Instagrammable Destinations as "Whatever" Destinations

Najbolj instagramabilne destinacije kot »karkoli« destinacije

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ABSTRACT

To be Instagrammable is to be caught in a loop of seeing and being seen – a loop that stretches across screens and through bodies, binding places like Telašćica Nature Park in Croatia to the affective economies of visibility. Drawing on Jodi Dean's concept of communicative capitalism, this paper explores how the Instagrammable aesthetic transforms destinations into "whatever destinations" – sites flattened into consumable backdrops for the "authentic" experiences of a subject entrapped within the visual field.

KEYWORDS: Instagrammable, Instagram hot spots, subjectivity, Telašćica, communicative capitalism

IZVLEČEK

Biti instagramabilen pomeni biti ujet v zanko videti in biti viden – zanko, ki se razteza čez ekrane in telesa ter povezuje kraje, kot je Naravni park Telašćica na Hrvaškem, z afektivno ekonomijo vidnosti. Članek na podlagi koncepta komunikacijskega kapitalizma, ki ga je razvila Jodi Dean, raziskuje, kako instagramabilna estetika spreminja destinacije v »karkoli destinacije« – lokacije, zreducirane na potrošna ozadja za »avtentične« izkušnje subjekta, ujetega v vizualno polje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: instagramabilno, najbolj popularni kraji na Instagramu, subjektivnost, Telašćica, komunikacijski kapitalizem

"INSTAGRAM HOT SPOT: Indescribable beauty. A view that will take your breath away." This summer, everyone is flocking to the Interpretation and Education Center Grpašćak (in Telašćica Nature Park) on Dugi otok, where you can look out the window at the stunning cliffs and endless horizon of the open sea. Simply breathtaking and enchanting! (*Jutarnji list*, 31 August 2023)

If you're searching for the perfect Instagrammable location and want to boost your social media following with an unforgettable photo ... Telašćica Nature Park is a MUST-SEE destination and a photographer's paradise. (*Zadar Archipelago* 2023)

To be beautiful, to be present, to be everywhere, to be authentic, to be Instagrammable – this is one of the latest aesthetic fixations of our time. As an aesthetic of the present, Instagrammable means to locate oneself and capture something in a specific way to participate in a visual economy that moves through platforms, across screens, and into the eyes of those who scroll by. We live in a time when more photographs are taken every two minutes than in the entire 19th century (Mirzoeff 2016: 4). This is not important just because of numbers or mere image production; it is about the changes in ways of seeing, in what it means to see and to be seen. In this paper, I explore what it means for a place like Telašćica Nature Park to be seen as Instagrammable. What implications accompany the description of a view that "takes one's breath away"? Who is this view for, and how does its aesthetic relate to political, broader social and economic issues?

Telašćica Nature Park is situated on the island of Dugi otok (Long Island) in Croatia, a place marked by its unique biodiversity and striking beauty, recognised early on as a natural reserve. It was identified as such alongside the Kornati archipelago in 1967 under the Nature Protection Act. Over time, its status has changed – it was once part of the Kornati National Park before becoming a Nature Park itself – positioning Telašćica as not only a tourist destination but a site of national pride. It stands out among Croatia's parks, each a symbol of natural wonder that speaks to the world. Such places have always attracted tourists, their images taken and shared as a way of presenting the self, as a way of saying, "I was there" (van Dijck 2008; Siegel, Tussyadiah and Scarles 2022). But in the past, this self-presentation was confined, bound by proximity, by the presence of others, usually friends and family, shaped by the contours of bodies in a shared time and place (Siegel, Tussyadiah and Scarles 2022). Now, in the era of digital photography, smartphones, and social media, self-presentation is no longer constrained. It spills over surfaces, stretches across screens, dispersed into a networked gaze. Digital images allow people to "curate" themselves, to reshape and refine how they are seen. Travel photos, once an archive of where one has been, have now become tools for constructing an idealised self, aligning itself with the tourist spaces it captures. In this reconfiguration, images take on a performative quality, tuned to ideals that hover and circulate, to sociocultural standards that linger and settle, directing how much one should edit, how much one must embellish, to truly be "there", to be seen as having been there (Lyu 2016; Siegel, Tussyadiah and Scarles 2022). Telašćica, like so many places now marked by the Instagram gaze, has become a site for this being-seen – a place where beauty is not simply encountered but curated, shaped into an image of a self meant for consumption, reflecting a particular aesthetic.

My understanding of the aesthetic draws largely from Sianne Ngai's work on the impact of capitalism on aesthetic categories. She argues that the hypercommodified and information-saturated conditions of late capitalism are reflected in minor aesthetic categories like "cute", "zany" and "interesting" that index "the ways in which contemporary subjects work and consume" (Ngai 2012: 1). These categories appear as weak and minor, but nonetheless, they penetrate our everyday lives. In a similar way, I propose here that the Instagrammable, while seemingly a minor contemporary cultural aesthetic, indexes changes in the dynamics of 21st century capitalist production and circulation. Ngai argues that each aesthetic category is more than judgment; it "names the bond between a sensuous 'look' and a discursive evaluation […] and both sides of that relation are saturated with affect" (Ngai 2022: 24). This affective saturation generates ambivalence, manifesting as the mixed and often conflicting feelings that accompany our engagements with the Instagrammable. These feelings shape how we experience Instagram Hot Spots like Telašćica as we move through a visual landscape influenced by today's social and commercial pressures for constant visibility and instant sharing. Inspired by the works of Mark Andrejevic (2020) and Jodi Dean (2010, 2014), I consider how this pressure for constant visibility and the immediacy of sharing experiences – a moment captured, an image posted – intersects with technological shifts and how, as Dean argues, this intersection captures users of communication media in a specific kind of enjoyment, accompanied with production and surveillance, a formation which she names communicative capitalism (Dean 2010: 4).

In short, the focus on the aesthetic category of Instagrammable draws us into a loop of visibility formed by communicative capitalism; it invites us to analyse the communicative relations it entails and how it shapes our connections to others, to places, and to practices that encourage us to be present, to be everywhere, and to be seen in specific ways.

Methodologically, my research falls within the field of digital ethnography and consists of two interconnected parts. In the first part, I tracked the hashtag #Telašćica on social media, especially Instagram. I was interested in the types of photos of Telašćica that were posted, where they circulated, the comments they received, and the hashtags added to them. I contacted certain account users through Instagram and had informal conversations with them about their experiences in Telašćica, their reasons for posting specific photos, and their choice of accompanying hashtags. As Pink et al. argue, in digital ethnography, "we are often in mediated contact with participants rather than in direct presence" (2015: 3).

The second part of my research involved a kind of micro-ethnography conducted in Telašćica and on the tourist boats from Zadar to Telašćica during the peak tourist months (July and August) in 2023 and 2024. I observed visitors' behaviours, chatted with them, and spoke with boat operators and park officials. I took numerous photographs and recorded sounds and conversations. My conversations with visitors to Telašćica, shaped by chance, captured a piece of the atmosphere – a sense of how Telašćica is seen, interpreted, and made visible. These conversations hold traces of social relations – relations that emerge from the textures of contemporary life, from the ways people move through spaces, carrying with them their expectations, desires, and images of what they seek to find. What follows, then, is

less about Telašćica itself or the visitors who pass through, and more about the broader social atmosphere – an atmosphere that has made it feel natural to view Telašćica as an Instagrammable destination. Therefore, the ethnographic fragments I include here offer glimpses into this atmosphere – they cannot be generalised but can help us understand certain ways of seeing destinations as Instagrammable.

In the sections that follow, I first address issues that have surfaced with the rise of social media networks like Instagram, such as the role of marketing and the quiet operation of digital algorithms. From there, I turn to the shifting meaning of "authenticity" in relation to tourist destinations like Telašćica, where the Instagrammable aesthetic begins to settle in and shape the contours of what it means to be seen. I argue that as an aesthetic category, Instagrammable shares echoes with the aesthetic of the "picturesque". Where the picturesque once reflected economic and colonial entanglements, the Instagram aesthetic mirrors our contemporary age of communicative capitalism (Ngai 2012; Dean 2010). Under this aesthetic, Telašćica is confronted with what Jodi Dean (2010) calls a "whatever subject" – a subject whose "whatever" signals a form of communication that lacks depth, a hollow connectivity that does not seek to understand itself beyond the bounds of perpetual sharing and display. In this sense, Telašćica becomes a "whatever", an Instagrammable site for a "whatever subject" caught in a loop of visibility that obscures the very hegemonic discourses shaping its existence. The place becomes flattened, rendered into something consumable, a backdrop for a subjectivity that has been entrapped in the visual field.

SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS
AND COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM

The term Instagrammable first appeared in 2010 with the launch of Instagram, and it refers to places, objects, or moments that are visually striking – essentially, things seen as "worthy" of being shared and captured for others. By 2018, this term had made its way into dictionaries like Merriam-Webster and Cambridge, marking its transition from slang to mainstream language and highlighting Instagram's influence on our daily perceptions and consumer habits. While Instagram shares similarities with other social networks, it stands out for its focus on visual content, representing itself as a unique form of digital communication and connectivity.

Since their emergence in the late 1990s, social media platforms, along with communications and network technology, have transformed significantly. However, some aspects have remained constant: the interconnectedness of individuals, the freedom to participate, and expanded access to diverse information. These platforms foster friendships, enable communication across distances, and provide opportunities for creative expression, reaching millions of users. Initially, social networks emphasized their democratic potential – encouraging participation, free expression, and organising grassroots political movements. However, commercialisation soon took hold, introducing paid advertisements and targeted marketing (Hinton and Hjorth 2013: 49).

Targeted marketing on social media, enhanced by artificial intelligence (AI), collects data on user preferences. Every piece of data becomes valuable as user behaviours are monitored – what they read, search for, listen to, and where they spend their time online. Additionally, identity markers like gender, age, ethnicity, and nationality are considered, ensuring users see links and pages promoting products and information that might interest them. In this way, user attention is steered toward specific content based on digital algorithms, keeping users engaged on specific platforms and generating economic value – often without their awareness. As Andrejevic points out, these algorithms play a crucial role in determining important information. Programmed to maximise profit, they automate the collection, classification, and processing of information to the extent that it may seem they understand social media users better than the users understand themselves (Andrejevic 2020: 39). Notably, users do not need to purchase the advertised products for the system to work; what matters is that they click on a promotional post, view the information, or share their thoughts about a product or service. The more time users spend on social media and the more engaged they become, the more data these networks collect about them, which is then monetized for marketing purposes (Hill 2015: 8; Kornbluh 2023: 71). In this context, social media platforms profit continuously from their users, who become a kind of unwaged digital labour. For example, Facebook's total revenue (Meta), which has also owned Instagram since 2012, reached $134 billion in 2023 (Statista 2024).

In summary, as Dean argues, social media networks are integral to communicative capitalism, where we witness the convergence of democracy and capitalism within a net-worked media landscape (Dean 2010: 15–16). On the one hand, social media networks embody certain values central to democracy, such as feelings of freedom and inclusivity, providing opportunities for discussion and participation on multiple levels. On the other hand, they facilitate profit-making and accumulation through various forms of commodifi-cation, creating an environment where diverse data is effortlessly collected and used to steer users' attention in particular directions.

With the emergence of hashtags, introduced in 2007, the social media landscape changed again. A hashtag is created using the symbol # to group specific posts around particular topics, serving as a link that facilitates easy searching and browsing of related content. However, it has become much more than that: it organises users' interactions and generates new pathways for visibility. In a way, hashtags shape how users inhabit digital spaces by marking moments, events, and experiences as worthy of collective attention. As hashtags circulate, they create economies of visibility, where what is seen, shared, and recognised becomes capital. The rise of the influencer is a direct consequence of this circulation, as companies invest in those whose visibility can be leveraged, with the value of that visibility determined by the number of followers or friends. In this economy, the hashtag becomes a means of being seen, a way to accumulate recognition, always with the promise of further visibility.

Instagram, in particular, serves as a dynamic platform for the circulation of various

hashtags. It is a platform where digital marketing and user data collection converge, fundamentally reshaping users engagement with identity and experience (Caldeira, De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2020). Through AI-powered editing tools, users of Instagram can form and curate their visual identities, presenting themselves as unique and interconnected, individual yet participatory. The introduction of Instagram Stories in 2016 created a space for ephemeral self-expression (and for more traffic the platform needs for monetization). Each Story disappears after 24 hours and offers a fleeting glimpse into everyday life, allowing users to share moments that might seem trivial or private: cooking, walking the dog, singing, dancing, working out, shopping, and everything in between.[1] Hashtags function as Instagram's taxonomy, serving as a framework for these sharing acts. They gather posts that resonate with similar themes or sentiments, transforming fragments into collective experiences.[2] Users can use up to 30 hashtags in a single post, covering topics ranging from *#naturepark* and *#sunset* to *#love* and *#serenity,* and even brand-specific tags (such as the shirt worn in the photo, the phone used for the shot, or the drink being consumed). In this digital landscape, users occupy a dual role as producers and consumers (or prosumers), with hashtags encapsulating their expressions and experiences (Meraz 2017: 143–145). For Dean, blurring the distinction between the role of producer and consumer helps in sublating the particularity of experiences into "mere contributions to the circulation of content" (2010: 54). In addition, hashtags provide businesses with insights into grouped posts and data linked to their products or marketing campaigns, making it easier to reach target audiences. Prosumers receive guidance on creating "authentic content" and gain access to various photo editing and filtering apps that simplify content creation. Popular applications like VSCO, PicsArt, Lightroom, Dazz Cam, and Snapseed enhance the possibilities of image refinement and composition, transforming Instagram into a platform for highly polished visual narratives.

In 2024, Instagram expanded its capabilities by allowing users to include up to 20 photos in a single post, with the carousel feature gaining popularity. This feature enables images to flow seamlessly from one to the next, merging with text to create smooth, visually engaging storytelling. The growing demand for an impactful Instagram presence has led to the rise of specialised marketing agencies that offer strategies for maximising platform visibility – how to be seen, appear "authentic", and attract a larger audience to share, save, or even "bring new friends" to a particular profile.

> Be unique, be interesting, and never boring! […] Create captivating content; make them love what you share! […] Take breathtaking photos […]. Increase engagement and grow your following […]. Track, analyse, and optimize. Only what we can measure, we can influence! (Digital Agency Marketing 2018).

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[1] Here, experiences are not simply shared; they are curated and meticulously arranged for an audience that feels both perpetually present and fleeting. Adventure and nature – key elements of the Instagram aesthetic – dominate these moments, aligning seamlessly with the platform's appeal to companies eager to brand destinations and products (Garner 2021).

[2] Nathan Jurgenson describes this fragmentation of everyday life as "atomizing the infinity of life" (see Kornbluh 2023: 71).

Much like the aesthetic categories examined by Ngai – such as cute, zany, and interesting – the Instagrammable pulses subtly at the edges of our cultural system while being deeply embedded in the neoliberal structure of society. According to Ngai, these categories are steeped in ambivalence. For example, when we describe something as interesting, it can quickly shift to "maybe interesting", which is just a leap away from being deemed "boring" (Jasper and Ngai 2011: 47). Similarly, the zany implies perpetual action without achieving fulfilment, blurring the lines between work and play. The judgment of something as cute may suggest an objective value, yet it reflects underlying power relations that reveal the vulnerability of what is labelled as cute, potentially leading to exploitation or a heightened desire to protect (Jasper and Ngai 2011: 47). This ambivalence – where affective experiences misalign with discursive meanings – also characterises the Instagrammable. In the same way as the notion of interesting, the Instagrammable encompasses a range of temporalities. It invites circulation and recognition, hinting at something appealing that we may not yet fully understand, thus distinguishing itself from countless other moments. The Instagrammable constantly straddles the line between intriguing and dull, novelty and the mundane. It can even embrace boredom as content, but it must frame it as captivating, presenting boredom as if it were unique or authentic. Within the realm of the Instagrammable, the concept of authenticity shifts from its traditional meaning – not something genuine or uncontrived – to a carefully crafted aesthetic presentation amid a sea of "whatever". Yet, within this vast array of "whatever", certain actions, places, and destinations gain prominence due to algorithmic rankings that favour posts with higher levels of user engagement. For some Instagram users, it becomes essential to post from these algorithmically significant locations, curating a collection of Instagrammable spots to populate their profiles. The focus shifts to conveying messages like "I was here" or "I did this", but in a manner that appears "authentic", diverging from mundane displays of everyday life. Consequently, Instagrammable activities – like a daily jog – serve to demonstrate both ordinariness and extraordinariness, capturing the "authenticity" of the experience.

But, as Lauren Berlant notes, in performing "ordinary acts and events" the most challenging aspect can be the actual ordinariness of everyday life or the inherent plainness of a place or experience. What becomes paramount is the desire to belong to an aesthetic that compels individuals to be noticed, often leading social media users to self-exploit in making their posts. However, there is no guarantee that these posts will be seen – and if they are, questions remain about who will view them and how they will be perceived (Demeyer and Berlant 2021: 100–101).

This position of uncertainty – of not knowing where the gaze comes from, when it might arrive, or whether we will be noticed at all – is what Dean identifies as a defining characteristic of communicative capitalism (Dean 2010: 105). For her, the gaze of the Other is obscured within a heterogeneous digital network, where the primary signifier structuring reality seems suspended, lacking authority to provide coordinates for our desires. In this context, "whatever" becomes the primary marker, with algorithmic calculations transforming this "whatever" into fleeting trends.

Our disclosures are surveilled, archived, remembered, in ways that exceed our ability to manage or control. On the one hand, this is the source of their immense attraction, what lures us in, what incites us to practices of revelation and display. On the other, the media that incite us to create and express, to offer our thoughts, feelings, and opinions freely, to participate (but in what?), deliver us up to others to use for purposes of their own. Because one is never sure how one is seen, one is never certain of one's place in the symbolic order. How, exactly, are we being looked at? (Dean 2010: 106)

The uncertainty of the gaze – emanating from multiple directions – diffuses responsibility and blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality. As a result, the possibility of establishing fixed symbolic meanings or stable interpretations dissolves (a decline of the symbolic). Individuals become ensnared in loops that provide immediate pleasure yet trap them in a cycle of continuous repetition, moving through a series of experiences (see also Kornbluh 2023). In this context, the pursuit of identification with a specific social position or the desire for symbolic recognition (the ego ideal) becomes elusive. Instead, it resonates more with the Lacanian concept of *objet petit a*, wherein the gaze embodies the subject's entrapment within the visual field (Dean 2010: 103).

This entrapment within the visual field and the pursuit of "whatever" are reflected in various locations designated as Instagrammable sites. These places are chosen for their visual appeal, whether through natural beauty or distinctive architectural features. They serve not only as objects to be photographed but also as stages for crafting and performing one's Instagram identity (see Matchar 2017; Siegel, Tussyadiah and Scarles 2022). While the marketing potential of such locations is often highlighted – especially within the tourism industry – the gaze directed at them remains elusive and uncertain, scattered throughout a digital network and algorithmic calculations. Stripped of their original meanings, these places compete to provide "authentic" Instagram experiences, transforming into Instagram hot spots, such as Telašćica Nature Park.

TELAŠĆICA – INSTAGRAM HOT SPOT DESTINATION

The Instagram aesthetic, particularly in relation to tourism and national parks, has roots that trace back to the origins of these parks and the concept of the "picturesque". It is not new that national parks and nature reserves, celebrated for their scenic beauty, attract visitors and evolve into sought-after tourist destinations. Emerging in the late 19th century, they were shaped by a Romantic vision of the picturesque, intertwined with the economic and imperial ambitions of the time.[3] Much like the picturesque aesthetic once reflected

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[3]
The creation of parks as protected areas under state ownership is closely tied to colonial projects. It is no coincidence that parks began to emerge at a time when the concept of endless "exploratory" spatial colonial expansion was slowly shifting in the minds of Europeans and North Americans. Nature was no longer imagined as an infinite resource but as a limited one, bounded by the borders set by "civilisation". Domesticated through the discourse of protection, nature came to serve both imperial and national agendas (Gissibl, Hohller and Kupper 2012). According to Ghassan Hage, it is through this discourse of domestication that we can see the intersection of racism and environmental relations. Both are rooted in a way of being in the world that is founded on the idea of "civilisation" and capitalist exploitation, grounded in power relations built on the domination of capital (Hage 2017).

economic and colonial entanglements, today the Instagram aesthetic mirrors our contemporary age of communicative capitalism.

The picturesque emerged as an aesthetic appreciation of nature primarily among the upper and middle classes during a historical moment when the land was increasingly commodified and industrialisation was advancing rapidly. On the one hand, people flocked to cities, enduring harsh factory conditions, or laboured on vast farms. On the other, a romanticised and nostalgic image of orderly rural estates began to take hold – an image that conveniently erased the gruelling labour and poverty of the peasantry.[4] This notion of untouched nature, celebrated for its visual allure, soon became a desirable attraction for tourists, especially from the middle and upper classes. Tourism encouraged more significant traffic to these so-called "untouched" natural beauties, which were increasingly threatened by industrialisation while simultaneously relying on the mobility and wealth generated by the economic shifts that fuelled both industrialisation and poverty. As Sean Smith observes, picturesque nostalgia produces what it simultaneously consumes, "its own vanishing point, driving the scarcity of its consumable object" (2019: 283).

According to Ngai, the picturesque arose alongside the growth of the marketplace. It is a gaze that drifts "over a series of window displays", and we can say that this wandering gaze has also found its way into the realm of the Instagrammable (Penny 2017). Just as the picturesque style adhered to certain rules, crafting a whole from carefully selected parts that embodied a "natural" or "authentic" sensibility, the Instagrammable constructs a sensibility from elements that stand out against the backdrop of the ordinary. Here, authenticity hinges on a meticulously curated post that differentiates itself from a flood of other images. Where the picturesque once mirrored a market-oriented gaze shaped by tourism, the Instagrammable is aligned with neoliberal principles of profitability, commodifying everything, including the Instagram users themselves. In this way, even the act of scrolling – this gaze drifting down a digital window display – becomes significant as a tool for generating profit (Penny 2017; Lobo 2023).

Finally, we arrive at our nature park – Telašćica. How do these interwoven concepts shape the park as a specific Instagram destination? What elements make it authentic, beautiful, cute, and Instagrammable? Telašćica is prominently featured on digital platforms like *Putni Kofer*[5] and *Getbybus,* where it ranks among the top 50 Instagram locations in Croatia (Getbybus 2024). As part of Croatia's tourism portfolio, the park is marketed as a

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[4]
The aesthetics of the picturesque became popular in the 18th century, particularly in England. It referred to recognising the beauty of the landscape in its natural form, as if it "looked just like a painting", but it also required human intervention. In 1792, William Gilpin characterised the picturesque as a composition that unites various elements into a whole, with those elements being necessarily natural. However, since nature doesn't always create the best compositions, it is important to design them. Artists were advised to plan their compositions in three layers: a darkened foreground, with the middle ground and background illuminated. The picturesque marked a new structure of feeling in which nature was no longer viewed as threatening but as interesting, idealised for visual consumption (Smith 2019: 282).

[5]
"With its majestic cliffs and a salt lake nestled in the heart of the island, this marine nature park enchants visitors with its serene beauty, often described as a true slice of paradise on the Adriatic coast" (Putni kofer 2024).

must-see spot in Zadar County, a destination with undeniable Instagram appeal. In 2021, the Dutch version of the reality TV show *Survivor* was filmed there, using the park as a backdrop for various wilderness scenes (Croatiaweek 2021). That same year, it even appeared on the cover of the American travel magazine *Condé Nast Traveler*, accompanied by the tagline "Find Yourself" (Zadarski list 2021).

Telašćica was designated a nature park in 1988, when mass tourism was already reshaping the landscape. While Europe's national and nature parks began emerging after World War I, most were established in the post-World War II era.[6] In what is now Croatia, the roots of conservation date back to the 19th century, but the first official parks were created under Yugoslavia. Since the early 1950s, Yugoslavia had signed several international conventions on nature conservation. In 1957, the Yugoslav Society of Conservators was founded, and by 1965, it included a society dedicated to protecting national parks. Following the 1974 Constitution, the federal republics gained the power to establish parks within their territories; from then until 1986, Yugoslavia created 22 national parks (see Petrić 2019: 172–173). Due to its unique biodiversity and exceptional beauty, Telašćica, together with the Kornati archipelago, was declared a natural reserve in 1967 under the Nature Protection Act of that time. By 1980, it became part of Kornati National Park, managed by two separate administrations – one for Kornati and another for Telašćica. But in 1986, disagreements over governance and levels of protection led to a split, and Telašćica separated from Kornati, achieving its designation as a nature park in 1988 (Kornati n.d.).

Today, Croatia boasts eight national parks and twelve nature parks. In 1994, the Croatian Parliament passed the Nature Protection Act and from 2013, when it joined the European Union, Croatia has been committed to implementing European Union environmental legislation.[7] As the only nature park located on an island, Telaščica is unique in Croatia. Its official website describes it as home to the most beautiful natural bay in the Adriatic, featuring 25 beaches, cliffs that rise to 161 metres above sea level, and the saltwater lake Mir (Telašćica n.d.).

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[6] The first national park, Yellowstone, was established in the U.S. in 1872. Beyond its significant role in shaping national identity through the public protection of natural beauty, the idea of tourism was woven into the park's creation from the very beginning. The story often told about the park's formation, centred on its untouched natural beauty, involves a group of entrepreneurs, explorers, and journalists (the Washburn Expedition) who toured the Yellowstone region in the 1870s to gather information about its stunning geysers and fascinating canyons. One evening, around a campfire, they contemplated the potential profits, convinced that such natural beauty would attract visitors. They looked to Niagara Falls as a model – where in 1818 William Forsyth had built a covered staircase and charged visitors for walking beneath the falls, later building a hotel in 1822. After discussing how much a landowner in Yellowstone could earn, someone proposed that the area be designated for public interest, as a national park. As Frost and Hall argue, this story contains all the elements of picturesque aesthetics and the pioneering myth of nations born from settler colonies: the expropriation of Indigenous land, the clearing of wilderness, the building of infrastructure and cities, the harsh working conditions and the constant migration of labour to meet the demands of work, and finally, the idea of protecting natural beauty in the name of the state, to allow public enjoyment and recreation while also fostering a sense of national uniqueness (Frost and Hall 2009: 16–28).

[7] Telašćica is also part of the Natura 2000 network, a network of protected areas across the European Union, established to ensure the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats.

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Image 1: Telašćica, Dugi otok (Author: Boris Kačan).

Historically, its picturesque allure – characterised by untouched and stunning nature – has attracted visitors primarily during the summer. In line with prevailing discourses, this picturesque quality has increasingly been paired with sustainable tourism, an ecological component, especially in light of discourses surrounding the climate crisis and global warming.[8]

This entanglement of eco-protection on one side and the picturesque allure of Telašćica on the other is visible in almost every legal document and on official websites concerning

[8] These new discourses on sustainable and eco-tourism put pressure on Telašćica to find a way to at the same time be profitable and protect nature. In the "Visitor Management Action Plan for Telašćica Nature Park", developed as part of the 2020 project "Interpretation and Education Center Grpašćak", we see the layered contemporary realities of the park – the ways it exists as both an economic opportunity and an ecological concern. Seven restaurants operate within the park, and private accommodations offer a place to stay, signalling the economic flow into the local community, the promise of tourism as shared prosperity. However, alongside this promise lies another story: the environmental costs that remain unresolved, the harm that accumulates in the very spaces meant to be preserved. Wastewater disposal remains a pressing issue, a trace of the tensions between growth and conservation. Nautical visitors, too, are marked as potential threats – their anchoring, their waste, etc. In response to these threats, the plan calls for sustainable development, for a form of tourism that is conscious of the very space it seeks to enjoy. This dynamic reflects a broader, global trend in the neoliberalisation of parks and protected areas, where spaces of preservation are reshaped to fit the demands of eco-tourism (Gissibl, Hohler and Kupper 2012). In this way, Telašćica is becoming part of a network of landscapes that are asked to be beautiful and bountiful, sites where nature "must" perform its value, where the promise of the protection of nature and endangered species is bound to the imperative of profitability (See Ramov 2020). It is relevant to this discussion that in 2024 Telašćica Nature Park was awarded the Silver Green Destinations Award at the world's largest tourism fair, ITB in Berlin.

Croatia's national and nature parks. The platform *Parkovi Hrvatske* (run by the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development), for instance, presents Telašćica as a sanctuary for endangered species like the bottlenose dolphin and the peregrine falcon, yet simultaneously caters to visitors' desires for capturing scenic moments, for photo opportunities that frame Telašćica as both protected and consumable, a place to be saved and shared via social platforms.

> A place where the tallest, white Adriatic cliffs of 161 metres plunge into the blue sea. Bottlenose dolphins, the last marine mammals of the Adriatic, have chosen Telašćica as their favourite spot, gathering in pods to offer visitors an unforgettable photo opportunity. Perhaps, in the same moment, you'll catch a glimpse of the peregrine falcon taking off from the cliffs. It's impossible to capture all the beauty of our most stunning and expansive Adriatic bay. (Parkovi Hrvatske n.d.)

The picturesque allure of Telašćica, intertwined with its ecological significance, also finds expression on the park's official Instagram page (@natureparktelascica). With just 2,948 followers, the profile feels small within Instagram's vast, attention-driven landscape – almost understated. Yet this modest profile does not mean that Telašćica itself lacks Instagrammable appeal or that its presence is limited to this official page. While the official account invites visitors to share their experiences using *#natureparktelascica,* most Instagram users posting about Telašćica employ a range of other hashtags which are not related to nature parks (or eco-protection) at all. These hashtags often speak to a desire for the mutual visibility of Instagrammers, for being seen, using tags like *#instalike, #instadaily, #likeback, #followforfollowback, #likers, #instamood, #instagood, #photooftheday, #instatravel,* and *#l4likes* (like for like). In this way, Telašćica enters a broader network of visibility, where sharing is bound up with the rhythms of reciprocity and exchange, where nature's allure is woven into the economy of communicative capitalism of likes and follows.

In many Instagram photographs, Telašćica and its striking turquoise seas and steep cliffs become a mere backdrop, a setting that reflects the curated lifestyles of Instagram users, where the park's ecological significance and its endangered species are barely there, almost erased. Instead, Telašćica is transformed, absorbed into a visual economy, where Instagrammers become the objects of fascination, commodified selves who captivate for various reasons. As a result, the comments section beneath these images is not just a space for emojis and likes, but an arena for potential collaborations, where the visibility of an Instagrammer beckons opportunity. For instance, a post featuring a Polish Instagrammer swimming in the turquoise waters of Lake Mir, tagged with hashtags like *#blond* and *#love,* caught the attention of a modelling agency and businesses related to tattoos and hairstyles, leading to partnership invitations.[9]

Curious to observe the performance of visitors in Telašćica firsthand, I decided to join the journey most visitors take – a day trip by boat from Zadar or nearby towns. The

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[9] Numerous examples like this exist, with the Croatian Tourist Board frequently engaging in the comments under the hashtag *#croatiafulloflife,* seeking permission to share these user-generated images on their platforms. Given that estimates suggest that 70% of Instagram users primarily seek travel inspiration on the platform, it's unsurprising that national tourist boards maintain their business profiles and leverage user-generated content (UGC) to promote various destinations. The Instagrammability of these locations significantly boosts visitor numbers.

summer months offer various boat options, from speedy gliders to larger passenger vessels. Ante, the skipper of a speedboat that provides full-day and half-day excursions, described the interest in Telašćica as follows:

> The interest is huge; you really need to book your spot in advance. Even our private tours, which aren't exactly cheap, fill up quickly. Social media is everything to us – I honestly don't know how we'd manage without it. We get great reviews, and while some people want to hear the stories, let's be real: the pictures matter most. People are after those stunning shots of the turquoise sea, sandy beaches, or cliffs. And of course, they want to be in those photos, and that's what we help them with. Just check out our Instagram or TripAdvisor – those photos speak for themselves. People want paradise, and that's exactly what we offer. Not many are interested in hiking around the islands or learning about the history; it's mostly about snorkelling and getting those awesome pics. You know how it goes: unforgettable experiences and creating memories. We even have drones for that! They get the shots they want and can share them everywhere. It's a win-win for everyone!

In contrast to the tourist speedboats that provide various equipment for capturing great photos, including drones, some boats only offer basic transportation, perhaps lunch on board, and a few hours to explore a specific destination. As I waited in line for half an hour to buy a ticket for one of these boats, the salesperson expressed surprise when I spoke Croatian and mentioned my interest in Telašćica:

> Why are you interested in Telašćica? What are you planning to do there? There's really nothing except overpriced coffee. Everything's dirty, and who knows what kind of bacteria are in that saltwater lake. I heard just a few days ago that it gets super crowded when all the boats arrive; everyone's swimming with just their heads sticking out of the water. Seriously, don't go there – you'll just be disappointed. It's not for us; it's just for tourists, and all they care about is taking pictures, and that's about it.

During the boat ride to Telašćica, I could not help but notice that, although the boat was packed with people, only a few seemed genuinely interested in the landscape as we sailed past Ugljan and Pašman islands. Most were glued to their phones. However, as we approached Telašćica, without warning from the tour guide, everyone suddenly stood up and began taking pictures. It became clear that the tourists were using apps to track our location and identify popular photo spots, including the entrance to the bay. I noticed a similar pattern once we entered the park. Almost all the visitors from the boat headed straight for the cliffs, the most famous photo spot, paying little attention to the environment around them – except for a few who were using apps to identify plants by their photos. After ten minutes of taking selfies, they moved on to the saltwater Lake Mir, where most wanted a photo of themselves swimming in the lake's turquoise-green water. This was also where the previously mentioned photo of the Polish Instagrammer was taken. It is worth noting that most tourists had little interaction with each other; they were mainly focused on their phones, either posting just-taken photos or scrolling through their feeds.

In her book *If … Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics* (2018), Taina Bucher describes our interactions with data organised by artificial intelligence as "programmed sociality". However, it's not just sociality that is shaped by engagement with this data, it also influences

cultural experiences more broadly and lived experiences. Andrejevic (2020) refers to this shaping of lived experience as "environmentality", suggesting that algorithms directly affect behaviour within specific environments treated as programmable contexts, similar to those in virtual spaces. Here, "environment" does not refer to ecological contexts but is linked to the algorithmic calculation of living space. In this way, Telašćica becomes a programmable destination immersed in a sea of other Instagrammable locations whose sole purpose, at least on Instagram, is to enhance the authenticity of posts and bolster the reputation of Instagrammers who are likely contemplating other Instagrammable spots while still at Telašćica.

An Instagrammer from Poland told me two days after she made her post about Telašćica: "Oh, Telašćica, great experience! I don't remember all the details now; I'd have to check my photos. Today, I'm in Austria, mountain lakes… you know". When I looked at her posts from Austria, they were remarkably similar to those from Telašćica, featuring the same hashtags that are intended solely for expanding one's follower reach, including #collectingmemories.

INSTAGRAMMABLE DESTINATIONS AS "WHATEVER" DESTINATIONS

Programmed sociality – a way of viewing the world through the lens of Instagram aesthetics – highlights broader social changes within communicative capitalism. The case of the Polish influencer illustrates how these changes relate to the dynamics of performativity and labour. Paradoxically, this creation of a mirror of consumer desire leads to a shift in the concepts and performances of work. One might argue that social media has introduced a new working mode, fundamentally altering our understanding of "free time". In the past, free time represented a temporal division within the eight-hour workday, clearly delineating what individuals did and when for specific monetary rewards. Free time was associated with pleasure and freedom, ideally existing "outside of work". While this temporal division was problematic – critiqued by Marxist theorists in the 1960s and 1970s – the definition of freedom and quality of life remained tied to labour. Consequently, free time was often reduced to consumerist expenditures that could lead to personal debt. Additionally, unpaid work performed during "free time" (such as household chores or certain agricultural tasks) complicates this notion further.

In today's neoliberal context, especially with the rise of the digital economy, equating free time with work has become commonplace. It is crucial to note that since the beginning of neoliberal restructuring in the economy and society, the question of freedom – and, by extension, the idea of free time – has become a focal point around which various value systems have been dismantled and restructured, as if caught in a whirlpool.[10] Wendy Brown,

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Neoliberal economic policies were first introduced in 1973 in Chile (influenced by the Chicago School of Economics), and by the early 1980s, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan had implemented neoliberal programs in their own countries. These policies quickly spread to other nations. Depending on the local context, neoliberal economic policies promoted the privatisation of state institutions and services, the deregulation of capital and labour, the reduction of progressive taxation, the free flow of capital, and the sovereignty of the individual (the rational decision-making subject) (Brown 2019: 18; see also: Božić-Vrbančić 2023).

in her book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (2019), argues that neoliberalism encompasses more than mere economic restructuring; it embodies a political rationality that promotes individual freedom as independence from both the state and one another. Brown emphasizes that this conception of freedom legitimises self-exploitation and increasing economic inequality, failing to interrogate the material conditions in which individuals find themselves. Instead, the freedom of the market establishes the "rules of the game" within which individual freedoms are exercised. According to Brown, neoliberalism simultaneously produces and consumes freedom in the pursuit of unrestricted economic progress, viewing the entire planet as its horizon. This leads to a form of commercial planetaryization that creates conditions for freedom – the idea that "you are free to be free". In other words, it establishes circumstances under which individuals feel free and engage in practices of self-care and self-investment across multiple levels – both financial and socio-cultural (Božić Vrbančić 2023: 41–44; see also Foucault 2016).

When considering technological advancements, the emergence of artificial intelligence, and communication through social media, the complexities surrounding freedom, free time, and labour experiences deepen. Engaging with various entertainment content on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube during leisure moments algorithmically transforms into calculations regarding potential economic value creation. Surfing, scrolling, and sharing thoughts with followers effectively become forms of labour-sharing – ranging from creative and social to emotional and affective labour.

The question arises: is Telaščica, or any other Instagrammable destination, genuinely accessible, considering all that has been discussed? Matthew Flisfeder (2021) views activities on social media as forms of self-curation and self-branding. In this context, an Instagram profile serves as an exhibition space where users create a specific reputation by sharing Instagrammable photos from various locations. Users seek posts they can trust, primarily interested in genuine experiences of places, food, clothing, and other elements. Even though they recognise that shared photos are often filtered and edited, this awareness does not diminish their desire to discover something authentic or interesting in each moment, as they hope to showcase their own Instagrammable experiences.

In this dynamic, the destination itself becomes secondary to the Instagrammer, who primarily utilises the location to expand their social connections and enhance their visibility. Jodi Dean, in her theorisation of participatory culture, authenticity, and the expansion of friendships on social media, notes that connections formed on these platforms, particularly with individuals outside one's immediate circle, resemble Slavoj Žižek's concept of "decaf coffee" – friendships devoid of real intimacy or, as Dean puts it, "friendships without friendship" (2010: 73). According to Žižek, the notion that we can consume anything, regardless of its potential detriment to our well-being, as long as we can remove the negative aspects, is a characteristic of contemporary consumerism (for instance, decaf coffee allows us to enjoy the idea of drinking coffee without the harmful effects) (Žižek 2003).

Instagram operates similarly, providing an experience of reality stripped of certain limiting components. Daily life is fragmented into moments that must primarily be aestheti-

cally pleasing. This dissection of daily activities into interesting details creates an illusion of freedom in both expression and content consumption. However, in this process, we risk losing our grounding in reality, leading to a questioning of meaning that diminishes the stability traditionally offered by symbolic frameworks (reflecting the inefficacy of the symbolic). Consequently, affective and visual elements gain increasing significance in our engagements (Dean 2010: 21–22).

Posting photos of daily activities, travels, adventures, mishaps, and nature excursions – along with following what others do – fosters a sense of connection ("I am not alone") without the burden of accountability. Users can easily disconnect from a profile or stop following specific accounts at any moment. Most importantly, this dynamic generates feelings of pleasure and a sense of living. For Dean, this relationship to pleasure is linked to the concept of drive.

Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Dean posits that desire and drive are two key concepts that shape how individuals experience and seek pleasure. Desire can never be fully satisfied; it is directed not only at desired objects but also at the very processes of desiring. In contrast, drive is not focused on a specific object; rather, it returns like a boomerang, finding pleasure in the ongoing process of repetition. This repetition brings satisfaction, regardless of whether we have diverged from the original desired object. In the continuous cycle of posting, scrolling, searching, commenting, and liking, Dean identifies a clear connection to drive: just one more post, just one more click, just one more look to see what is trending today, what's receiving the most views, or what has garnered the most likes (Dean 2010: 109).

When examining the interplay between drive and desire within the framework of new digital technologies, we must confront the provocative question: is Telaščica, or any tourist destination for that matter, genuinely accessible? Are we truly capable of reaching a definitive endpoint, attaining ultimate pleasure, or completely consuming nature as repackaged through the lens of Instagram aesthetics? Or is it rather a case of relentless repetition – an endless cycle of seemingly distinct experiences and pathways that ultimately lead us nowhere?

This is where Dean's analysis of communicative capitalism becomes crucial. According to her, this capitalist paradigm hinges on repetition. Instagram, as a digital communication platform, facilitates this very repetition where pleasure morphs into something far more insidious: it becomes an object of loss rather than simply a lost object of desire. We find ourselves ensnared in a cycle of incessant sharing and competitive display, where our desires are not merely blocked but proliferate into fragmented drives, creating knots of anxiety that vanish in the labyrinth of interconnectedness.

What is particularly alarming is Dean's assertion that this new "community" – if we dare label it as such – constructs identities increasingly detached from traditional markers like ethnicity, nationality, gender, or age. Instead, we are confronted with a "whatever subject", where this "whatever" signifies a hollow form of communication devoid of any substantive interest in understanding itself outside the confines of perpetual connectivity (Dean 2010: 89). In this way, Telaščica transforms into a mere "whatever", an Instagrammable site for a "whatever subject" that loses the ability to perceive the hegemonic discourses

shaping its very existence. This absence of critical engagement eliminates any potential for questioning; irony fades away, leaving various locales to function solely as props for virtual lifestyles and identities that have become commodified.

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POVZETEK

Članek na podlagi manjšinske estetike Sianne Ngai in koncepta komunikacijskega kapitalizma Jodi Dean proučuje instagramabilno kot sodobno estetsko kategorijo. Na primeru Naravnega parka Telašćica raziskuje, kako se instagramabilne destinacije preoblikujejo v »karkoli destinacije«, zreducirane na potrošne kulise za samokuracijo ter digitalno vidnost. V prvem delu naslavlja ključna vprašanja, ki se porajajo z vzponom platform družbenih omrežij, vključno z vlogo trženja in nevidnim delovanjem digitalnih algoritmov. V nadaljevanju raziskuje spreminjajoči se pomen »avtentičnosti« turističnih destinacij, kakršna je tudi Telašćica, kjer instagramabilna estetika preoblikuje način, kako so prostori videni in doživeti. Prispevek zagovarja trditev, da instagramabilnost, tako kot slikovitost, odseva globlje socioekonomske dinamike. Medtem ko je bila slikovitost tesno povezana s kolonialnimi in gospodarskimi razmerami, se v estetiki Instagrama zrcalijo poblagovljene strukture komunikacijskega kapitalizma. V tem okviru Telašćica postane tisto, kar Dean opisuje kot mesto »karkoli subjekta« – subjekta, ujetega v površinske, ponavljajoče se cikle deljenja in prikazovanja. Ta zanka vidnosti prostor potepta in ga spremeni v potrošen predmet, v »karkoli prostor« za »karkoli subjekt«, ujet v vidno polje.