourism (in Italian known as *cineturismo*, in French as *tourisme cinématographique*) includes a wide spectrum of relations between cinema and tourism, mostly from the perspective of a tourist’s motivation to visit filming sites in search of ‘authenticity’ and the complex notion of the latter (Karpovich, 2010; Tzanelli, 2004; Urry, 1995). Practices contributing to the extraction of a ‘scenic economic value’ from urban society serving as a ‘living stage’, however are still overlooked, as existing scholarship has paid little attention to the nuanced connections between the film industry and densely populated urban spaces of the European South.

This article, for its part, critically examines the emergence of what I define a ‘film industry-tourism complex’. By proposing the term ‘complex’ I intend to contribute to a critical understanding of how the operational patterns of the film and tourism industry bring into being new cycles of urban cultural industries, emphasising their mutually reinforcing, multifaceted and inseparable connections. I observe these industries as increasingly dependent on generating imaginaries of ‘Southern urban living’ beyond the Global South conventionally perceived. This shows how ‘Southern’ representations of urban life generate a film industry-tourism complex that incorporates into its operations the alleged characteristics of the Southern urban society, particularly its precarious living forms. The latter are exemplified by informal housing tenures, street-level living conditions, a crumbling socio-economic fabric and a dysfunctional infrastructural base. In Naples, the most populous urban centre in southern Italy, coping with the hardships of permanent urban precarity in creative, self-sustained ways continues to be referenced as the so-called ‘art of making do’ practised by lower-income communities (Pine, 2012; Pardo, 1997; Belmonte, 1979). This perilous but yet incessantly edgy and imaginative character of ‘improvised lives’ (Simone, 2019) is equally reflected in the daily workings of emerging cultural industries, namely the film industry and experiential forms of local tourism. In this context, the

precarity of local lifeways transcends to the precarity of filmmaking activities using Neapolitan historical neighbourhoods as their location.

I suggest that today's intensified interest in filmmaking in densely populated historical neighbourhoods of the 'Southern City' feeds on reifying this animated urban landscape (Rose and Wylie, 2006) onto imagery to be sold on a global marketplace. Conceptually, I draw on the notion of reification (or the 'thingification' of social reality) by Fredric Jameson (1979), who applied Marxist theories of commodity reification to the observation of mass culture. I set out to show how Jameson's account of how any event of everyday life - specifically their precarious dimensions - is drawn into mechanisms of market value assignment can shed light on the ways in which Southern urban society becomes a site of intensified value extraction in both tangible and intangible terms.

Guided by this concern, I explore how intersecting cultural industries like filmmaking and tourism contribute to the generation of Southern urban imaginaries. In doing so, I deem both industries as mutually reinforcing and scrutinize how the economic practices of filmmaking adapt to stifling pressures of mass tourism. As empirical evidence of this argument, and to demonstrate the validity of the 'film-tourism complex' hypothesis, I draw attention to the Southern Italian city of Naples as a prominent example of today's 'film industry-tourism complex', with its historically 'intensely lived' neighbourhoods featured in prominent domestic and international films and TV series. More specifically, I look at how recent trajectories of filmmaking in the Neapolitan neighbourhood of Rione Sanità have set the stage for intensified economic-value extraction from the urban scenery. This area has previously suffered from long-standing marginalization and neglect and has recently turned into a hotspot for filmmaking and tourist activities alike.

Following this motivation, the article is structured as follows. The first section discusses the 'Southern City' trope and its role in catalysing cultural industries, asserting the chosen conceptual framework. The second section lays out the rationale for employing the 'film industry-tourism complex' as a research hypothesis, exemplifying the context of Naples. The third section details the case study of Rione Sanità in relation to this very 'complex'. The last two sections offer an insight into how the 'thingification of precarious life' and the reification of its imagery unfold in the operating and making of the respective film and tourism industries. In closing, I highlight the value of a 'complex' lens when looking

at how economic stages of value-extraction patterns are prepared in and via densely lived urban spaces.

2.2 Imagining the ‘Southern City’: the role of cultural industries in a touristifying European South

This work adopts an understanding of cultural industries as increasingly entangled, inseparable and mutually reinforcing. In doing so, it expands the conceptualisation of a ‘complex’ thinking towards tourism and its complementary cultural industries such as filmmaking, in a touristifying Southern European urban context. Before laying out my rationale for speaking of a ‘film industry-tourism complex’ and to understand how filmmaking in informal, touristifying and precarious urban contexts happens and adapts, I point out the necessity to scrutinize the commodification of ‘Southern’ urban life itself.

This very context is conventionally defined by constraints of institutional inertia or sclerosis, the hollowing out of social infrastructures, the lack of strong public management and a peripheral position in the national political economy and within the Eurozone (Rossi, 2004). These preconditions render tourism an easily realizable ‘guaranteed path to growth’ (Rossi, 2022) and a predominately unregulated, main driver of urban revival that encompasses many domains of the economic landscape of the Southern metropolis. With their struggling economies but also relatively preserved forms of life, urban societies in the global periphery, such as the European South are more susceptible to the idea of tourism as a highly adaptable ‘growth engine’, moreover in its experiential forms. This is due not lastly to their informal, creative nature of ‘making do’ practices and livelihood strategies in their street-corner economies, but also to the distinctive imagination associated with their urban spaces. Experiential tourism, defined as a transformative approach to tourism, promises visitors an active engagement with local culture, people and environment through immersive and hands-on activities, opposed to passive observation of traditional sightseeing. Initially associated with artificially created settings such as theme parks (Pine and Gilmore, 2011), today’s examples of these highly performative tourism patterns in Naples include walking tours in low-income neighbourhoods and homes, offering an immersion into precarious local everyday life, presented as a site of nurtured creativity. In

this article, I emphasize the significance of the reinforcing tendencies of emerging cultural industries intimately linked to these urban spaces.

Cultural industries, also encompassing music, fashion, and digital media besides film, serve as agents through which culturalization processes are enacted, transforming diffuse cultural practices into codified, reproducible commodities. In such, cultural industries do not merely reflect existing culture but actively participate in its production (see Hesmondhalgh, 2018; Peterson, 1997; Williams, 1998).

From the late 1990s towards the early 2000s, ‘culturalization’ (Thrift, 2000; Richardson, 2015; Zukin, 1995) became a crucial part of production in all urban industries encountered in the post-Fordist age of the ‘new economy’ (i.e. knowledge economy, experience economy and ‘creative economy’) (Löfgren, 2003; Healy, 2002; Böhm and Land, 2009). Such culturalization refers to the process where cultural values, aesthetics and symbolic meanings become primary drivers of commercial value, selling identities and curated narratives through mass-distributed goods (Hall, 1980). Interest lay in how culture was packaged and marketed in new ways, in producing images, atmospheres, and experiences. Thus, besides the material economy of cities (real estate, finance and production), urban spaces hold a symbolic economy (Zukin, 1995), the meanings and representations that determine how space gets used and by whom. With both economies being deeply intertwined, the symbolic capital (a neighbourhood’s authentic ‘feel’ or art scene for instance) directly shapes material investment decisions. Culture, in Zukin’s framing, became a form of capital that city governments and developers could increasingly mobilize, with cultural consumption stepping in as a replacement growth strategy attracting investment, tourism and a professional-managerial class. The current demand and challenges of urban competitiveness for cities located at the margins of global capitalism has equally spurred a new economic cycle of urban creative industries including film, now ever more culturally pronounced. The popularity of ideals of the ‘creative city’ promoted by Richard Florida (2005) and others (Landy, 2012; Scott, 2010), having been widely referenced in public policy and urban development aspirations beyond academic scholarship, is a witness to this surge.

Likewise, economic culturalization is linked to the creation of ‘spatial imaginaries’ (Josh Watkins, 2015; Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; Gregory, 2004; Said, 2003; Silvey and Rankin,

2011). The latter shape our reality rather than just describe it, and that they have a strong connection to ‘otherings’, or the belief that certain people, places, or ideas are ‘naturally’ different and unequal (Sharp, 2022: 11). As a spatial imaginary, the European urban South is circulated through language, images and texts, built on a narrative of urbanization symbolized by its preserved, spontaneous and in particular precarious forms of urban living. When people behave in relation to and via this spatial imagination, this narrative materializes into economic circuits of value creation. ‘Spatial imaginaries of the South’ (Smith, 2021; García Canclini, 1997; Scorer, 2016) acknowledge how cities on the margins of global capitalism often merely live off their reputation in highly depictive terms, locating the Southern city as a primarily ‘visual and visualized place’ (Smith, 2021), often concentrating on the lives of the masses, the urban poor and their street-level ways of inhabiting urban spaces. Southern urban environments as such ‘stand out from other cities because of the intensity of encounters and interactions that they host and the creative environments they foster’ (ibid: 4). Comparatively, Abdoumalik Simone (2019) speaks of the ‘improvised lives’ that characterise Southern urban societies, making its urban dwellers relentless enactors of social endurance, further contributing to the South understood as a human condition and an inherent mode of life (Mbembe, 2017; Rossi and Wang, 2020; McFarlane, 2008).

I consider recent variants of the cultural and creative industries in their local and globalised translations as generative of and increasingly dependent on cultural ‘extractivist’ patterns. Contrary to the historical characterisation of extractivism as the capitalist exploitation of the primary sector of the economy in the Global South and its post-colonial variants, I engage with the European urban South as a site of intensified value extraction in both tangible and intangible terms. In doing so, I align with authors engaging with the contemporary encroachment of capitalism on new spaces and new realms of social life (see Mezzadra and Neilson, 2019; 2017). More concretely, I speak of the ways in which any event of everyday life - I add ‘Southern life’ - increasingly tends to be incorporated into the mechanisms of market value assignment (Jameson, 1979; Rossi and Wang, 2020).

Following this rationale, I set out to scrutinize how highly entangled cultural industries of a touristifying and creative European South bring forward and prepare the economic stage for ‘scenic economic value’ extraction from place-specific urban articulations of precarity. Theoretically, I draw on the Marxist concept of reification in mass

culture, as elaborated by Fredric Jameson. His review leans on György Lukács's original theory of reification (Lukács, 1923) explained as a process in which social relations, being intrinsically dynamic and human, are understood and treated as fixed properties or objective things. This perception in turn leads to an acceptance of social structures as natural and self-evident entities, essentially masking their origins in social interaction. Building on the observation of how social relations are taken for things, Fredric Jameson (1979) extended the idea of *Verdinglichung* ('making into things' or 'thingification') towards consumer society patterns. He investigated how a thing or place of any type is reduced to a means of its own consumption - with the ultimate form of commodity reification in today's consumer society being the still or moving image itself. As opposed to the definition of art and artistic activity as a 'finality without an end' (Jameson, 1979 informed by Kant's philosophy), Jameson's review considers today's media consumption as the reification of human experiences and specific localised ways of living being turned into consumer products. In his original theorisation, Jameson referred to the conditions of poor urban migrant neighbourhoods in a post-war U.S. context and its reified reanimations of *mafia* narratives such as in the *Godfather* films. While this film genre affirms and lays out the social order of the socio-spatial world of its setting in a given time, it also evokes what he calls a 'utopian longing' for a return to lost traditional family values and roles (Jameson, 1979; 2013).

This longing is equally drawn forth by early accounts of Naples. Michael Mittelmeier (2024), leaning on the observations of sociologist Max Horkheimer, describes Naples' popularity among German bourgeois writers (*vacationers*) of the 1920s as a 'longing for a society in which the economy did not hold sway over culture, but culture over the economy' (ibid: 8). Much earlier, *grand tourist* Goethe references the precarious economic life of Naples as full of 'vibrant and brilliant industriousness', by means not to get rich but to 'live free of care', implying an intrinsic resilience towards economic struggle (Mittelmeier, 2024 quoting Goethe). Extending the words of Jameson's understanding of reification, I suggest speaking of a 'thingification of precarious life'. By reducing the fundamental vulnerability in precarious existences to mere (cultural) things, certain ways of living are rendered as expected and the default. These patterns induce and serve a 'film industry-tourism complex', both in terms of how creative work 'works' and the ideation and idealization of 'Southern' urban life they bring into being and affirm. I speak both of an ideation and idealization here,

as the first relates to how new ideas about something are created and the latter represents the idealizing and fetishizing tendencies related to that something, for instance the longing for a life ‘pre-corrupted’ by modern urban social alienation (often inferred in ideas about the Mediterranean). These ideational concepts convey how visions and beliefs play an essential role in shaping economic activity and trends (Peck et al, 2025; Benner, 2024). The idealization of a Southern Italian ‘slow life’ for instance has generated a highly profitable and customizable product market to be catered to (e.g. ‘slow living’ or *‘vita lenta’* tourist guides or social media trends, ‘slow food’ cooking courses and streaming shows; opposed to this, in Naples local life is seen as frenetic and noisy). I propose that by extension ‘precarious life’ functions as a ‘Southern narrative’, driving mutually reinforcing cultural industries like filmmaking and tourism.

This view opens up an understanding for how conditions of precarity, informality and the art of making do have become a quintessential part of today’s commodity satisfaction. The commodification of ‘Southern’ narratives fuels visual industries, as it creates a demand to serve and reify on a global audiovisual product market (see also Young and Markham 2019). Already economically overexploited urban societies of the South that are more susceptible to predatory mechanisms of today’s capitalist economic value extraction patterns become a lucrative scenery to create and satisfy a ‘utopian’ longing for experiencing the precarious, yet perpetually creative ‘Southern’ urban life. This links the interest of this work to the industry of urban tourism in today’s European South. As a familiar example of instrumentalized culture in a Jamesonian sense, tourism production systems are highly dependent on the creation of cultural imaginaries and atmospheres. Having written extensively about film and the historical world onto which it is projected, Fredric Jameson welcomes a broader inclusion of not only the economic and social conditions that visuals present (besides pure aesthetic concerns) but rather the same conditions that the actual production process encompasses (Jameson, 2013, Wagner et al., 2022). By acknowledging Jameson’s work when looking at what images do and how they do it, I aim at aiding an understanding of the entanglements of industries involved in the generation of economically viable imaginaries.

In the next section, I lay out the advances and shortcomings in film-induced tourism research and my rationale behind choosing to deploy a ‘film industry-tourism complex’

approach instead. I illustrate how the conceptual framework above is relevant to what I define as a local example of such a complex, the city of Naples.

2.3 Thinking towards a ‘film industry-tourism complex’: Naples’ cinematic gaze

Films, besides their role as means of artistic expression and social communication, function as an industry with great economic relevance, arguably still one of the ‘biggest of the commercial cultural industries’ (Lorenzen, 2008: 3). The film industry possesses an image-creating force, participating in defining the perception of a country, region, city or neighbourhood. As a result, it contributes to attracting foreign businesses and investments and developing tourism pathways.

The literature thematising the interplay between film production and tourism concerns film-induced tourism (Riley et al., 1998; Beeton, 2005; Beeton, 2010; Croy, 2011). Since the 1990s, the field has explored the role audio-visual media play in creating dominant tourism destinations, describing the intentional efforts of local and national stakeholders to capitalize on the popularity of films, not least due to their inconspicuous nature when compared to traditional advertising. Film therein is emphasized as a powerful marketing tool opposed to a cultural practice (Yen and Croy, 2016; Croy, 2011).

Consuming a place via the screen without being physically present shapes an imaginary of the place and further determines decisions to visit the location or not, ultimately defining what to ‘actually think’ about a place (Urry, 1995). In Sangkyun Kim’s (2012) concept of screen tourism, viewers proactively engage with media to meet expectations and needs (Kim, 2012), to become emotionally invested in the perceived rich cultural atmosphere of the film location. This results in what Michael Mittelmeier (2013), writing about Naples’ role in critical theory, calls a *Sehnsuchtslandschaft* (translated by author - ‘landscape of desire’).

Typically, film-induced tourism takes place after a film is made and released, capitalizing on its reputation through cinema marketing, ticket sales, online views and critical reviews. However, there is another set of relations between filmmaking and tourism, which lies in the actual production process and its relationship to the location in which it is

being produced. Here, I point towards the role of ‘real’ urban spaces (i.e. where local communities have remained relatively genuine, preserving traditional habits), which are chosen as movie settings, instead of filming studios or unpopulated nature landscapes. Looking at the ‘geographies of filmmaking’ as a series of place-anchored social practices favoured or limited by the economic preconditions of its setting, seeks to uncover the often-overlooked social practices involved in creating and maintaining a local or regional cinematic landscape (Lukinbeal and Sommerlad, 2022). Consequently, by viewing filmmaking not merely as a cultural, but also as an economic process, critical geographers extend its understanding from cultural text to a cultural commodity with symbolic value circulating in the global economy (Anderson, 2018). In line with this motivation, this work explores how cinema is produced and consumed, alongside the representational languages that facilitate its regional, national and international market viability (Lukinbeal, 2012: 183).

Contemporary tourism is characterised by market niches and an increasingly tailored customization of tourist consumption (Leotta, 2020). One of such niches is cinema-related business tourism, in which we observe a stark rise of filmmakers (mostly in their role as entrepreneurs) becoming tourists themselves. Correspondingly, as filmmaking has become increasingly globalised, studios have adopted strategies to outsource production to lesser regulated legal environments, cheaper labour and attractive tax incentives and subsidies by regional and urban governments (Curtin and Sanson, 2016). Such phenomena highlight hidden forms of interurban competition and labour exploitation in screen media production, particularly in filming locations of the Southern (and global peripheral) urban context. The still limited research endeavours into this process offer critical reflections on how local creative work is positioned along a global production apparatus.

While cinema is acknowledged as a significant driver of tourism, there remains a need to investigate its subtle influences and practical implications in actual lived filming locations (Juškelyte, 2016, Liu and Ruiz Pardos, 2020). Following this motivation, in this work, I investigate the recent re-emerging film industry in Naples as an example of cultural economy practices that are at once enacted, responsive to, and fed by, tourism-driven urban revival processes. As I observe these processes to be increasingly intertwined and inseparable, I suggest that film-induced tourism is a limited way of perceiving the relationship between film production, tourism and place, and propose to scrutinize what I

term the ‘film industry-tourism complex’ and its daily workings in real spaces. Not only has filmmaking a high visibility and shapes the reputations and imaginaries of places, but it also entails an everyday reality of work and ‘mechanisms by which economization transforms social arrangements’ (Roscoe, 2016: 2) as any other comparable industry. Staying true to the dictionary definition of ‘complex’ and to emphasise its inseparable entanglement, the film and tourism industries respectively make up a ‘whole of complicated or interrelated parts’, as does a complex of welfare programs for instance. Most prominently, the interrogation of the US ‘military-industrial complex’ (Adams, 1968; Dunne and Sköns, 2010; Roland, 2021) or the now-totemic ‘prison-industrial complex’ (Schlosser, 1998; Thompson, 2012) introduced a ‘complex’ thinking to critical social theory and economic research. The term was popularized by Angela Davis (1998) in a conference speech with reference to ‘the structural similarities and profitability of business-government linkages in the realms of military production and public punishment’ (ibid: 146). More recent examples of a ‘complex’ thinking critique for instance how nonprofits, government, and business become entangled, to the end that activist funding ultimately flows through the same channels controlled by the interests being critiqued (Thorton, 2007). Also, the ‘AI-industrial complex’ describes the intertwined power of AI corporations, governments, and related institutions, alleging how these actors manipulate policy and public perception while framing AI advancement as a matter of national security (Widder et al., 2024). Among others, the ‘agricultural-industrial complex’ (Guimarães, 1982) and literature on a ‘pharmaceutical-(or medial) industrial complex’ (Relman, 1980) should be mentioned here.

As becomes apparent, the ‘complex’ term is a structural-critique tool for naming networks of overlapping state and/or industry interest that get naturalized as necessary or inevitable. This makes a seemingly neutral or benevolent activity (culture, punishment, philanthropy) become fused with capital accumulation and political power, such that the activity persists not because it works, but because networks of interlocking financial interest need it to keep expanding (Dunne and Sköns, 2010). A complex-style thinking therefore helps to de-naturalize something presented as functional or creative and expose the nuanced profit/power structure underneath.

The concept of a ‘film industry-tourism complex’ I introduce here equally tries to highlight the mechanisms that make two interrelated industries inseparable and dependent

on each other. In detail, the following constitutive dimensions distinguish the concept from adjacent and related notions of the existing literature presented above, such as film-induced tourism or symbolic economies. Firstly, thinking through a complex does not only emphasise the mutually reinforcing nature of both industries but further highlights who gets excluded from the profits the complex generates, even when these actors make up part of the industry itself. Secondly, a complex points to how cultural products like film become actively naturalized as solely creative (or tourism as solely economically beneficial for the city), obscuring the industrial financial interest contingent on the expansion of the complex. Lastly, although the complex does mirror symbolic economies, it adds a component of the extractivist nature of ‘thingifying’ urban living itself, extending the idea of symbolic capital, that does not necessarily represent an extractivist tendency per se. These practical and theoretical dimensions encourage my rationale for the conceptualizing and analysis of the following case study as a ‘film industry-tourism complex’.

I consider Naples, both in its cinematic legacy, its recent re-birth as a ‘grand set’ for film productions (Grassi, 2026) as well as its evolution into a mass tourism destination, a prominent example of the emergence of such a ‘complex’. As of late, Naples has invested 90 million in the film production sector in the last three years alone (ibid). Equally, tourist numbers have skyrocketed in the last decade, turning Naples into a new and rapidly growing tourist destination within a short period of time. To trace my ‘industry complex’ reasoning, an overview of Naples' cinematic and touristic gaze in past and present is due.

Besides a long tradition of theatre, the origins of Neapolitan cinema date back to the very beginnings of cinema itself, with Naples and Turin as the centres of Italian filmmaking during the silent era (Marlow-Mann, 2011). During the fascist regime, production ground to a halt due to censorship. Benito Mussolini objected to Neapolitan contributions, often set in working-class settings and spoken in dialect, contrary to the image of Italy he wanted to promote.

In the 1950s and 60s, Naples together with Rome was the most filmed city in Europe. It was also one of the most bombed ones during WW2, inspiring a first wave of neorealist films telling ‘funny stories’ as attempts of survival amidst a life of poverty. Pasolini's idea of ‘cinema as life’, or ‘free indirect subjective life, that ‘turns’ on its own’ (Pasolini, 1965: 7) has significantly influenced Naples' film production, making the city's

urbanity a main source of imagery. Italian cities - beyond Naples, also Rome, Milan or Venice - always reflected and established the cinematographic ideals of polished places and sites, along with some 'street life' flavour. In Neapolitan films, however, a particular outburst of the latter is often depicted: an excess, with novelistic and melodramatic archetypes, musical and comedic implications that are stylized repeatedly in familiar or unexpected ways. From the late 1960s to the 1990s (a period in which cinematic activity lacked and tourism was practically non-existent), Naples was little more than a stopover for travellers heading to nearby attractions like Capri and the Amalfi coast, whilst the city suffered stigmatization within Italy and Europe alike.

As a response to the economic crisis the city experienced the post-industrial transition from the 1980s to the 1990s. The 1990s saw the rise of a novel urban strategy trying to 'modernize' the city: the so-called 'Neapolitan Renaissance'. Driven by the active pursuit of a set of culture-led policies of urban representation from 1993-1997, it aimed at 'making culture a new productive resource for the city' (Simeon and Lucariello, 2018: 67). This new policy of image for Naples as a 'city of art and culture' was equally impelled by the UNESCO 'branding' of the designated historic centre as world heritage site in 1995 (Iovino 2022a). This led to an interest of national and international press and the advertising sector, such as iconic campaigns of *Barilla* and *Volvo*. The German magazine *Der Spiegel*, while only a few years earlier writing on Naples as a haven of crime, with the provocative picture of a gun placed on a plate of spaghetti, dedicated a large press report on the city named '*Old magnificence, New splendour*' in 1994 (D'Alessandro et al., 2015).

At the same time, by the 1990s, a new generation of Neapolitan directors revived the city's prominence in Italian cinema. This so-called New Neapolitan Cinema (Marlow-Mann, 2011) established a relationship with the transformed urban built environment, people's living conditions and social life of those times, relaunching the neorealist style, but rather as a way of 'introducing new ways of showing Naples from the inside out' (Caldwell, 2011: 348). Standing out dramatically from the landscape of Italian cinema in the early 1990s, titles like *Vito and the Others* (1991), *Death of a Neapolitan Mathematician* (1992) or *Libera* (1993), all debuts of young local filmmakers, contributed to the critical success of local cinema over the next decade and a half, in which Naples once again became a thriving centre of film production (ibid). Ruth Glynn (2025) compares the first Neapolitan soap opera *Un*

Posto Al Sole (*'A Place in the Sun'*), launched in 1993 and still up and running, as the beginning of the rehabilitation of Naples in the national cultural imaginary as a 'national utopia' of Italian everyday life, in stark contrast with the dominant view of a city with a troubled past.

Before this transition of Naples into a tourist destination in the last 10-15 years, the city has been disproportionally preceded by popular aversive media coverage. Negative portrayals during the 2000s, including urban crises of gang criminality in the local drug market, and a prolonged waste mismanagement emergency, both arbitrarily linked in news outlets, reproduced the idea of a city of 'imminent doom' (Jones, 2023) or as Nicholas Dines termed it, the 'aberrant city' (2016), locked in a state of near 'pathological exception' (ibid: 23). Indeed, the city is rarely depicted as dynamic nor innovative but is mostly viewed as 'locked into its own idiosyncratic cycles' between brief positive episodes and numerous setbacks (Dines, 2016: 25). Naples is rendered as a city yet to become modern or seemingly stuck in pre-modern ways of life, with this notion mostly being entangled with the 'popular' neighbourhoods of its historical core. The telling of Naples as the 'porous city' (Benjamin and Lacis, 1925) that is 'already images' (without the need of rolling film so to speak) – by default offering nooks and frames from which to view and stage the life of the street from, has for long motivated the city's attractiveness as a filming venue (Moroncini, 2024).

The catalysts bringing back the film industry to Naples in its recent scope, alongside intense and rapid processes of touristification in the last decade and a related rise in tourism trends aiming at exploring 'Southern urban life' outlined earlier, encompass several domino effects of culturally based development strategies. In the difficult context of a city still affected by endemic problems in the early 2010s, the maturation and rise of the cultural and tourism industry prepared by the 'Neapolitan Renaissance' phase set in, a growth of international connections, especially low-cost flights and traffic sea cruises, and the arrival and swift expansion of short-term rentals. In a few years, Naples revelled in a tourism boom, registering the highest increase in overnight stays between 2010 and 2019, with a particular surge in the foreign component of +165% (Iovino, 2023). The strategic marketing plan 'Destination Naples 2020' (Municipality of Naples, 2017) was the first attempt to rationalize this branding policy of the historic city. The plan was intended to sell the city as 'authentic' with socio-cultural promiscuity, presenting the 'bad' neighbourhoods as the 'right ingredients for living authentic experiences' (Iovino, 2023: 94). This shows how the city

shifted from an official image approach of ‘art’ and in the 1990s towards one of capitalizing on the ‘wicked’ image of the city as a source of attraction, playing on the famous ‘duality’ of Naples as a city full of ‘tantalising’ inherent contradictions. These trajectories set the foundation to eventually open up the city to foreign investment in the audiovisual sector once again, at a higher rate in terms of production numbers and professionalism as seen before.

Elena Ferrante’s novels, TV series and art films set in Naples, start to reactivate the image of the city both at national and international level. Other global hits, such as Mario Martone’s *Nostalgia*, and Paolo Sorrentino’s Oscar-nominated *The Hand of God*. Ferrante’s work in particular has contributed to shifting the international perception of Naples by reframing its systemic challenges (Leotta, 2020). Her novels and adaptations use the city’s ‘grim realities’ as a backdrop to highlight a vibrant urban reality, sparking a wave of literary tourism. Further, the ‘Gomorrah phenomenon’ (initiated by the release of Roberto Saviano’s ‘docu-novel’ *Gomorrah* in 2008, followed by a film adaption by Matteo Garrone, and a five-season series) among other prominent examples (e.g. HBO’s own big budget show *My Brilliant Friend* based a novel by Elena Ferrante, the series hit *Mare Fuori*, *Un Posto al Sole*, *Mina Settembre* to name a few) have crafted an epic and popular narrative that holds the centre of the city at its core, spurring a series of adaptations and spin-offs that have contributed to Naples’ return to global notoriety in the audiovisual sector.

The city administration has increasingly and actively fuelled and encouraged the strategy of *cineturismo*, with the goal to both attract non-local filmmakers as labour tourists and to aid the generation of a unique destination image through film and TV, inspiring audiences to visit the featured locations. This concept gained major traction in city government and public debate, with the mayor Gaetano Manfredi recently calling a film-induced tourism strategy the ‘future’ for local urban development (Locorotolo, 2025). Claiming that for productions to ‘leave’ wealth in the city, it is necessary to create preconditions for the audiovisual sector that ‘embrace an entrepreneurial approach to decision-making’ (ibid). Concrete examples of this course are the introduction of dedicated production hubs such as the *Casa del Cinema* in historical locations like the *Palazzo Cavalcanti* and the *Real Albergo dei Poveri* with an aim to attract international capital and streaming platforms. The Regional Film Commission of Campania as well as the Naples Municipal

Office for Cinema were introduced in 2005, as a means of streamlining bureaucracy, offering logistical support and infrastructure for productions. They are public offices representing the region's and city's interest in cinema as a means of place promotion through specialized digital and physical itineraries. Being responsible for providing shooting permits, the introduction of 'light shoots', requiring no road closures or big equipment, and being exempt from authorization fees has facilitated an exponential increase of small and fast production projects (D'Alessandro et al., 2015). In their function, Film Commissions are a main player bridging tourism management and film industry. Besides these initiatives, the overall lack of a solid economic base as outlined in the earlier chapter, and the heavy debt situation of the city, equally push the film industry towards fitting a profit-driven tourist monoculture (Iovino, 2023).

As a result, today film and television crews are a common sight on Neapolitan streets and in public spaces, both in its central core as well as in its more peripheral urban areas. Whereas only 20 years ago, at the time the Regional Film Commission was founded to attract filmmaking with the ends of place promotion, 10 to 15 projects were filmed in the centre of Naples yearly, in 2021 nearly 150 projects were realized (Povoledo, 2021), and the latest numbers by the municipal office for cinema (*Ufficio Cinema del Comune*) show a total of 600 audio-visual productions in the last triennium according to the city's cinema office (Grassi, 2026). Quoting one of most prominent directors of Neapolitan cinema since the 1990s, Mario Martone describes Naples as having returned to 'being the capital of Italian cinema, as it was at its origins' (The New York Times 2021).

Through the case study of Rione Sanità, an intensely filmed Neapolitan neighbourhood, presented in the next section of this chapter, I contribute new knowledge to this 'industry complex' scholarship. I set out to show how new cycles of image-intensive industries are exposed to, and bring forward a demand for, experiencing the 'Southern City'. My definition of an industry 'complex' follows an interest in how the film and the tourism industry are increasingly and reinforcingly interlinked. I turn to the staging of the neighbourhood of Rione Sanità to exemplify these trends. By exploring how this urban area is mobilised as a 'living stage', I explore its role in generating conceptions of 'Southern urban living' and its image reification within an audio-visual product market. In the following, I

evidence the parallel trajectories of tourism growth and the filmmaking frenzy in Rione Sanità.

2.4 Rione Sanità – ‘a city in the city’: film location and tourist destination

The insights I report on here are based on extensive fieldwork conducted throughout the year of 2024, focusing on the filmmaking scene in Naples and more specifically centred on and in the historical neighbourhood of Rione Sanità. A detailed account of the undertaken fieldwork preparation, process and analysis is outlined in the General Introduction of this dissertation.



A common scene off and on the screen: *Mercato dei Vergini* in Rione Sanità, a quintessential representation of Naples' tourist image combining frenetic activity and cultural heritage (Source: Fonts83, RM licensed, modified by author, 2020)



View over the Sanità neighbourhood, seen from the bridge *Ponte della Sanità* on *Via Santa Teresa degli Scalzi* (Source: Alexandre Ruthven, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0, 2018)

Sitting just outside the core of the historic city of Naples, this area has historically experienced a status of ‘internal periphery’, long representing a symbol of urban marginality, despite its centrality and presence of extraordinary cultural heritage like late-Baroque style palaces (unique to Rione Sanità and not found in other Neapolitan historic neighbourhoods, such as the *Palazzo dello Spagnolo*), churches, monasteries and large catacomb complexes like the *Cimitero delle Fontanelle* and the *Catacombs of San Gennaro*. Today, due to the fact that the area is central yet detached in respect to the historic city, while at the same possessing the same elements (with a unique set of cultural heritage), it is often portrayed as ‘a city in the city’ (in Italian - ‘*una città nella città*’). These elements contribute to easier logistical and physical access for film crews and filmmaking, for instance by the ease of setting up a base camp and the transportation of actors and workers.

Its decline from an elite noble area to an infamous enclave began in the early 19th century with the construction of a bridge directly connecting two royal residences, isolating the neighbourhood and cutting it off from urban routes. This ultimately led to the district’s degradation, poverty rising and Camorra culture rising (the local decentralised Mafia-like organisation operating via ‘clans’, referred to as ‘*O Sistema*’ (‘The System’), reflecting its deep integration into the local economy and society), proliferating in the early 2000s (Varese, 2006). As a symbol of one of the poorest and physically deteriorated areas of Naples, Rione Sanità has been widely referenced in popular culture linking it to dense descriptions of social and physical voids, crime and decay (Calicchia and Capuano 2024). Conversely, the district has also long been perceived as emblematic of the scenery of Neapolitan vivid street life and socially dense urban space and iconic street sceneries like the *Mercato dei Vergini*. It was the setting for several movies in the first Italian neorealism era, especially for lower-class street scenes, such as in Vittorio de Sica’s *The Gold of Naples* (1954) (see for instance Davinotti, 2009 for the locations in Rione Sanità featured in the film, then and now) and *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963), or the massive Hollywood hit *It Started in Naples* (1960) featuring Sophia Loren and Totò, one of the most celebrated early Italian actors and comedians, born and raised in Rione Sanità.

The process of ‘redemption’ of Rione Sanità (Iovino, 2023) started in the early 2000s with the popular figure of pastor Father Loffredo (2013) of the basilica of Santa Maria alla Sanità. In 2006, together with local young people, he founded the social cooperative *La*

Paranza, with a mission to break the isolation of the area and aid a neighbourhood marked by great socio-cultural divide on one hand and abandoned cultural heritage and rich artistic resources on the other hand. As protagonist of the regeneration, his ‘renaissance’ movement paved the way for cultural upgrading and opened the area to visitors and new surging economic interest in the neighbourhood (see also Locorotondo and Rossi, 2026).

One prominent early example of this ignited tourism interest is the rediscovered popularity in the catacombs of *San Gennaro* set on in the mid-2010s (Napoli Today, 2015), with a visitor increase from 12.000 to almost 160.000 between 2009-2016 (a much higher growth than the two main museums of the city MANN and Capodimonte). After a conflict with the church in 2018 over the management of the archaeological site, by then in the hands of *La Paranza* for over 10 years turning it from abandoned into one of the most visited sites of the city, a more established system of cultural heritage management took shape in the neighbourhood. The recovery of the catacombs becomes a pivot point for a wider regeneration project aiming to re-establish economic and cultural interest in the neighbourhood.

The ‘*Paranza* effect’ (Corbisiero and Zaccaria, 2021) became contagious, on the one side supporting the experimentation of innovative organizational models (see Locorotondo and Fishwick, 2026). Gabriella Punziano’s work (2022) also shows how conflicts around the use and transformation of urban voids in Naples’s historic neighbourhoods including Rione Sanità are now highly linked to the tensile interactions between neighborhood groups and citizen committees and public authorities. On the other side this effect attracted increasing tourist capital via titles such as ‘Best Experience in the World’ in 2020 and ‘Best Attraction’ in Italy in 2021 assigned to the catacombs in 2020 by the Global Remarkable Venue Awards competition, among many other examples. Today, Rione Sanità is considered a ‘best practice’ example of urban revitalisation, studied at national and international level (Consiglio et al., 2021; Massa and Moretti, 2011; Iovino, 2022b), sometimes referred to as the ‘*Sanità model*’. In 2022, it was included in the English magazine ‘*Time out*’ as one of the ‘coolest urban districts in the world’. Besides the recovery of historical memory and objects, the area became a lucrative spot to welcome and experiment with platform economies such as AirBnB. In the two-year period 2018-2019, the Sanità district demonstrated the peak of

property purchases for tourist accommodation in the city, with 50% of all sales (Iovino, 2021)

Alongside the touristic boom of the rediscovered catacombs, Rione Sanità's transformation into a tourist destination was aided through the construction of a media place-brand, largely influenced by audiovisual contents (Punziano and Saracino, 2021). After the success of the catacombs, popular films set in Rione Sanità begin to appear and grow rapidly in numbers, most notably Mario Martone's pioneering *Sindaco del Rione Sanità*, released in 2019 and his hit *Nostalgia* two years later. The later film is based on Ermanno Rea's 2016 novel *Nostalgia*, in which Rione Sanità plays an important role as an inspirational place, contributing to the neighbourhood's rediscovery. Besides cinema, several documentary films and television broadcasts dedicated to the *Paranza* experience emerged, such as *The human factor*, about grassroots entrepreneurship, *The Paranza of Beauty*, or *The Rione Sanità System*. Many of the latter won or were nominated for awards, such as *The certainty of dreams*. This led to the district becoming one of the most requested film locations in Naples. Quickly film promotion initiatives, funded and promoted by the city's tourism management, arose, such as the first International Sanità Film Festival (SàFF). The urban neighbourhood has thus continued to be a hot spot and key location for film and TV series production - locally referenced as Naples' *cinecittà* (in reference to the largest film studio of Italy and Europe *cinecittà* in Rome) - alongside paralleled mass tourism trends, with the district now being the third most-visited area by tourists in Naples (Punziano and Saracino, 2021). The cultural revival process is not exclusive to the film industry. Besides reshaped interest in local heritage sites like the named catacombs and a boom in new art venues such as the sculpture museum *Jago* opening in 2023 and built within an old church, the withstanding influence of globally acclaimed novels such as those of Elena Ferrante has been acknowledged. The role of filmmaking has been mentioned in public debate and news outlets; however it is yet to be researched in its newest dimension, neglecting its large reverberations in the dissemination of an urban imaginary, attracting different tourism activities.

I postulate that the processes laid out above proof the mutually reinforcing dynamics between the filmmaking and the tourism industry. From a simple 'filming set', the Sanità neighbourhood has been rapidly transforming into a fully-fledged hotspot for both the

tourism and audiovisual industry with a synced timeline and aligned cultural development processes. As a ‘complex’ consisting of many connected parts, the outlined factors have equally led to the rise of the interrelated industries and continue to make up a favourable setting for the reinforcement of both industries, even more so in the context of urban neighbourhoods that have traditionally been caught between pleas for preservation and demands for demolition.

In the following sections, I demonstrate how the neighbourhood has become the new focal point of this ‘complex’. I firstly underscore the renewed interest of filmmakers as tourists themselves, and secondly point out precarious living is mirrored in the local film industry, suffering from increased precariousness due to the pressure of national and international competition and a lack of long-term stable public investment in the said industry or related long-term job opportunities in the neighbourhood. Ultimately, I delineate the animated landscape of Rione Sanità as catering and being catered to reinforce its reification as a ‘living stage’ for the said ‘complex’. In such, I stress the extractivist nature of this latest round of filmmaking and tourism rush in this urban area.

2.4.1 ‘This neighbourhood is a constant set’: From precarious living to precarious industries

Yes, there is so much more production, and it is attractive because it has opened up tourism, and tourism has opened up the neighbourhood - but still it’s ‘authentic’, people live here, it is strongly inhabited and ‘used for life’, it’s independent and ‘a city inside the city’. There is no such thing as an ‘out of season’ or a low or high in touristic or filming terms in Rione Sanità anymore, there are always tourists and filmmakers now – ALL the time (CR, interview with author, September 2024)

The quote above stems from an encounter with the head of production of a national filming company and reflects the increasing geographical concentration of filmmaking in and about Rione Sanità. This phenomenon is evident in the titles and film promotion activities using the name *Rione Sanità* (e.g. ‘*Il sindaco di Rione Sanità*’, ‘*Noi del Rione Sanità*’), and shows how even merely the neighbourhood’s mention has become essential for the

dissemination of the ‘newest’ film material telling the story of urban Naples as a whole, even if filmed elsewhere. I argue that the symbolic and locational value of Rione Sanità can be considered a new frontier for both the tourism and film industry in constant search of new spaces of expansion, as this section will demonstrate.



‘On set’: A common sight of film shooting in Rione Sanità. In the background the soft volcanic rock (yellow tuff) is visible; it is omnipresent throughout Naples, and characteristic for descriptions of the city as highly malleable and porous. (Source: author, 2024)

As the opening quote of this sentence, by the Director of the cinema *Modernissimo* in the centre of Naples, entails, cinema serves both as a constant reference for the neighbourhood and a daily presence. Rione Sanità shows a high diversification of tourist activities involved in or related to filmmaking. This includes a growing trend of niche labour tourism where filmmakers (national and international teams) become tourists themselves in the filming location of interest, comparable to patterns of policy tourism, that describes

when city planners and policymakers take trips to other cities to study their ‘successful’ urban regeneration models (González, 2010). The resulting stark ‘fly-in-fly-out’ nature of audio-visual production follows the goal of completing as many TV and film products as possible in short time frames. We see a shift from filmmakers as usual long stay business travellers (Irimiás, 2015; Ward and O’Regan, 2009) towards shorter filming durations and drastically reduced on-site presence of film-crews in the neighbourhood. This echoes Susan Ward and Tom O’Regan’s (2009) description of an increase of footloose producers, in line with an earlier description of a footloose industry as a ‘business that is not tied to a specific geographic location’ (Allen, 1992: 304). Similarly, even during shoots in the neighbourhood, fewer crew members in fact lodge or stay in the area aside from working hours. This induces the risk of a ‘hit and run’ effect for the film industry, in which the influx of predominantly non-local productions is not integrated into wider local economic long-term strategies (see also Locorotolo, 2025). In such, the ‘film industry-tourism complex’ shows itself in the mechanisms aimed at attracting foreign investment rather than seizing the momentum to consolidate structural and stable leadership within the industries. Below I lay out how this affects local filmmakers working both with significantly smaller budgets as compared to national and international production houses.

Due to this transformed filmmaking reality, I argue that the precariousness of urban living in Naples’ historical neighbourhoods, now dominated by touristic economic activity, is reflected in the precariousness of the local film industry. As the latter is increasingly pressured to compete with large-scale production schemes and encompass elements of a promotion-driven tourism industry and vice versa, filmmaking has become a touristic activity that exacerbates the precarious conditions of local filmmakers. This resonates with what Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson (2016) highlight as the precarity experienced by workers in creative sectors outside the mainstream commercial entertainment hubs of the Euro-American heartland. Local production enterprises have little investment potential, employ on average less than ten people and work with smaller budgets and substantially extended production timelines. A local studio producer explains:

Our daily work couldn’t be more different from the big production factories; we have other jobs too to ‘make do’. We can’t set up a film in a few months, we can’t produce

fast, we take years, we spend a lot of time on research and preparation, we don't work with traditional 'sets'. We don't have the production capacity to create big narratives of Naples or its neighbourhoods for this broad audience of potential visitors; it's not our goal. (CC, interview with author, September 2024)

Prevalent conditions of temporary, contingent and casual work in everyday economic life of Naples are visible in the sphere of the local film industry. The interviewed small local producers describe this struggle as an extension of a dependency on the aforementioned 'art of making-do' (Pine, 2012) as the main strategy for industry survival. Uncertain and unstable circumstances of film work become apparent through a series of existentialist concerns, reflected in this young local director's sentiment:

This was my first film, the first film of the photographer, the first film of the producer, the first film of the custom designer. It's a miracle this film even exists, it could easily just not, it's so hard to realize a vision in this industry. (EP, interview with author, November 2024)

Before the rediscovery of local filmmaking in the late 1990s, Neapolitan actors primarily served as '*ethnic players*' or '*extras*' siding the big faces of Italian cinema. Slowly, Naples became a protagonist in its films with all stages of the film production circle and creative roles (screenwriters, scenographers, directors) being locally filled. The latest filmmaking trends however show how most of the workforce still provided locally represents low skilled labour. Remuneration and salaries for these technical needs are substantially lower in Naples, which is essential when saving on filming costs is a goal. Local producers express concern over the abandonment and adaptation of most creative roles (Curtin and Sanson, 2016) to accommodate large-scale production schemes. One for instance recounts how:

Neapolitan businesses provide some hardware to film, when something is missing or something went wrong, there is always local back-up. The 'money', the staff, the directors were Neapolitan before, this home-brewed industry is no more. The main characters now are the big media production factories, you can't shoot anything successfully without them and when they come to shoot for six months that's good – you get logistical support from the public offices, this means six-month paid drivers, paid receptionists, paid delivery guys...we arrived at this point where what is wanted from this city is: waiters, pizza makers, doormen, occasionally an electrician, some lighting people – all in all small works. (MM, interview with author, October 2024)

The Film Commission follows a predominantly outward-looking tourism-fostering approach, in contrast to a rather inward-aimed strategy of addressing professional deficits of locally embedded industries (Lorenzen, 2008). By issuing filming permits, navigating city bureaucracy and providing free logistical support, they act as a production facilitator and welcoming agent rather than a main investor. Their assistance works in an ad-hoc manner; training and cinema education is offered on a project-basis, funded via a 'special projects' scheme. To survive on the local market of filming, local production entities tend to operate as inscribed cultural associations depicting how they 'make-do' and adjust to poorly coordinated institutional methods. A local producer and cinema teacher explains:

They provide a post-production course or alike if needed. But there is no long-term strategy for local cinema. The neighbourhood and the tourist trends develop way faster than the urban institutions adjust to it. It's all about now, to consume now. You see this constant sentiment of urgency and anxiety also in our institutions. This belief that we Neapolitans have this propensity towards showbusiness and 'making it work' no matter the odds. (GP, interview with author, October 2024)

Personal rivalries and the safeguarding of power dynamics between stakeholders in tourism and city administration create conflicts regarding the contested representation of the city's iconic neighbourhoods. I observe how local independent producers express

fatigue as they question the integrity of the film sector and its local workers. The pressures of having to compete with the productivity of national and international film studios shows itself not only via conflicts over diminishing creative autonomy but also in the emotional strain on workers (Curtin and Sanson, 2016). This situation reflects how local creative labour practices in an era of global media competitiveness play out on the ground. One of the few female local producers, who also organises educational and recreational activities for local children, expresses a sense of frustration as follows:

I'm tired of convincing the ones saying what is important cinema for this city, that what I do is relevant, tired of begging for favours, some approval. I want to work in an environment where I can have my space to be inventive, where I can express my ideas. I have enough of putting myself in this militant position - where I must fight for what is my own area of expertise. What we do gets lost, we don't bring in the big investments. (AN, interview with author, November 2024)

Francesco Calicchia and Maria Elena Capuano's (2024) insights outlined above show how the local film industry is characterized by a certain *elasticità* (flexibility) and improvised ways of operating that mirror the informal livelihoods of many urban communities and other cultural sectors in the city. This chronic ductility echoes what Goethe termed a 'subversive industriousness' of Neapolitan life (Goethe after Mittelmeier, 2024), often referenced as an 'inherent' characteristic of Neapolitan life and Neapolitan economies alike. In the next section, I illustrate how these specific 'urban ways of life' are central to the filmic attractiveness of the neighbourhood, reifying it as a place-specific 'living stage', which lies at the core of the maintenance of the said 'complex'.

2.4.2 Animated urban space: The 'living stage' of Rione Sanità and its reification

Crucial to developing a highly adaptive setting for filmmaking is the role of the urban as animated entity itself (Rose and Wylie, 2006). This notion understands 'urban forms of life' (Moisio and Rossi, 2024; Jaeggi, 2018) as inseparable material and social worlds that

produce ideas, economies and images. I observe how the atmosphere of the neighbourhood serves as a critical attractive factor for the industry, and how in turn the same spaces are being restaged to cater to that very industry. Emphasizing the animating characteristics of the neighbourhood's main filming spots shows how the specificities of the built environment foster activities beyond their initial purpose. Rione Sanità offers a variety of film sceneries, from historical palaces to bucolic backyards to the most visually referenced, slum-like densely populated alleys and market streets. When speaking of Rione Sanità's cinematic appeal, the historical and artistic quality of spaces remains overlooked, rather its 'character' as a tension between social struggles and the 'rough' material reality takes centre stage.

Two prominent features of Naples' urban fabric, present to a large degree in Rione Sanità, derive from the ideas of porosity and permeability, first mentioned in the travelogue of Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis (1925), a lasting description of urban life based on Naples. This 'pre-modern' reference starts out with the morphologic features of architectural elements, calling the city 'as porous as this stone' (ibid: 165-66), describing yellow tuff, the porous volcanic rock composed of compacted volcanic ash omnipresent in Naples' building stock and natural environment. The porous condition helps understand the scenic urban 'character' that creates voids that present themselves as filmic frames to be stylized and filled with plots. Rione Sanità stands as an emblematic setting, where the overlapping of private and public spheres 'leap' out onto the street, a constant reference in film and TV plots. A cinema researcher explains how:

Every day the physical outlet of streets changes, always improvised. It's the intermingling of things and people without borders, there is a lot of messy muddling of functions, that's what people want to see, the bazaar of life. The private is so explicit and visible, it calls for scenes. - (FA, interview with author, 04.09.2024)

The material nature of the *bassi* (street-level homes, historically inhabited by low-income households – see chapter 1) contributes to this 'porous' residential feature, prominently depicted in film and TV. Popular filming frames mirror this porous imagery

onto the social aspects of neighbourhood life in Rione Sanità, ‘full of cracks of lives of people’ (*an interviewed screenwriter quoting Benjamin and Lacis*). Producers often pay residents of undefined ‘downtown’ Naples’s alleys to hang clothes and sheets from their windows. An alley without them *‘just wouldn’t be Naples for the American script’* (*one example is the filming of ‘Eat Pray Love’*). This performative entertaining and reinforcing of the expected scenery is omnipresent in the neighbourhood, as a director of nation-wide reputation frequently filming in Rione Sanità explains:

You have this famous duality of Naples – the beautiful and the ugly, the seductive and the repulsive, the ordinary and exotic – this is reality. But you also keep on showing this over and over again and it becomes re-established over and over. This goes for how people live but also how every little thing looks like in Rione Sanità. (CR, interview with author September 2024)

The ‘thingification’ of ‘Southern urban living’ as an inherent condition is reified onto a cinematic image to be sold and catered to a marketplace both nationally and globally. I observe related processes in the daily filming reality of Rione Sanità, as its socio-material elements are repeatedly performed, contributing to the functioning of Rione Sanità as a dramatic ‘living scenery’ as a prominent local filmmaker states:

This industry is feeding off all these little previously undesirable things. The everyday little practices are like a scene for human drama, all mixed up with the vibrancy of the main streets of Sanità. The goal is to keep this; you also don’t want it (Rione Sanità) to change too much. More of the same yes. Rione Sanità with all the colours now even more with tourists it’s like the closest thing to a Southern carnival, you need to fuel it with more buzz. (GP, interview with author, June 2024)

The mixing of street and domestic noises, artificial and natural lighting effects, everyday repetitiveness of activities and the switching between a day and night scenery all

orchestrate a pulsating ‘spectacle of the everyday’ as background setting. The provisional, processual and ephemeral nature of urban phenomena reflects a certain ‘openness to passage’ of the urban (Enright and Olmstead, 2023). This perceived openness suggests easy access to the intimate world of residents, an openness ‘free for the taking’ so to speak. The lines between agreed upon exposure of and direct / indirect prying on homes have led to conflicts during filmmaking, stirring questions on access to ‘living stages’. An occasional filming crew member sketches out:

It’s quite predatory sometimes, people are also fed up with tourists already spying in - day in day out. Now it’s also the film crew, people are fatigued, it resembles a zoo. We have slum-tours, food tours and movie tours showing all the spots in the neighbourhood that you can see on the screen, and this will diversify with new offers. (LZ, interview with author, September 2024)

This reflection echoes Jameson’s description of how ‘the various forms of (urban) activity lose their immanent intrinsic satisfactions and become ‘means to an end.’ (Jameson, 1979: 4). In the context of filming, this end involves precarious dimensions of work and living to be actively extended and staged, highlighting the performative role of the described industry ‘complex’. This ultimately makes the film industry an extension of today’s experiential tourism practices in Naples.

The conception of the neighbourhood then resembles what Jameson (1979) calls a ‘criminal aberration of the norm and an omnipresent moral corruption’ (ibid: 147) in reference to the Mafia narrative in North American cinema. Here, Rione Sanità’s hardships and precarious lives cease to be addressed as an economic, political or historical matter but an inherently corrupted ethical one. This essentialism and naturalisation ultimately aid an ‘intent to mystify’ (Jameson, 1979; Rose and Wylie, 2006; Glynn, 2025). A noted foreign documentarian outlines this as follows:

...the image of struggle, the Southern abyss, city of failure and exception. This sells, and mostly the local idea that everybody is fine and dignified in poverty, makes a

living so creatively. Every element of the neighbourhood is a witness of that. There is no history or circumstance. (CT, interview with author, June 2024)

I thus argue that narratives of Neapolitan life are commodified: turned into appealing products that can be easily consumed by the audience. Since the demand for movies is marked by uncertainty, the commodification of narratives helps minimise commercial risks. Leaning on Fredric Jameson's (1981) idea of narrative commodification, Rione Sanità becomes marketable precisely due to its surface appearance and superficial repetition in film as well as tourism promotion. This is especially amplified in the case of Naples' local and regional firms. Foreign multi-media corporations, but also Italian state-subsidized digital media companies are more equipped to deal with this demand uncertainty than local production houses. As consumer tastes for films are unpredictable, the generation of certain 'go-to products' (Traverso, 2017) facilitates the creation of local spatial brands and 'images of reference'. Rione Sanità's popular spots, in combination with already well-established marketable storylines and starring, can buffer the 'risk of failed productions' (Lorenzen, 2008). To suit the global marketplace, films subscribe to 'universal' imaginaries like blockbuster 'recipes for success' and stereotyped portrayals of 'foreignized' locations (i.e. the 'Mexico filter' (Wood, 2021) used for the depiction of Latin-American and Middle Eastern locations, to transcend an atmosphere of arid and hostile environments). An actor working in both local and international productions illustrates this below.

You reduce the chance of a flop, you don't want to alienate your target audience, especially if you are dealing with foreign markets. It's not a domestic market anymore, like Indian cinema which feeds its own home market demand by a huge industry machine. Here we need to adjust to different market scenes. You must keep a certain image of what people think Neapolitan life is, you make what sells. Big cinema is not interested in real life stories, but the same story always – of someone who makes it, it's very Hollywood-ised and staying superficial is key. The image combo of bodies -

panorama - bodies - panorama - streets - waterfront just works. (MN, interview with author, September 2024)

The processes laid out so far show how the urban atmosphere of Rione Sanità can be described as catering as well as being catered to fit popular film sceneries and the resulting economic value it produces. I witness an increasing demand for filming spots incorporating the urban elements of precarity and the rhetorical power of the spatial imaginary of Rione Sanità proliferated through the branding of the neighbourhood's name both on the tourism and film market. In such, films do play their part in establishing stereotypical images, which, in turn, pushes the tourism industry to respond to that demand and offer a staged picturesqueness of precarious 'urban forms of life' (Moisio and Rossi, 2024), which in turn promises the visuals of already familiar film products. These mechanisms encourage the reinforcing dynamics of a 'complex' highly dependent on the 'thingification' of precarious urban life as an object of capital generation.

Introducing the notion of a 'living stage' proposes an interpretative image by bridging the sociality and materiality of urban space with the symbolic production of urban value. Although the theme of 'staged authenticity' is a prevalent critique within urban tourism and urban regeneration debates, the 'living stage' emphasises the mechanisms by which densely populated and visibly economically fragile neighbourhoods become cultural sceneries without remuneration or long-term betterment of the very living conditions they depict. This aligns with the dissertation's overarching argument of the extractivist nature of the political economy governing a culturally-based economization of urban living in contemporary cities of the European South.

2.5 Conclusion

This work has shown how a new cycle of Neapolitan filmmaking centred around the rediscovery of a formerly stigmatised urban neighbourhood is linked to an enactment of a 'scenic economic value' extraction from urban space as a 'living stage' serving a 'film industry-tourism complex'. This observation exposes how both industries of film and

tourism, in economic terms as well as in terms of the imaginaries of specific urban life they hold, are dependent on each other and mutually reinforcing.

The simultaneously aesthetic treatment of precarity and creativity, in combination with an easily accessible and socially negotiable public space, favours the renewed interest of mostly external (national and international) film projects. The recent round of an image-intensive industry increasingly establishes a demand for visual material of ‘Southern urban living’, and Neapolitan life more specifically, in ‘real’ lived neighbourhoods. Such a demand needs to be met and fed to multiply the economic value of precarious ‘living scenes’ in an increasingly competitive context of urban cinema, simultaneously translated into ‘sceneries’ themselves emerging as competitive resources for both industries.

As such, the insights of my case study led me to point to wider questions concerning participation in and benefits from the production of filming resources. Local filmmaking structures are necessary not only to tell urban stories from the ground, but moreover to buffer the tendency of using marginalised urban areas as a playground for an experience economy consumed through the screen. Having shown how the neighbourhood serves as a mere location for films, while lacking attempts to create a stable local industry in terms of public investment or long-term job opportunities in the neighbourhood, illustrates the extractive nature of the newest filmmaking buzz in and about this urban area. This opens up concerns on who benefits from the expenditure incurred by filmmaking, who organizes and channels it in the long run.

The Neapolitan case, although a prominent example of highly visualised ‘Southern’ urban living, is far from singular but points towards other cases of extractivist cultural industries that aid the preparation of an industrial climate favouring the economization of urban living. To give one concrete other possible empirical example for the case of filmmaking, I think of the city of Marseille in Southern France. Not only does it show highly comparable tendencies of a ‘film-industry-tourism complex’, but it equally suffers from infrastructural deficits, exoticism and national stigmatisation fuelling and legitimising a latter complex. From a theoretical as well as conceptual angle, this work contributes to wider debates on urban extractivism, cultural industries and the economization of urban living by bridging the latter themes via an introduction of a ‘complex’ thinking. Equally, this work supports arguments postulating the ‘Southern City’ as a new economic frontier, notably put forward

by Bhattacharya and Rossi (2026). In such, I consider this chapter to feed into research that increasingly sees Naples and the Italian South to be redesigned into extractivist stages for mass consumption, logistics and infrastructure. By emphasising how cities of the ‘South’ are increasingly being reduced to a pre-given set of functions, this research highlights how intertwined cultural industries play their often-underestimated part in facilitating these processes.

More research is needed to highlight the interconnections between film and tourism industries in Southern European urban settings and beyond. However, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted relationships between tourism and today’s dynamic filmic representations and further their economic enactments and value-extraction mechanisms in and via densely lived urban spaces. To close, I call on caution when cities of the European South increasingly see big ideational concepts of ‘culture’ entering political and public debates about urban revival, while continuing to be subjected to ‘exceptionalism and immutability’ (Dines, 2012: 17).

References - Chapter 2

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3. RE-KNOWING THE CITY:

The 'niche-producing' practice of alternative urban touring in Brussels

Abstract

This chapter examines critically-minded urban touring as a niche-producing, knowledge-generating practice between mainstreamed promotional city narratives and everyday 'lived' knowledge, empirically centring the case of socially aware alternative tour offers in Brussels. I position this phenomenon within a larger post-tourist city debate, such as the rise of proximity in urban planning debates and resident-oriented tourism trends. In doing so, I lean on two *leitmotifs*. First, I draw on Marshall Berman's notion of '*All that is solid melts into air*' as a means of attempting to make sense of the constant reconfiguration of the urban. Next, I adopt a literal definition of the 'niche', comparing the knowledge produced to a 'hollowed-out space displaying an object to be seen', opening up a sense of possibility for a 'new world' while at the same time preserving the existing one. I thereby propose alternative touring practices as an 'in-between' juxtaposed with the 'established' as the unsustainable side of today's mass tourism industry in a neoliberal urban tourism economy and the 'new', 'post-tourist' reality as not fully formed yet. By dissecting how this niche-producing state can help us grasp the unmaking and remaking of the city, this work opens up a discussion on the knowledge value of 'niches'. I conclude with a debate on the positionality of alternative practices within urban knowledge regimes and the importance of looking into variegated urban practices of the 'in-between' within and beyond the tourist city.

Keywords: urban knowledge, post-tourist city, urban tourism, urban tours, urban niches, knowledge production, in-betweenness

3.1 Introduction

The goal of this article is to offer an alternative understanding of urban knowledge production beyond the tourist city through the exploration of the rise of critically-minded resident-oriented urban tour guiding. By positioning this research in an upcoming post-tourist age, understood as a set of emerging trends and broader approaches to urban tourism and the urban experience in general, the observed practices reflect recent debates on ‘culture-driven sustainable urban tourism’ (UNESCO, 2025; see also European Union, 2019) as a set of low-impact, rather than mass-marketed, options. Traditionally, ‘tour guides’ are officially licensed tourism workers escorting groups of mostly foreign international tourists in places of interest (Weiler and Black, 2015). However, the emergence of tours dedicated to residents and locals’ challenges both the definition of what a tourist and a tour guide are and what it means to visit and know one’s own city and its constant changes (Hoogendoorn and Hammett, 2020).

The particular interest in this work lies in the tours that expose a more critical view on urban transformations towards residents. Many are subsidized by the public administration, others are offered by people within or outside of the touring profession, mainly freelance amateur guides. In Brussels, the field of urban tours has become a contested area of work, bringing to the fore of urban debates a variety of contentious issues that comprise precarious expertise, conflicts of knowledge interest and labour anxieties. Contrary to the notion of touring practices as possible gentrification inducers and the phenomenon of ‘free tours’ as a merely extractivist business practice (see for instance Navalón-García and Mínguez, 2021; Nilsson and Zillinger, 2020), I here suggest their role as knowledge enablers in the context of renewed urban austerity governance. Various actors possess different urban expertise with some being valued more than others, encouraging a debate on who creates ‘knowledge about the urban’ and which perspectives are prioritized. The political economy underlying these knowledge-producing processes defines whether they gain a central voice or not. Thus, funding cuts further sideline alternative viewpoints, highlighting how imaginative and selective elements, especially in tourism, become economic priorities.

Guided by this reasoning, I study the case of critical urban touring in Brussels. I exemplify how such initiatives represent not only post-touristic dimensions of urban knowledge but also inhabit a middle ground between top-down understandings of ‘grand promotional narratives’ about the urban on the one hand and everyday life or ‘lived knowledge’ of residents on the other. Therein, I postulate the critical urban tour as an interstice practice between what I delineate as two ‘streams of knowledge’. By equally applying this state of ‘in-betweenness’ towards a post-tourist debate, I propose the investigated practices as situated between the ‘mainstream’ or ‘established’ unsustainable processes of urban mass tourism in a neoliberal urban economic paradigm versus the upcoming post-tourist urban reality.

By tracing the evolution of what is recognised as urban knowledge production both in academic as well as political terms, I position alternative guiding as a knowledge ‘niche’. Whereas both the references of in-betweenness and interstice have been widely used in geography, anthropology and urban studies, the same can’t be said about the niche, standing as an unexploited notion within these fields. Besides the common association of niche as a ‘specialisation’ (e.g. ‘carving out a niche’ for and of something, or to do something in a particular way that is different from the usual), I further turn towards the material denotation that lies behind this very definition. A ‘niche’ in its literal sense is a ‘hollow in a wall to display a statue or the like in order to be seen’. Similar to the plea of paying attention to the ‘life in the cracks’ as moments, spaces and practices that open up possibilities for political transformation (Wright, 2010; Holloway, 2012), I suggest thinking of urban knowledge in the ‘niches’ as exposing the possibility of a ‘new urban world’ while at the same time preserving and occupying the existing one.

I further lean on Marshall Berman’s *leitmotif* *All that is solid melts into air* (1983) as a metaphor of modernity reimagined as an urban experience, with the city as its primary setting, witnessing both destruction and creation simultaneously. By transcending his description of moments of turbulence as possible creators of self-transformation, I equally speak of urban knowledge practices as trying to make sense of the city and its constant disintegrating and reconfiguring changes. Thereby, I show how this understanding helps us better grasp the complex landscape of urban touring in today’s cities and shed light on the

uncertainty of alternative urban knowledge, and the immanent risk of its practices being disenfranchised or sidelined.

With this motivation in mind, the chapter is structured as follows. In the next section I lay out understandings of urban knowledge production and relate them to urban guiding, from the notion of ‘walking as knowing’ to the emergence of resident-oriented touring. Here I present my rationale for positioning critical urban touring as an example for the creation of urban knowledge in the ‘niches’. In the following section, I introduce the case study of alternative urban guiding in Brussels and show how not only the knowledge they generate but also their existence, can be considered a ‘niche’. The chapter ends with a discussion on the benefit of reflecting on which narratives of urban transformation are acknowledged, communicated and prioritized, manifesting the potential of ‘niche’ urban knowledge production practices.

3.2 Conceptualising urban knowledge in the ‘niches’

This work examines the production of niche ‘knowledge about the urban’. Hereby, I refer to diverse communicative activities that generate, challenge and apply understanding about cities and their dynamic social life. In doing so, they make visible its spatial, social and political transformations to a particular audience of people. More specifically, I point to the declarative knowledge that critically-minded urban guiding provides. Below, I introduce the more commonly known and used notion of the interstice as a description of the urban ‘in-between’ and outline my rationale for choosing to speak of a ‘niche’ of knowledge-production instead.

The term interstitiality derives from the word *interstice* (from the Latin *institi* meaning ‘standing between’) referring to a small gap or space between things. It mainly describes the state of existing in the ‘in-between’ spaces, times or conceptual gaps, hence a condition of being caught between established systems, boundaries or defined categories, often acting as a bridge between them. Urban studies and geography have frequently employed the description of (sub) urban or fringe landscapes as ‘the in-between’, defined by ambivalent physical, morphological and socioeconomic factors (Phelps and Silva, 2018; Iossifova and Kostenwein, 2024; Sousa Matos, 2014; Jorgensen and Tylecote, 2007). Here, I postulate

that this idea can equally be applied to the genealogy of how we understand the urban knowledge of the ‘in-between’, the non-established narratives and practices of information creation of and about the city today.

Martin Savransky’s (2025) concept of ‘interstitial politics’ poses a framework to navigate an era of instability. It suggests that instead of fighting sweeping top-down political battles, the real transformations happen in the ‘cracks’ or interstices of the world, where people experiment with alternative ways of living and thinking otherwise. I postulate then, that this ‘life in the cracks’ can be equally paused onto a ‘knowledge in the cracks’, cultivating other ways of knowing and relating to the urban. Leaning on philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers (2005), the author indicates the generative capacities of interstitial practices as being able to protect knowing and thinking practices from an ongoing process of capitalist capture. The latter describes a process of ‘turning everything including the sciences and “all knowing”, into a power of extraction, destruction on which the knowledge economy feeds.’ (ibid: 1123). Similarly, Erik Olin Wright’s *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010) and John Holloway’s *Crack Capitalism* (2012) although using the term in significantly different ways, speak of moments and spaces of transformation that exist within the ‘cracks’ or the ‘interstices’ of the capitalist system, that aid ‘to build a new society in the shells of the old one’ (Wright, 2010: 12). Other examples of ‘knowledge interstices’ echo in the emotional, social and professional ‘in-betweenness’ of mobile researchers navigating multiple academic universes (Rossi, 2008) or the act of ‘interstitial thinking’. Introduced by Kamini Vellodi (2024) this thinking does not ‘stop at the registration of difference but invests such experiences as conditions of inquiry and thinking anew’ (ibid: 211), resonating with the seeking for knowledge between the ‘established known’ and the tactile knowledge generated by our everyday lives. These notions ultimately align with Cindi Katz’s plea for a ‘minor theory’ (1996), emphasising how our understanding of what is minor knowledge comes from what we deem to be dominant major knowledge. However, as social and economic contexts continuously change, so do the boundaries between what is major and what is minor. Katz acknowledges that ‘minor theory might then be best conceptualized as interstitial’ (Katz, 1996: 490). In such, the author does not talk about minor knowledge or research as less important or smaller in scope but rather about how it operates within dominant knowledge frameworks but disrupts them from the inside, staying closely related

to empirical research and political struggles and thus refusing to claim universal authority. This makes clear how knowledge production happens through active performances that ‘tear at the confines of major theory’ (ibid: 492), creating a tension out of which something else can appear. This rupture or tension is what I define here as a ‘niche’ that is actively ‘carved out’ to present an alternative, joining both minor and major knowledge to oppose injustices.

The notion of the ‘niche’ can be attributed with multiple diverging meanings and descriptions. Colloquially understood as a specific, specialized segment of a broader interest, environment or market, in this work I want to point towards a lesser-known definition of the term, stemming from its literal meaning most notably used in architecture. According to standard dictionaries (see, for example, Cambridge Dictionary, 2026), a ‘niche’ can be ‘a hollow or recess in a wall, especially one made to put a statue (or other artistic object) in, so that it can be seen’. This particular material depiction of the niche opens up a sense of possibility to think about a ‘new world’ while at the same time presenting the preservation of the existing one. It describes how a focal point, in the case of this work I speak of knowledge, can be put in place to be noticed, creating or carving out a ‘niche’ within the greater known and dominating knowledge about the city. Whereas the niche in this initial use of the word holds an aesthetic, decorative or artistic object within the thickness of a wall or building, I theorize that the same can be said for the knowledge produced by the investigated touring. According to managerial lexicons, a niche is described as opposed to the mainstream (see for instance Hoskins and Griffin, 2020). It thus holds an alternative position among promotional depictions of city and tourism stakeholders on one hand and the life stories of residents on the other. It looks both backwards, challenging unquestioned changes and planning decisions in the city’s past and forwards to outline ongoing ones and reflect on possible urban alternatives. While both terms, ‘niche’ and ‘interstice’ refer to spatial environments, a niche is a designated space (or role or specific spot), whereas an interstice refers specifically to the gap between large objects. In this work, I decide to employ the ‘niche’ as a way of emphasising how the practices actively ‘carve out’ a space for knowledge that is not considered as certain and guaranteed and hence needs to be continuously made.

By outlining the prevalent understandings of urban knowledge production in the literature, I want to elucidate the need to shed light on the alternative practices that create urban knowledge in the ‘niches’. Let us first turn to the understanding of knowledge production within urban geography and urban studies more specifically, moving from an academic perspective towards calls for making our disciplinary knowledge and praxis more ‘public’ (Jazeel and McFarlane, 2007: 2). By suggesting comparison as a mode of thought, rather than e.g. comparing variable X in city A vs. city B, ‘learning across cities’ allows us to challenge existing theories and understand urbanism as relational both in spatial and material terms, moving beyond a rationalist approach (McFarlane, 2006). Work on postcolonial thinking in knowledge production aims at decentring urban knowledge across a North-South divide. In doing so, research should draw on experiences from diverse global urban locations, allowing cities from the Global South to inform theory building, not just to supply case studies (McFarlane, 2010; Müller et al., 2025). Correspondingly, Tanzil Shafique (2025) urges urban researchers to embrace ‘dirty knowledge’. By acknowledging the messy, and subjective nature of research, this author proposes an anti-extractivist, decolonial framework for knowledge production in urban studies. In such, he seeks to prioritize reciprocity, and empathetic allyship with local communities over conventional objective and ‘pure’ knowledge.

This approach aims at foregrounding marginalized voices and ‘making things public’ (Jazeel and McFarlane, 2007, Ward, 2006). Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (2005) note diverse assemblies that ‘gather a public around things’, scientific labs or supermarkets for instance, that go beyond our usual sense of what is political or democratic. Drawing on sociologist Michael Burawoy (2004), Kevin Ward (2006) distinguishes between policy geography and public geography. The first aims at solving predefined problems meanwhile the latter fosters a dialogue and challenges power structures. In such, policy geography serves a specific ‘client’, whereas public geography ideally aspires to a dialogue with pluralist ‘publics’ to aid social change. Today, concepts like ‘fast policy’ (Peck and Theodore, 2015) and policy mobility (Cochrane and Ward, 2012) highlight how rapid, transnational transfer of policy models, especially in the urban context, tends to reframe complex socio-spatial problems as purely technical and thus solvable via apolitical, standardized interventions. The politics of urban policy knowledge production often bypasses further contextual

scrutiny and makes neoliberal narratives of urban solutions appear universally sensible. This consequently sidelines critical local knowledge and reduces the distance between producing knowledge and exercising power (Peck and Theodore, 2015), risking the over-professionalization of policy work and disregarding local experience-based insights on urban change (Burawoy, 2004).

A third set of urban expertise relates to the lived knowledge provided by everyday life experiences. Michael Gardiner's work (2006) shows how 'everyday knowledge' can be transformed from passive experience into 'critical knowledge', potentially challenging oppressive structures, such as capitalist alienation and city bureaucracy.

And it says, of this city, that there dwelled in the city a man, poor but wise, who saved the city; but no one remembered him. This man, to me, represents an epistemological challenge raising the question of whose knowledge shapes our city, which knowledge is regarded as valid, and who is remembered in the process of revisioning the city. (Gardiner 2006: 209)

Similarly, David Gross's thesis on urban knowledge (1990) regards the modern city as a hostile environment for memory that prioritizes efficiency and constant renewal. He states that the systemic and constant erasure of the past and the non-informing of that past creates an alienating urban landscape, merely catered to economic functioning. By tracing everyday experience of the urban and its changes, local memory can be uncovered and in such a way contribute to generating more reflective urban dwellers. Anthropologists like Tim Ingold (2021) propose a 'dwelling perspective', in which we are *of* the world, contrary to the traditional Western thought of separating the observer from the world. Urban knowledge according to this understanding then grows from our direct, tactile and bodily daily experience with our surroundings as urban residents. This line of work is reminiscent of earlier encounters with the 'ordinary city' thesis, namely introduced by Ash Amin and Stephan Graham (1997). The notion builds a positive account with the ordinariness of urban life as sites of democracy and learning. Their everyday-public-life argument directly leans on Sharon Zukin's claim that the source of urban knowledge and shared citizenship isn't spectacular (tourism) consumption spaces but everyday life (1995).

The ‘in-between’ knowledge centred in this work equally serves as an entry point to understanding post-tourist experiences and its aspirations in the making. I propose to look at the ‘recessed’ knowledge space that the tours create as a ‘niche’ caught between the recognition of the challenges and pitfalls of the urban tourism industry today and a sense of potentiality of knowing and seeing the city in alternative ways.

In a similar vein, the practices I observe attempt at grasping an understanding of the complex, often contradictory and overlaying transformations of the city. In such, I equally lean on Marshall Berman’s seminal book *All that is solid melts into air* (1983), describing moments of turbulence as creating opportunities. It argues that modern life forces individuals to adapt to a rapidly changing world where personal, moral, economic and social stability is constantly dissolving, disintegrating and reforming. In short, it explains what modernity is and how it feels to be modern. Seconding Berman, being modern is a spatial experience, to find yourself in an environment that promises joy, adventure, transformation of ourselves but at the same time threatens everything we have, we know, and we are. It describes how progress is always ‘pregnant with its opposite’, something resonating well with the aim of critically-minded touring. Although change happens everywhere and at any time, it is more apparent in cities. Borrowing this notion, I understand the urban knowledge communicated by the observed tours as an attempt to grasp the social and material changes of the urban that create dizzying, constantly shifting realities.

What I define as ‘niche-producing knowledge’ then emphasises the very practice of trying and attempting to ‘know’, carving out so to speak, without the aim of claiming complete urban truths. I thus position practices favouring the curation of such knowledge between grand urban promotional narratives and the lived experience-based knowledge of residents. This notion of urban knowledge does highlight views on urban changes less favoured or marketable to the traditional tourism market, as it is in many ways a practical critique to the latter. In parallel, it encourages a debate on the alternatives to the very commodification of urban knowledge and knowledge authority. By conceptually demarking this type of knowledge producing practices from similar concepts such as ‘political tourism’, urban pedagogy and critical heritage studies outlined in the next section, I stress its potential

role from the perspective of two growing urban tourism debates, the rise of resident-oriented tours and ‘post-tourist city’ aspirations. More precisely, three features of ‘niche-producing knowledge’ distinguish it from adjacent terms in the literature. First, rather than self-identifying as alternative tourism products, these initiatives suggest and imply in more subtle ways a growing necessity to question the very state of urban life and how the city came to function as it does in today's global tourism age. Second, unlike conventional practices of urban pedagogy and critical heritage, they go beyond uncovering hidden urban histories to actively engage with unrealized, alternative urban plans that were never implemented. Finally, while related to these urban knowledge debates, the practices I interrogate here aim at scrutinising both the authority over expertise on one hand and the market tendencies of governing urban knowledge, shifting the focus to the potential knowledge space that can be generated in-between.

In the next section, I lay out how from one perspective alternative urban touring in itself can be viewed as a niche tourism activity, emerging alongside trends of resident-oriented tourism and proximity urbanism at large but also how from another the practice of guided forms of ‘walking the city’ represents a long-standing critical urban praxis.

3.3 Urban touring: between critical practice and resident-oriented tourism

While foundational research on guiding as a profession and knowledge transfer exists (Boorstin, 1977; Holloway, 1981; Cohen, 1985; Ap and Wong, 2001; Brito and Farrugia, 2020; Chen and Chang, 2020), its contemporary forms remain understudied. Besides its stereotyped notion as a highly choreographed action in everyday talk, visitors of tours have likewise been viewed as passive recipients, not questioning the content of tours or their surroundings. Despite still being contested beyond tourism studies, guided tours play their undeniable part in shaping narratives about cities within today's tourism industry (Zillinger et al., 2012; Weiler and Black, 2015; Wynn, 2011; Zerva and Nijkamp, 2016)

Most recently, work on the rise of ‘free tours’ reflects tourism's increasing demand for ‘stories’, influenced by the emergence of the sharing economy. Although they

correspond to the trends of contemporary society, they function more as a marketing strategy rather than an expression of collaborative consumption among equals (Navalón-García and Mínguez, 2021; Morrow, 2024; Rivera-García, 2025). Premeditated by the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), storytelling has grown in significance as a way of crafting memorable experiences and curated associations with urban locations, aiming at eliciting emotional responses. The ‘free tour’ can be considered an international business model, highly transferable and easily adaptable to different urban settings (Salazar, 2005; Widtfeldt and Zillinger, 2018; Nilsson and Zillinger, 2020). Moreover, the tourism sector is witness to the subsumption of this informal and performative manifestation of tours into platform economies (provided by sites like TripAdvisor, Airbnb Experiences, or other tip-based tour guides). As the latter tours, historically bound to direct human exchange, are also increasingly structured and mediated via digital platforms, Jorge Rivera García et al. (2025) recently showed how platformisation is reshaping even the most informal and interpersonal tourism encounters. Ultimately this influenced how tourists choose to visit cities and which sources they trust to guide them (ibid).

Today, this phenomenon is often counterposed with trained and licensed tour guides, yet few guides in either category rely on guiding as their main income, highlighting the controversial elements in terms of labour and organisation (Navalón-García and Mínguez, 2021; Wang, 2020). Guides have been institutionalized, and have institutionalized themselves, only to a small degree (Hoogendoorn and Hammett, 2021). As a highly urbanised job sector and a direct reflection of today’s shifts in urban experience and tourism economies, guiding features similar complex, messy and uncertain working practices, with widely varying, city-specific regulations, for instance whether licenses are obligatory or not.

André Jansson (2018) understands the aspiration of post-tourism as a ‘generalized social condition that entails the de-differentiation between tourism and other social realms as well as a complex set of reactions against this predominant trend.’ (ibid: 102) Within tourist studies, Tim Edensor’s early work on performance, tourism and everyday practices differentiates between scripted ‘enclavic’ tourist spaces (resorts, heritage sites) where behaviour is choreographed by a clear ‘direction’ and loosely regulated ‘heterogeneous’ spaces (ordinary streets, neighbourhoods) where multiple actors improvise without a shared

script (2001). He argues that global tourism development simultaneously standardizes physical space through commodified ‘theming’ while paradoxically multiplying and diversifying the range of tourist identities and performances available within it. While industrial capitalism fostered mass tourism and the packaged tour (Lash and Urry, 1987), ‘disorganized capitalism’ (Urry, 1994) led to ‘niche’ markets and blurred lines between tourism and other areas of social life like work and leisure. New urban tourism (Maitland and Newman, 2014) reflects this shift, with visitors increasingly seeking ‘the ordinary’ and ‘residential’ of cities over ‘the extraordinary’, positioning traditional tourism as the antithesis of ‘everydayness’. The surge in ‘off the beaten track’ and ‘hidden urban’ tourist offers illustrate this ‘de-exoticizing’ trend, fuelling the ‘touristification’ of yet to be touristified neighbourhoods, and encounters between tourists and locals (Larsen, 2019; Guano, 2015). Maxine Feifer (1985) coined the term ‘post-tourism’ to highlight a new symbolically playful mode of travelling, where the reflexive, typically middle-class Western traveller acknowledges mass tourism’s staged nature and deliberately ‘performs tourism’ according to media imagery rather in search of authenticity (Jansson, 2018). Emerging ‘niche’ forms of a culture of urban exploration, such as ruin or disaster tourism, are in themselves a ‘manifestation of a post-tourist society, while at the same time a critical reaction to it’ (Jansson, 2018: 105). Following Smith et al.’s definition (2012):

The post-tourist or post-modern tourist is a consumer who embraces openly, but with some irony, the increasingly inauthentic, commercialised and simulated experiences offered by the tourism industry. (ibid: 98)

Aligning with these processes, we witness the rise of proximity tourism, particularly in the form of tourism tailored and oriented towards residents of a city or neighbourhood. I ultimately consider these established new genres of ‘non-touristic tourism’ an effect of the emergence - during and after the pandemic - of a wider discourse on ‘proximity-based urbanism’ such as the ‘15 minute city’ ideal (Moreno, 2024) or even earlier, ‘the walkable city’ (Speck, 2018). While this ideal inspires and promises service accessibility and community interaction, it has also opened up a debate on its unintended effects such as residential segregation, social fragmentation and gentrification patterns. Ugo Rossi (2025) cautions that a place-based approach to public policy on liveability can in reverse foment

inter-place competition by increasing the attractiveness of certain areas. In line with Rossi's (2025) concern, I argue that the rediscovery of the local neighbourhood in post-tourism tendencies, similarly risks reproducing neoliberal urban policies that exacerbate urban inequalities. The emphasis on 'localness' and 'neighbourliness' (Sennett, 2012) also reflects shifts in residential ideologies such as the re-evaluated notion of urban densification (White and Madden, 2024), which the latter authors view as a continuation of today's financialized urbanization, rather than an alternative to it, taking the example of co-living housing forms. These patterns, in line with Jacobsian ideals, import urbanism debates on vibrant, density-oriented neighbourhood development scepticism towards top-down urban renewal (Jacobs, 1961).

These activities focus on short distances and familiar places, building on the idea of seeing our everyday surroundings anew, opposed to tourism as an activity traditionally considered to allow one to get to know 'unusual' places and live 'unusual' experiences. Similarly, post-tourism understandings then argue that whether an experience is 'tourism' depends more on one's state of mind than one's location, and cultivating a curious 'unusual mood' helps switch from a rigid daily routine into an 'anti-structural' state. (see also Wang et al., 2020). Ultimately, this demand for closer experience and knowledge also stems from the globalization of information itself, making the knowledge of further away places easier to come by than near ones. Hence 'what is usual is not necessarily related anymore to what is close' (Soria and Llurdés Coit, 2013: 303). This area remains largely a research inquiry restricted to tourism studies, exploring new promotional tourism pathways and strategies like beating tourism's seasonal constraints, enhancing the 'value' of usual environments or dispersing tourists away from overcrowded city centres. (Zuckerman et.al, 2023). The occurrence of resident-oriented tours has increased in recent years, detaching the profession from the sole context of business, towards urban knowledge conveyance. Jonathan Wynn's *Tour guides as urban alchemists* (2010) shows how certain touring practices can uproot banal visions of the city and transform participants into more 'reflective' urban dwellers (also Ren et al., 2023). Although 'local tours' result from post-tourist sentiments, such as an increasing perception of inauthentic, and commercialised experiences, they still risk succumbing to behaviours of the *spectacle* (see Hoogendoorn and Hammett, 2021).

It can be argued then that urban walking tours have been highly malleable to the transformation of urban space through gentrification and can be seen as a response to a new cultural product demand for ‘city experiences’ (Giddy and Hoogendoorn, 2018). Then again, urban touring stands as a counter-history and a longstanding critical urban praxis (Lyons et al., 2018). Within urban geography and urban studies, ‘walking tours’ are portrayed as an enduring feature of cities and *flâneur* culture (Kramer and Short, 2019; Jenks and Naves, 2009) and have been widely explored as a practice and method for understanding embodied urban experiences and perceptions of ‘living the city’ (Pink, 2008; Aoki and Yoshimizu, 2015; Singleton, 2024). Within a broader field of urban pedagogy, some authors suggest walking tours as a means of civic education borrowing the model of university field trips in architecture, geography and similar fields to encourage awareness for the built environment (Klaniczay, 2024; Lyons et al., 2018; Sprake, 2012; Christie and Mason, 2003). Recent examples of guided walking tours challenge the idea of merely disseminating ‘sanctioned narratives’ (Bamford and McKay, 2026). In such, besides transferring ‘acceptable’ place-promoting knowledge, they consider the walking tour capable of challenging perceived knowledge, aiding to upset dominant understandings of place. In relation, city administrations also play a pertinent role in the storytelling practices of guided tours. Official city guides are encouraged to tactically choose locations and objects to portray cities as alluring destinations (Amin and Thrift, 2002).

Equally, tours as political tools have been studied within tourism studies under the umbrella term of ‘political tourism’ or ‘justice tourism’, with the latter being designed to provoke post-tour advocacy by participants rather than simple consumption (Frenzel, 2012; Moynagh, 2008; Scheyvens, 2007). Others have looked into walking tours in cities defined by conflict and contested memory, showing how they risk contributing to reproducing conflict, as interest groups often use the tour to propagate particular political perspectives. What these examples have in common is a dominant focus on foreign tourists and a concern with challenging their previously held opinions as well as those brought ‘back home’ (McDowell, 2008). They remind us however that walking tours aren't inherently progressive tools, but they can also entrench division. In a similar vein, research on critical heritage, in particular the concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006) argues that heritage is not a set of pre-existing knowledge about ‘things’ but a dominant Western

discourse that naturalizes particular assumptions about what counts as heritage to visit, to be seen and to be told. This is structurally identical to Sharon Zukin's (2010) core move on authenticity: both refuse the idea that heritage and authenticity are the inherent property of a place and instead treat it as an actively produced discourse of legitimacy. For Smith, the professional/expert heritage discourse (museums, conservation bodies, UNESCO) needs to be scrutinized, whereas Zukin speaks of a branding discourse (developers, city marketing, media). Although related to these urban knowledge debates, the practices I interrogate in this work aim at fusing both critiques (one centred on the authority of expertise and the other on the market favouring knowledge) with an eye towards the potential knowledge space that can be generated in-between.

The case study of this work portrays the category of non-consumption based alternative tours, utilizing tours as a tool to disseminate socially aware information about the city and its changes to locals. Following this rationale, I aim to scrutinize the idiosyncrasy of this type of urban tour and its potentials for thinking beyond today's tourist city. By exploring the urban knowledge they generate, I seek to understand both their positionality and the conflicts they raise. In doing so, I turn to the two selected *leitmotifs* outlined above that aid an understanding of the observed phenomenon. Firstly, I apply the conceptualisation of the 'niche', considering the recessed knowledge space that the tours create an 'in-between knowledge' caught between promotional narratives of the city and the knowledge of everyday life. Secondly, I draw on Marshall Berman's reference of *All that is solid melts into Air* (1983), equally assessing the knowledge produced as a means of making sense of turbulent urban changes. The following section outlines the reasoning for doing so, taking the empirical examples of variegated critically-minded urban touring in Brussels.

3.3.1 The case of critically-minded urban guiding in Brussels

This work investigates a variety of critically-minded urban tours offered by publicly subsidised initiatives, hiring freelance and 'amateur' guides. In general, the observed tours reflect on past and current transformations of the city and capture a large range of urban areas in Brussels. They centre on informing about unknown or historically disguised realities

of the city and its neighbourhoods. Furthermore, they attempt at encouraging critical reflection and discussion of planned urban development projects for specific, often contested sites in the city. In detail, they focus on heterodox themes such as the colonial legacy of Belgium in the urban fabric, financialization of housing and speculative urban development, suspended urban plans throughout the city's history, mis- or under-representation of women in public space and the urban labour market, contested urban redevelopment, the margins of the city, the history of urban prisons among many other highly localised examples. One of the main points of discussion is for instance the urban development strategy of the 1960s and 1970s that led the main physical restructuring of the city into its current state, often referred to as 'Brusselization', that prioritized the construction of large office blocks over residential housing, mostly overseen in recent housing shortage debates. In such, the tours provide an alternative approach to consumption-based tourism by way of 'informing' and 'knowing' about contested past and ongoing changes in the city.



STARTPLAATS: **ZUIDSTATION**

AANKOMSTPLAATS: **PARK NINOOFSEPOORT**

AFSTAND: **4,7 KM**

PUBLICATIEDATUM: **ZOMER 2021**

Deze wandeling werd geschreven door Brukselbinnenstebuiten. De gidsen van Brukselbinnenstebuiten hebben een groot hart voor Brussel en willen je de stad tonen in al haar veelzijdigheid. Ze hebben oog voor positieve en negatieve ontwikkelingen en vertellen fabeltjes noch pr-verhalen.

Verantwoordelijke uitgever: Anne Brunaghe

A tour flyer of the Dutch-speaking touring initiative *BrukselBinnensteBuiten* (translatable to *Brussels-Inside-Out*), focused on the *Kureghem/Cureghem* neighbourhood (labelled here: 'The arrival quartier'), an area suffering from acute territorial stigmatization of neglect, known for its industrial heritage and second-hand car industry. The description of the initiative reads '*...our guides keep up with both positive and negative developments and are not in the habit of telling jokes or playing PR...*' (Source: BBB 2021, photographed by author during a renewed version of the tour in March 2026)

This work is based on qualitative fieldwork methods, including walking and expert interviews, as well as participant observation during tours. The interview partners consist of representatives of tour initiatives and associations, freelance and 'volunteer' tour guides, as well as city officials. In total, I conducted 20 interviews and participated in five interactive tours. The talks mostly took place right after the tours, in the interviewees' respective offices or in public spaces and homes if the latter was not a given. During my own participation in the tours, I observed both the reactions and questions of other participants and the contents

discussed and debated. The tours mainly centred themes such as plans for new urban projects, the history and causes of urban inequalities, and an overview of urban flights and struggles among others.



Printed publication from the francophone initiatives IEB (Inter-Environnement-Bruxelles, initiated as an active resident ensemble) thematising a series of *balades* about the contested plans for the regeneration of the Canal area, the colonial traces in the central touristic heart of the city, the consequences of the planned metro 3 line for the (in) accessibility of certain residential areas, and ‘dead’ nature in the city. *Balades* (French for stroll or trip) is traditionally used as a term for peaceful protest walks. (Source: IEB 2025, photos by author 2026)

Some of the organisations observed function as urban citizen action initiatives that provide guided resident tours as part of their offer of services among other activities in the neighbourhood. Most of the initiatives in this category have a long legacy, founded in the late 1960s as a means of neighbourhood engagement and public service facilitators. Others have an equally long-standing tradition but have been founded with the sole aim and function to offer urban tour guiding. All the touring practices however have in common that they employ and depend on freelance amateur guides with varying degrees of expertise but with a mutual dedication to creating transparency on urban issues. The following exchange with a freelance guide and urban activist illustrates the current anxieties of this field of work:

You always work way more than what you get paid. I invoice per tour, all the hours I spend on research and preparation are not included, that's a lot of free time. This job does not fit a corporate world; it's not our motivation but yes struggling to make ends meet is the consequence. I taught geography as my main income until very recently. I'm trying to make this freelance situation work now, it's bordering on the impossible. I know I'm competent but that is not enough. Doing tours like we do them, with a critical militant focus, there is no 'market' for that, there is no capitalizing on it. My pressure is more of an existential one, but there is also pressure to become entrepreneurial, but we want to stand against this trend, 'marketable' knowledge is not the knowledge about our city we want to portray. (F.P, interview with author, February 2026)

In such, all the tours are subsidized by the public administration and to varying extent dependent on public support. The guarantee to receive and maintain that funding is not a given. Correspondingly, they represent differing and fluctuating stances and relationships towards the city and region. Being increasingly critical of public decisions, mismanagement and deficiencies has put some of them in a counter position, resulting in the constant risk of subsidy cuts. Accordingly, the 'niche' created by these initiatives reflects a constant state of having to 'carve out a space' for knowledge that both relates to what public stakeholders would like to know about urban changes and that questions those changes at the same time. The founder and representative of one of the initiatives starting out as a neighbourhood office, summarizes their approach and aspirational beginnings as follows:

We started very militantly, and then the associations became more institutionalised. I think that led a bit to a loss between active urbanism and the guided tours in the past which we are now reconnecting again. At some point it was all about the usual tourism demand and the art nouveau etc. and we had to wake up and turn our spirit back to the original motivation. After doing this for many years, I'm convinced this is a promising political tool, to claim the space by guided walking, simply occupying the space itself. (T.V., interview with author, February 2026)

The tendency to ‘tell the unknown’ about the ‘already known’ becomes apparent in the practical aims of the tours, to point out lesser acknowledged physical and social evidence of urban transformations throughout the city and in specific neighbourhoods. This knowledge objective signals an explicit focus on residents, and their often differing or non-existent references to their daily surroundings. Accordingly, the Jacobsian canon of urban ideals (for instance Jacobs, 1961; Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2012; Sennett, 2018) such as the renaissance of neighbourliness and the rediscovery of the local are an underlying theme in the tours, it can be considered a driving force for the emergence of new forms of tourism occurring *within* the locale of residence. In the descriptions of the participants visiting the tours, this intention is made clear:

People that live here don’t look at the city, they have other things to do in their daily life, they go the quickest route to get from A to B, living in a city for a while you stop noticing things. Tourists go to a place with antennas on, they are there to take notice, so with residents and locals, they pay attention to something for the very first time, in their own neighbourhood also. (V.B., interview with author, February 2026)

Along the lines of Marshall Berman’s *All that is solid melts into air* (1983) which tries to unravel the complex urban experience of modernism, I postulate that the knowledge generated by the given practices equally resembles an attempt to grasp the constant changes making up the city today. Marshall Berman describes the reference as an analogy for the experience of being modern. In such, it is a paradoxical environment of constant change, disruption and renewal. He further speaks of a ‘maelstrom’ in which social and physical structures are destroyed, ultimately forcing society to create new forms. The key to understanding this reference in relation to urban touring, lies in the focus on experience of change rather than mere neutral and apolitical technological factors of growth and economic progress. Highlighting the city as the primary, physical setting for this experience, emphasizes the ‘double vision’ of witnessing destruction and creation simultaneously. A common thread of trying to look beyond the presentable and known, and dissecting the dynamics of change behind them, parallels. In such, the tour’s knowledge stands as a ‘knowledge of movement’, opposed to stagnant urban historical facts of traditional tourist

representations. This echoes the premise that we understand the world, or in this case the city, when we actively doubt and acknowledge that its knowledge is never constant. This seeking of the innate dynamism of urban knowledge is equally noticeable in the given tours, outlined for instance by the following encounter with a freelance tour guide:

Sometimes we have to do real detective work to get to facts, and to look behind the mechanisms of who drives these changes. We need to read reports, development plans, news, and exchange with public offices. We need to constantly be up to date. Decisions on urban projects are not linear and they take very long and then all of a sudden something happens and you have to quickly figure out what it is, who is involved...It's a lot about political happenings and if you guide in a museum or the Grand Place it's always the same, the itinerary does not change, historical events remain unchanged, unchallenged and unquestioned. (T.E., interview with author, November 2025)

The tours recount the many modifications of the city in a constant tension between exhilarating transformative processes from one perspective such as the invention of new housing arrangements or recreational public spaces, and the sensation of the city as a space for everyone from different paths of life, yet conversely terrifying facts like economic crisis, housing shortage and social segregation. Marshall Berman's idea of the kaleidoscope fits with what it means to try and understand the urban reality today. Despite this constant unmaking of urban environments and its resulting chaos, knowledge on urban possibilities and unknown plans as shown and exemplified throughout the observed tours, echoes Berman's argument of how this knowledge transfer can equally create hopeful and active engagement with the city. The depiction of multiple layers of the city that need to be exposed and discussed to confront oneself with the city as one's home, in need of care and maintenance resonates at multiple occasions throughout the talks. In the manner as Marshall Berman suggests, that even as our 'homes' melt into air, we must continue to 'find, build, and fight for our place in this environment' (1983: 23), something that resonates with the observed tours as a freelance guide touring for multiple initiatives explains:

I want to explain how this chaotic history of Brussels became chaotic urbanism. We have a lot of buildings that got destroyed for no reason, lack of urban plans and mismanagement, the real estate had a free hand over the city, it created this 'jenga', it's not a planned city at all. I started doing tours with my neighbour for our friends, often at night. It was very underground. After a year it became a real project for residents, and I continued focusing on posing political questions about the city. I show how old class structures are lingering and define gentrification patterns today. I try to connect one layer of the city which can be very old and ancient to the one we have now. The traditional guide says a lot of things about the past, but it's isolated from now, it stays in the past. Once you know more about how the past lingers in the city today and influences it, you can be more responsible about it, I think. (C.M., interview with author, March 2026)

The knowledge produced and brought forward by the observed tours can be understood as an 'in-between' one, neither belonging strictly to the residential procedural everyday knowledge, nor to the dominating promotional knowledge catered to touristic consumption. The statement below from the founder of one of the oldest initiatives points out how not only the information shared in the tours but also situations in which 'resident tourists' transgress boundaries of territorial stigma to visit previously avoided urban areas (see also Hoogendoorn and Hammett, 2021), stand as transitional actions in themselves. By neither being able to actually 'know' the life experience of these marginalised areas on one hand nor subscribing to grand urban renewal rhetorics about them on the other hand, the intended knowledge stays intermediate:

Most people are from other parts of the country or from Brussels. People from outside the city have mostly negative views of Brussels, they know very little besides the stereotypes that it's dirty and dangerous. I think it's unfair and it does not solve problems, so I want to communicate the causes. I don't think it makes sense turning everything around into a positive thing either. I think knowledge and clarification is more useful. I'm not interested in doing tours about something that is conventionally beautiful to look at or the image of happy neighbours, but something that is interesting to try

and understand, about how our urban society evolves, social questions from a critical stance. But this knowledge is not easily sellable or promotable. Brussels is not the most 'attractive' city in Belgium at all in a touristic sense, but there is no city like Brussels. (A.B., interview with author, January 2026)

Similarly, I argue that this 'niche-producing' position is reflected in the positionality of the described practices in a post-tourist debate. Thinking of the 'niche' as a 'recessed space' that 'orchestrates' something as its original definition explains, the like practices make space to present knowledge in the 'niches', between the 'old' and the 'new' tourist city. In this work's context then, the 'new' frame – a set of trends reflecting a developing post-tourist consciousness – renders the 'old' frame, here the pressures of mass tourism and neoliberal urban tourism management, useless and unsustainable. The 'new' however is still at the designing or trial stage, not fully assembled or strong enough to be fully put into place as a new 'beyond tourism' *Zeitgeist*.

The given tours also show how the knowledge of transitions is equally characterised by liquid rather than a clearly traceable state of the production of our materiality, in this case the city. Both Zygmunt Bauman's (2012) and Marshall Berman's (1983) references derive from the description of the post-modern condition. In the same manner, the post-tourist condition incorporates for instance the co-existence of micro entrepreneurship like 'free tours' and mass tourism macro-business of mass operators functioning at the same time, or different types of information sources generating narratives of specific cities simultaneously (see for instance Strabowski, 2017). When Marshall Berman (1983) speaks of the difficulty of making sense of modernity as a spatial urban experience, he equally notions how everything is 'even more melted' (ibid: 8). In the case of post-tourism conditions, the touristified or touristifying urban and the residential urban are increasingly converging and intertwined, less detectable and inseparable. Correspondingly, this sentiment resurfaces when discussing the alternative knowledge generated in the studied tours, as a tour guide sketches out:

If we do a tour on the Grand Place, we don't say this is that, here you can buy waffles etc. We talk about the touristic development of the centre and the consequences it has had. We also point out how even building facades are just 'make believe' and staged for tourists, behind this medieval wall I pass every day it's just a modern block house, people don't know and they start to realise: 'oh we are really on a stage of a play'. It is this matrix moment when you see reality through the facade literally. I always say, I feel like 'hey I'm very lonely in my knowledge, join me in this loneliness of knowing and more importantly in reacting to it'. My goal is not only 'ok what can we do with Brussels' and the future of the city but more immediate 'how can I use this knowledge in other contexts of my life, how I see society or what's my place in society....' (B.B, interview with author, March 2026)

This also reflects what Junchuan Wang et al. describe as opening up to an 'unusual' mood, in which the activation of consciousness helps one to think outside rigid daily routines and see one's surroundings anew, which can ease general anxiety about city life (2022).

The status of 'in-betweenness' is moreover reflected in the threats to the maintenance of operating the tours. Both their way of working as well as the knowledge they generate stand as highly contested and uncertain. Running the risk of being diminished and sidelined is imminent and has increased due to the latest governmental shift, characterized by significant austerity-induced public funding cuts for social services and altering administrative priorities. Accompanied by an increasing conflict of interest between the public administration and the approach of the tours, these trends show the status of 'niche' knowledge is never fixed nor undisputed. Most recently, the efforts of alternative touring have been challenged further, to the extent that foundational interest conflicts over the type of knowledge and depictions of the city to be prioritized and disseminated are intensifying. The information communicated in the tours, in particular regarding urban development plans such as for instance the contested renewal of the canal area, bordering the most marginalised neighbourhoods and paralleling the spatial mismatch around the central-northern canal-adjacent zones, as well as the disputed effects of the new metro line

3, have led to the public administration's decision to reduce subsidies and in some cases cancel entire long established funding schemes. The following statement of a freelance guide, doing tours for many of the observed initiatives recounts this state of incertitude:

Recognition is a big issue, our tours concern very urban issues and we are not officially acknowledged for communicating this knowledge enough. Our subsidy got cut by half last year, it was a shock. When you have tours in the traditional tourist sense, they are less vulnerable to that. We are more of a social educational initiative with touring as our tool. We need more time, more care, more context, about what is happening in the city, with less resources that gets harder to fulfil. Often, we apply for a subsidy and then we get 20%. This uncertainty makes it very tricky to programme the tours if this is the official sentiment. We are able to work but we are not the prioritized form of showing the city in this political climate. (T.C, interview with author, February 2026)

Contrary to the description of urban fringe areas or 'leftover' zones between buildings or neighbourhoods as the urban 'in-between', defined by ambivalent physical, morphological and socioeconomic factors, (Phelps and Silva, 2018; Iossifova and Kostenwein, 2024; Jorgensen and Tylecote, 2007), here I speak of urban knowledge in itself and more over its contestation as taking on the state of the 'urban interstice'. Put into the context of increasing pressure for the 'urban' to fit and cater towards neoliberal consumption patterns, the practices equally portray a halfway between the tacit and lived knowledge of residents and their life in the city and a tradable and upscale-able knowledge potential. Besides the tensions between public stakeholders regarding the communicated knowledge of the tours, another set of pressures to commercialise the respective knowledge, directed from both the city and region, can be named. In response to these strains, the tours attempt to pose a firm stance against the 'productification' of their knowledge. However, a common trend towards incorporating the tours into marketing schemes is pervasive, as a co-founder of an alternative touring initiative recounts in the following way:

Now, we have a difficult relationship with the city because we point out things that they rather we do not make so visible. With this austerity-driven political shift, it's hard to

stay on our course, it takes courage. The general trend is to move from structural funds to more flexible project-based ones. Now activities must be packaged like a product. They want to transform us into small companies, to do podcasts or a map, a quick workshop but we avoid that, it's too superficial. Our whole point is the human dimension and the moving together through the city, showing examples. We don't want to make it into a product or to give out 'labels' to the institutions saying 'ok now you are socially aware' because you bought our content. It's an attempt to 'pay us out'. We have to think more about running this initiative like a business now and we're not used to this. We are a bit in a limbo, being pulled from all sides. (F.P, interview with author, February 2026)

Besides the shown tendencies to both limit and commercialise the 'knowledge of the niches', a third set of pressures is the competition with 'free tours' and other related entrepreneurial tourism activities in the city. 'Free tours' or similar 'live like a local' offers have long succumbed to the informal territorialization of public space by using highly calibrated affective and performative labour (Riviera-García, 2025). In such their conveyed content is aimed at strong emotional responses rather than the knowledge intended by the studied tours. Nonetheless, the latter feel increasingly confined between urban branding and public promotion strategies on the one side and platformised gig-work economies on the other. An alternative tour guide that started out a freelance path by touring friends around their own neighbourhoods addresses this sentiment as follows:

This trend of 'free tours' gives the impression that you just have to be passionate about your city, and you can tell people what it is about. In Brussels there is no control over who guides or can guide and who cannot like in other cities. It devalues our practice; it promotes the idea that everybody can do it and it's not a 'job'. I was one of these guides before and I could not continue in this atmosphere. Even if this is not the main job for many of us, it doesn't mean it's just a hobby. Everybody can and should speak about the city, but I have a problem when you say you have 'content' you want to pass on and you don't have the preparation nor sensibility for it. You hear so much 'non-sense' in these free tours, but it's a quick way to be seen. The precarity of this job comes from

guides not getting paid enough and people not being willing to pay, it creates the idea that a tour can't be good or valuable. (C.T, interview with author, December 2025)

Having laid out empirical examples for how alternative urban touring stands as a 'niche' urban knowledge producing practice, attempting to understand and grasp the city in its unmaking and remaking transformations, shows the potential of revisiting both *leitmotifs* of the 'niche' and Marshall Berman's thinking, and placing them within post-tourist contexts of urban change. This lens becomes useful not only as a theoretical advancement but when trying to 'think tourism' with an eye towards possible futures for more sustainable resident-committed urban development. The latter is already outlined but 'yet to be born' in a Gramscian sense, referring to the *interregnum* term as a description of crisis-ridden transitional periods, between an old that is dying and a new that 'cannot be born' (1930). The thoughts of a founding member of the tours express and sum up this plea below.

The city is for everybody, residents and visitors. It's a place of meeting and having different views, there is no such thing as no tourism, but we can make it another 'system' from what it has become, maybe something more about knowing and less about consuming. We need to be conscious about the industries and dependencies we create. We inform about the areas in the heart of the city that are being scaled down from their social and cultural value to meet tourist agendas, a chocolate-beer-fries frenzy. We unpack the political strategies behind this, for people to know. To talk about the plans that did not make it, to raise awareness for the plans that protect crucial functions in the city, they become more and more adaptive to only tourism. We show the 'what if', the 'beyond', even if that beyond is not the reality yet but we are part of forming it maybe, we like to think that. (T.C., interview with author, February 2026)

3.4 Conclusion

This work has advanced an understanding of the generation of urban knowledge in the 'niches'. In doing so, it has built on the research field of urban knowledge production within urban geography and urban studies more specifically. Through evidence obtained

via the case study of critically-minded resident-oriented urban touring, this work gives way to think about what alternative urban touring currently is and could be. This endeavour opens up discussions on its potential for public awareness efforts alongside concerns about the deregulation of the guiding profession in the present neoliberal urban market economy. It furthermore contributes to an understanding of wider trends towards a growing fragmentation of tourism and touring practices and the entanglements between tourism and other social realms, exemplary for the upcoming post-tourist era.

Against the backdrop of the state of the knowledge that is not guaranteed but needs to be actively produced and ‘put in place’, I outline the practices as an ‘in-between’ amid mainstreamed promotional narratives about the city and the lived experience-based knowledge of residents. This ‘niche’ knowledge describes the post-tourist condition in such that it negates the unsustainable consequences and widely acknowledged socio-economic pressures of mass tourism and lays out alternative approaches to ‘re-knowing’ the city following non-consumerist principles. Likewise, with the city being a constant transitional entity, here between the established (urban tourism as we know it) and the ‘new’ (post-tourism or ‘more-than-tourism’) ‘in the making’ but not fully matured, borrowing the very notion of the ‘niche’ opens up a sense of possibility both for a ‘new’ while at the same time of preservation of the existing one.

Further, I place this research’s contribution within a wider context of today’s culture-driven and resident-oriented sustainable tourism debates. By pointing towards the pitfalls of what *resident involvement* in tourism development means, for instance that residents are often considered homogeneous, and that structural constraints of local political and administrative tourism management are neglected, I propose that paying attention to ‘in-between’ urban practices can help in the generation of possible alternatives and counterposed understandings of what tourism and ‘knowing the city’ can mean. From a theoretical perspective then, I propose an added value of using a ‘niche’ lens to point out urban knowledge generating practices of the ‘in-between’ besides the ones observed here. Following this very incentive, in the last instance, I consider this work as an illustrative evidence for how big societal and cultural shifts such as the post-tourist city, are not linear and straightforward and that rather than merely looking at grand urban politics and arenas,

paying attention to granular practices in the ‘niches’ can help us make sense of urban change within and beyond the tourist city.

Relating the role of ‘niche-producing knowledge’ back to the overarching theme of this dissertation, I want to reflect on how the observed practices try to challenge the extractivist tendencies explored in the previous chapters. First and foremost, they aim at unfolding where big promotional city narratives stem from and who they benefit. Further, they negotiate what tourism is by encouraging a debate on the ‘could-have-beens’ or disregarded plans for the city and its neighbourhoods, an aspect that is rarely a concern in today’s mainstreamed tourism offers. Lastly, the carved-out knowledge represents a way by which urban living can, if only momentarily, escape the pressures of value extraction, a pervasive tendency of today’s global tourism age.

References - Chapter 3

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Conclusion

This dissertation provided a critical dual-focused examination of contemporary urban tourism and its reinforcing relationship with the economization of urban living. In doing so, I investigated the mechanisms driving both their extractivist tendencies of economization aided by highly culturalised industries on the one hand and alternative paths aimed at reclaiming resident-oriented urban knowledge, on the other. In such, I developed my argument across two contrasting dimensions of the global tourism age, explaining how both are contingent on questioning the sustainability of urban living within today's tourism pressure on urban liveability itself. As a result, my work ultimately is intended to shed light on how the subtle and intangible dimensions of the economization of urban life make up a significant portion of today's urban tourism industries. Via three case studies, I addressed the threefold research objectives to firstly show urban tourism's increasing dependency on the extractivist economization of precarious life, secondly to interrogate the inseparable reinforcement between tourism and culture-intensive industries and lastly, to explore alternative paths for reclaiming and generating resident-focused urban knowledge.

This doctoral dissertation seeks to advance the theorization of the economization of urban living within critical urban theory and urban studies, situated in the context of contemporary global tourism. Although previous research has touched on the commodification of specific life forms as touristic products, this study establishes a clearer analytical distinction between value-generating cultural assets and rent-extracting 'pseudo commodities' to better identify when such commodification becomes detrimental to local economies. The chosen case studies collectively attempt at advancing our understanding of contemporary culture-driven value-extraction mechanisms by connecting how urban living imaginaries (co-produced and mediated across platforms, film, and tourism) do 'political work' and form the legitimating force in enabling its very economization, both from an extractivist and alternative angle. Correspondingly, the thesis aims at making visible the need to research the emerging small-scale practical possibilities of countering the latter. Viewed more holistically, the work's insights try to contribute to a scholarly as well as

societal debate on how urban living today is (re-)valued, imagined and can possibly be safeguarded against market subsumption.

The first chapter, coauthored with Ugo Rossi, explores the extractivist economization of precarious urban living in the context of the becoming-an-economy process of using digital platforms for short-term rentals during the 2010s by exemplifying the local variant of a slum tourism startup. The second chapter demonstrates that a new wave of Neapolitan filmmaking, focused on a previously marginalized but historically rich neighbourhood, is linked to the enactment and extraction of a 'scenic economic value' of precarious urban life. This finding highlights the symbiotic relationship between the film and tourism sectors, showing how they reinforce one another through both shared economic interests and the specific urban imaginaries they cultivate. This grounds my motivation to employ the conceptualisation of an 'industry complex'. Finally, the third chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how urban knowledge is produced within 'niches', thereby broadening the scope of urban geography and urban studies regarding knowledge production. By examining the case study of critically-engaged, resident-focused urban tours, this work offers a framework for conceptualizing the current challenges and future potential of alternative touring practices.

My work contributes to academic debates in multiple ways. First and foremost, it challenges traditional understandings of culture-driven economization processes and encourages a deeper comprehension for the importance of looking at the subtle onsets and preparation stages of such economization in relation to urban living and that of precarious living in densely populated urban centres more specifically. Whereas the wider contribution can be placed within the evolving research field of economization and more broadly within the tradition of performative economies and economics, emphasising how economic representations of the world don't simply describe and fix the world but actively make it, the more specific implications are manifold.

The first chapter introduces the notion of 'startup precarity', thereby indicating how the subsumption of the precarity of urban living into the value-extractive machinery of the platform-mediated tourism industry at the same time defines the precarious status of the startup enterprise itself. By working on two economic levels simultaneously, namely the

precarity of place and inhabitants as well as the structural precarity of enterprise itself, the notion becomes applicable to other value extracting practices of the cultural startup business model, that run the risk of mirroring the very conditions they commercialise. Here in particular the idea that entrepreneurial economic ‘spirit’ is increasingly portrayed as an inherent socio-cultural condition of specific urban places and populations makes the concept an advancement to the study of entrepreneurial urbanism of the ‘South’. This conceptual angle then contributes to allowing us to think of how the urban European as well as Global ‘South’ gets constructed as a site of precarity for consumption. This adds to a discussion on how, besides existing research on jobs in the hospitality and service sector as well as the gig economy, less apparent cultural industries working in and via highly visualised touristifying urban centres are increasingly subsumed into processes of economization of urban living. The notion also gestures towards an underlying feature of platforms that continuously adapt their creative practices to their own working theories of how platform algorithms operate. This dynamic risks to homogenize culture towards whatever performs well within a given platform's logic. This then affects how cultural and creative industries dependent on the success of platforms like Airbnb and attempt to adjust to equally homogenize culture and more precisely romanticise precarious life as inherent ‘Southern’ culture.

The chapter correspondingly calls on caution when precarity and informality are described and promised as engines of agency and local resilience, thus a critical distance from an emerging revisionist shift within Southern urbanism literature. The second one coins the concept of a ‘film industry-tourism complex’ and in doing so expands the literature on ‘industry complexes’ towards the cultural and creative economies as well as tourism. This not only opens up a path for exploration of the versatile and entanglements between the two but also illustrates how this ‘complex’ incorporates the characteristics of the urban society, particularly its precarious living forms. It further shows how this ‘complex’ reifies these living forms into a global commodity, a process I term the ‘thingification of precarious living’, in such extending Federic Jameson's concept of ‘reification in mass culture’. The final chapter advances literature on the fragmented topic of urban knowledge production that continues to debate a high variance of diverging definitions of what is understood and accepted as urban knowledge. Here, it transgresses

the work on urban interstices by introducing the conceptualisation of knowledge as and in the ‘niche’ instead.

Both the first and the second chapter provide empirical evidence for how the subsumption of the precarity of urban life into value-extractive industries equally reinforces the precarious status of local industries themselves. In such, my work demonstrates the double-down-spiral of extractivist approaches to urban development. In contrast, the third chapter stands as an outlook for alternative paths for the understanding of tourism itself. By recognizing and naming the ‘niche’ practices of knowledge production, I arrive at a contribution to the still limited literature on the post-tourist city. Through this research, I highlight how the latter theme of ‘post-tourism’ can benefit from empirical investigation, albeit its still ambiguous definitions.

As a frame of mind and thought for reflection here, I want to figuratively pause the idea of a linear economy onto that of what we understand as tourism today. The name linear detours from the fact that all other approaches to economies are considered alternative economies, never intended as the primary or sole one. In such, alternative economies just like alternative tourism practices often have to subjugate themselves to these imperatives, especially to receive funding from the said linear economy or to stay ‘economically’ viable. In this work, I attempted to think of alternative practices of knowledge production as set in a similar context of an urban knowledge hierarchy.

Cast together, these three conceptualisations do not simply exemplify three different case study realities of the economization or economy-making process of urban living in today’s global tourism era but emphasize their interrelated role in debates on how to manage the unsustainable aspects of urban tourism and its negative externalities as well as its potentialities for public awareness work. The process of economizing urban living extends beyond the specific empirical settings of Naples and Brussels analysed in this work. Adapting this analytical framework to other urban environments offers valuable insights into the local variations and distinct ways this economization tendencies manifests through industry interdependencies. Furthermore, the conceptual scope of this research provides a useful lens for examining alternative, more-than-tourist ways of knowing the city that actively contest the contemporary entanglement between urban tourism and the marketization of urban life.

The insights gathered from this research led me to reflect on the practical implications and action-based responses beyond the academic domain. I name specific recommendations per chapter and a general one to reflect on. The first chapter led me to stress the need to focus on the municipal and national regulation of platformised urban tourism such as the short-term rental sector. Without this policy interference, precarious homes are threatened not only to be voyeuristically exploited but the *bassi* are not subject to renovation efforts for the sake of people inhabiting them but rather aiming at gentrifying logics. The work also highlights how not only one should exercise caution when representing urban precarity as a source of empowerment and creativity in academic work, but beyond how this increasing viewpoint in popular culture and media coverage is favourable to the very persistence of these living conditions. The second chapter points towards the need for a political willingness and agreeance to create a stable local industry in terms of public investment or long-term job opportunities in the neighbourhood of Rione Sanità. Accordingly, a policy shift towards neighbourhood management that focuses on local liveability over the prioritized catering to tourism enterprises can be named as an essential intervention. In such, the imputable free market approach over popularized neighbourhoods with long-standing infrastructural and socio-economic deficiencies can be buffered through urban plans tailored towards the creation of ‘actually’ productive locally ingrained economies rather than a focus on mere rent seeking and ‘scenery exploitative’ selling of the neighbourhood. In action, this could include appropriate policy support and a wider strategy towards a global artisanal hub (including also the local film and music industries). Given that the city has a long-term specialization in these skilled activities like furniture-related woodwork, musical instrument manufacturing, haute couture leather goods (see for instance Seymour, 2019), this would support its proliferation. Overtourism patterns have increasingly led to the obliteration of this craftmaking diversity, as many shops have faced the destiny of being transformed into bars, restaurants or souvenir shops. Further, the over-dependence on foreign investment to sustain the local cultural industries such as filmmaking, without the actual stabilization of the local filmmaking scene, runs the risk of capping local creativity in the long run. Here, for example, a publicly institutionalised school for young people interested to join the audiovisual production field could aid. The plans for such an investment have been widely discussed within the sector but never came to be realized yet. The insights of the third chapter proved the necessity of defining the role

of tour guiding in relation to labour. This involves an active advocacy for the dismissal of underpaid and exploitative invoicing, a legally defined minimum amount of reimbursement per tour or the introduction of minimum wages. Additionally, my insights have shown how the opinions regarding who should be able and ‘allowed’ to guide are highly diverging, both among guides and tour initiatives themselves. Both voices are justified, implying different priorities for workers. On the one hand, licenses aid to guarantee a sensitivity for the content matter and an acknowledgement of the ethical responsibility of sharing knowledge. However, on the other hand, the tours investigated here represent a segment of guides with a long-standing history of urban expertise, either from an activist past, urbanist work or studies, that is generally detached from the guiding profession. As guiding is just one of their income sources for most of them, with many juggling multiple jobs, the financing of licences is an extra burden.

To point to the unresolved questions and limitations this work has generated, I declare that the narrow geographical scope of this work does not serve broad generalisations but rather emphasises embedded situatedness. Yet there are recognizable and relatable urban contexts not explicitly mentioned here. Cities that are traditionally portrayed and imagined as ‘Southern’, equally prone to extractivist tendencies of culture-heavy industries or risks of tourism monocultures or suffering from highly polarized ‘bad’ reputations can benefit from an interrogation using the conceptual lenses I put forward.

In the case of chapter 1 and chapter 2, both the startup case study of the ‘Vascitour’ and the ‘film industry-tourism complex’ give way for further research of similar patterns in other urban centres of the European South, faced with similar structural constraints in the presence of strong symbolic imagery. Further, this brings forward a promising potential of a comparative stance between urban filmmaking hotspots; for example, in distinctive contexts of the European regions following divergent trajectories of both cultural industries and tourism management. Future research should also address the entanglements between other culturally driven industries and variegated tourism influences. This could augment the ‘complex’ approach employed in chapter 2 towards the critical exploration of other new frontiers of tourism industries in constant search of new spaces of expansion. The observation of similar past or upcoming slum tourism variants, highly dependent on the economization of other place-specific ‘urban forms of life’ in other parts of Southern and

Eastern European urban areas stands as another avenue of research inquiry. Chapter 3 in relation to the other two conversely shows a much higher potential for employing a broader geographical angle. Here, I suggest a larger analysis that groups multiple similar initiatives of alternative urban knowledge creators in two to three cities, to expand and deepen the theoretical base of the ‘knowledge niche’. Another theme that emerged yet remained beyond the analytical scope of this chapter concerns the community participation. Although my work has shown that an increasingly diverse group of residents joins the tours, I encourage an in-depth confrontation regarding their motivations and the individual effects of these practices in the long run.

I started this work with the hope that it might clear a space of rapport when thinking of how cities that are traditionally reduced to their immutability, equally deserve to have the processes and trajectories leading to that exceptionalism be scrutinized and questioned. During my fieldwork, both cities I addressed underwent additional challenges beside the ones centred in this thesis. Naples, aside from a constant overtouristification threat, deals with new volcanic and seismic unrest at the Campi Flegrei caldera, with demands for better structural retrofitting of homes and stronger guarantees for public safety, also showing the increased natural risk for precarious housing and ‘porous’ infrastructure. Naples’s preparation to host the global mega-event of the America’s Cup sailing competition in 2027 with its headquarters in Bagnoli (overlapping with the Campi Flegrei risk zone), is equally challenged by grave environmental and infrastructural concerns, forecasting the promised economic and infrastructural boost to be a temporary one only (D’Agosta, 2025). This adds another dimension of reflection to questions of urban liveability in the context of urban regeneration increasingly being tackled through event policy approaches rather than strategic structural ones targeting foundational economic and organizational shifts. In the case of Brussels, the city has remained without an active working government for 615 days following the elections in January 2024. This has led to collective resentment, fatigue and mistrust in the political institutions. Although this has opened pathways for the transformative potential of the observed practices in times of turbulence, it also tested the very existence and survival of these initiatives.

Although many commentators have declared neoliberalism as ‘ending’ (see Valletly 2024), mostly based on the crisis of US hegemony grounded in free market ideology, we

often overlook how neoliberalism rather than being a 'grand project' is rooted in micro-machineries of everyday life, permeating and restructuring our understanding of living in the city. Therefore, I close with a plea to emphasize the importance of scrutinizing the becoming-an-economy processes of urban living everywhere capital tries to create something it cannot truly own, and to sharpen a view towards the possibilities of reframing our understanding of urban liveability and urban knowledge in a global tourism age.

References - Conclusion

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