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## Review of Documentary: Common Roads - Pilgrimage and Backpacking in the 21st Century by Tommi Mendel

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## Review of : *Common Roads - Pilgrimage and Backpacking in the 21st Century*

A film by Tommi Mendel (director, research, interviews, camera, sound, editing).  
Documentary film / 2013 / 195 min

This review aims to analyse the documentary *Common Roads - pilgrimage and backpacking in the 21st century* and expose its most striking facts fundamental to understand the new phenomena of world tourism. Two different ways of traveling allow us to prove that contemporary pilgrimage has new values and reaches, such as spiritual growth, that surpass the ancient act of pilgrimage linked to religion.

The documentary *Common Roads - pilgrimage and backpacking in the 21st century* was produced in 2013 by Tommi Mendel, based on his doctoral thesis defended at the University of Zurich and supported by the National Science Foundation of Switzerland. Tommi is an anthropologist and filmmaker. He is currently an independent producer and member of the Audiovisual Media Commission of the Swiss Ethnological Society.

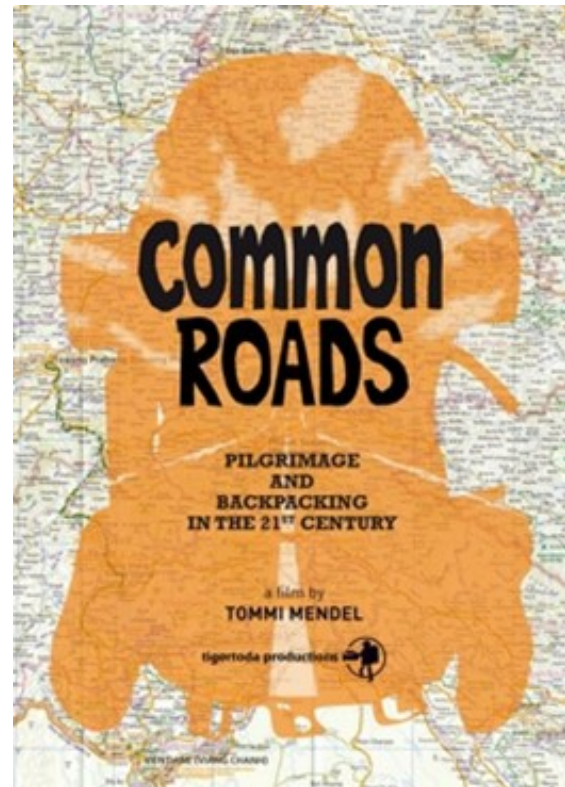
The documentary was released on DVD (Figure 1), with subtitles in English, since the speakers speak mostly in German. The producer of the documentary, Tigertoda Productions, mainly produces documentaries with themes related to Anthropology, religion and society.

Between the years of 2013 and 2015 the documentary was shown at several European film festivals. In 2015, it received the Menzione Speciale Prize, Visual Fest, Università Degli Studi Roma Tre, Italy.

As its name suggests, *Common Roads*, portrays the journeys of two young people who are accompanied by the director. While Aniña makes the Way of Saint James, an itinerary of secular pilgrimage, from France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, Lea visits countries like Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. The fact that they have in common is that they are the two backpackers.

The purpose of this documentary is to demonstrate that the term pilgrimage is associated with a devout person who travels only for religious motives, while backpacker travellers set off on a quest for adventure, where they seek to get out of the routine.

Figure 1: DVD cover - *Common Roads: Pilgrimage and Backpacking in the 21st century*



Source: [http://www.tigertoda.ch/COMMON\\_ROADS.html](http://www.tigertoda.ch/COMMON_ROADS.html)  
(accessed in February 13, 2019).

*Pilgrimage today is a miscegenation between sacred and profane to achieve material and spiritual goals ... We can affirm that tourism sacralizes profane spaces to attract tourists and the pilgrimage tourist sacred spaces, that is, they are increasingly two sides of the same coin (Pereiro, 2019).*

In this sense, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, like other pilgrimages, has become a tourist product of the present time. As stated by Xerardo Pereiro, tourism in a symbiosis with pilgrimage reconfigures the sacred and creates a different category of experience, that of tourism pilgrimage (2017: 416).

*Synthetically, we can affirm that there is a revival of pilgrimages in contemporary times and a certain convergence between tourism, religion, spirituality and pilgrimage in contemporary societies (Pereiro, 2019).*

In order to confront and demystify these images, Tommi Mendel, by accompanying the experiences of the two young women over three years, presents parallel aspects of two very different ways of traveling, but they end up having something in common, as we will check throughout the text and as is demonstrated by Roseman (2016: 532).

The documentary is divided into three parts: the departure, the accompaniment during the trips and the arrival. The beginning focuses on the two young Swiss women, Anina and Lea who are the central figures of the documentary, watching a video of themselves on a computer. With busy academic journeys accompanied by the stress of everyday life, they decide to travel and acquire new experiences.

The documentary begins immediately with an implicit question: the choice of tourist destinations or alternative destinations? Lea herself states that she is "looking for some places to travel, but everything seems beautiful at the same time".

At the beginning, the importance of tourist guides or itineraries, whose information gives security and tranquillity is quite evident. The confidence that everything will work and that everything will go well is present - the trust of having pilgrimage hostels and the confidence of meeting with other pilgrims / tourists. Later on, Anina decides to stop being led by the guide which has contradictory information, and decides to move by her intuition.

The central motivations that both young women mention for traveling are the sense of freedom "because on a daily basis they are always busy with numerous commitments." Their trips are not planned properly, that is, they leave much of the trip open to discovery. They have similar motivations, they want to get rich with these experiences, to get rid of material goods, unlike pilgrims who make the Way as a promise after recovering from an illness.

In the initial parts the arrival of Anina and Lea is demonstrated. We are immediately confronted with a contrast. The first one (Anina) arrives in a medieval village lined with tranquillity and a landscape with lush mountains, while Lea arrives in Thailand in a confused environment, with cars, motorbikes and people moving around, being an environment that she likes.

The question of heritage is also addressed. The reception desk for the pilgrims in Saint-Jean Pied de Port is in an old house in the historic centre. A pilgrimage hostel is indicated by a sign next to an old lamp. In the middle we see an imposing medieval

bridge. These images refer to the preservation of historical heritage on the Way. In this sense, the documentary links local heritage with world heritage by showing the local heritage along the Way such as chapels or the Irache Fountain and shows pictures of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Both scenes show many pilgrims on one side and many tourists on the other, indicating a 'confrontation' between local heritage and world heritage. The issue of unbridled tourism in Laos is mentioned superficially.

We find that there are some symbolic scenes, for example, when Aninan takes a staff to assist during the walk, just as the pilgrims carried the walking stick during the pilgrimage. Anina's route is depicted on a cobbled road, followed by a tarred road and shortly thereafter on unpaved roads.

The role of pilgrims is duly analysed, where they are found to be very different from the pilgrims of 300 years ago. An incidental image shows cyclists doing the Way. A Spanish villager notes that the pilgrimage became popular through the books of Paulo Coelho. Another comment is that there are more pilgrims from various backgrounds during the summer, but most do not try to meet local people unless they need a place to eat or sleep.

Alone or in a group, there is always someone behind or ahead. 'If you need to talk there is always someone,' says Anina, showing that there is a constant presence along the way. It is also mentioned several times in the documentary that the pilgrims consider themselves a great family, since there is a great connection between them. Several moments of interaction, communication and engagement with other pilgrims and other tourists are highlighted, being a constant throughout of the documentary. It is noted that some are more reflective than others.

The housing issue is discussed extensively in the documentary. The pilgrimage hostels are for pilgrims only and not for tourists. Due to the increasing number of pilgrims, the number of hostels has also increased. However, in Laos, a housing worker reports that prior to 1999 there were only 3 housing units in Vang Vieng and Laos, where there are now 200, demonstrating that there is unrestrained and unsustainable tourism, which leads to loss of local identity.

We also see the spiritual side of both trips. On the Way, a pilgrim sells religious souvenirs of Jerusalem for social causes to Anina and other pilgrims. Lea and another tourist visit Buddhist temples (Monk Chat Club), a secular site of veneration to the spirits.

The final parts are focused on the end of each trip and on arrival, where the opinions of Aníña and Lea converge: both had positive experiences, met several pilgrims / tourists and felt that the end of their travels led them to return to reality. A few days later, the two girls make typical dishes (tortilla and amok) from the places they passed for their family, revealing that they 'got' the local traditions. They also show photographs of places and experiences. As the documentary comes to an end it reaches the point where it began, with Aníña and Lea together. Both feel fulfilled and with a sense of tranquillity, noting that it is pleasant to remember the sensation of that time, highlighting one important factor - the rhythm life and where they have been. They mention a confrontation of realities: the pace, the confusion and the stress that remains (there is a definite rhythm, where they can not be themselves), but with a difference: with their lived experiences they know how to manage their daily lives and they feel ready to leave again.

This is a well-made documentary that demonstrates the central travel experiences of the two journeys. The testimony of several stakeholders, besides the focus on Aníña and Lea, gives greater visibility to the transmitted message. Those who watch the documentary want to go to the journey of discovery. As is shown, backpackers are often considered general tourists, as they travel from tourist site to tourist site and engage in planned trips. There are numerous information points and forms of tourist transport, which contrast with the Way of Saint James. On the Way, where there is a certain simplicity, although there is also an adaptation to the growing tourist demand. Both travellers consider that their journey helps to take care of their needs and allows them to return with greater enrichment, more confident and closer to their own being.

Backpackers seek spirituality and meaning, in the sense that they are in contact with nature, growth as a person and self-discovery. The so-called 'traditional' pilgrims travel on the Way because it is linked to Christian values and religion, being associated with dogmas, opposing the backpackers who embark on adventure for spiritual causes.

In discussing the particular motivations for traveling and pilgrimage on the roads of Santiago de Compostela today, Francisco Singul refers to five motives:

- a) traditional religious (devotion, vote, favour ...);
- b) cultural (medieval art, history);
- c) ecological (contemplation and use of the landscape and the environment);
- d) spiritual and ecumenical;

- e) personal (meditation on life, therapy to know ...) (Pereiro, 2019).

Through the documentary, we can see how current tourists, such as Aníña and Lea, travel through sacred sites in search of a purifying state of self-discovery, contact and harmony with nature, moments of reflection and a search for inner peace. These factors lead to self-transformation. Thus, we can conclude that there is a deep relationship between pilgrimage, spirituality and tourism.

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## Webgraphy

- [http://www.tigertoda.ch/COMMON\\_ROADS.html](http://www.tigertoda.ch/COMMON_ROADS.html), accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2019.

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