DOI: 10.2478/abcsj-2013-0018

Leisure Traveling for 21st Century Americans:
Mass Tourism as a Cultural Trap

OVIDIU ANICULĂESE
Al. I. Cuza University, Iași

Abstract

The majority of mass men in the American environment exhibit predictable and similar patterns of behavior as tourists. Pre-Industrial Revolution modes of traveling as liberation and exploration are now thwarted by the leveling effect of globalization and the illusion of information fueled by the all-pervasive mass media. Claims about the role of routine or the quest for authenticity are challenged as genuine motivations for mass tourism. Both the American culture and travel destinations in developing countries have authentic content that is largely ignored in favor of sensationalism and cliché. Excessive regimentation in the US creates the acute need for transcending to which popular culture finds accessible solutions through tourism: an experience of concentrated yet vague exoticism which feels liberating without yielding exploration. Travel destinations are shaped to American standards of material comfort and even adopt western popular culture icons in an effort to supply accessible familiar experiences of western entertainment. Various kinds of difficulty that once stimulated travelers are now relieved by travel agencies, rendering the experience of traveling less personal and more like TV entertainment. Old notions of space, time and reality itself are blurred in favor of a hyper-reality where fiction dominates.

Keywords: mass man; routine; authenticity; sensationalism; exoticism; predictability; material comfort; accessible experience; package holiday; hyper-reality

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, in 2012, the United States ranked third in the world for its international tourism expenditure of 83.5 billion US dollars, narrowly behind Germany's 83.8

billion. If one adds to that the massive home tourism industry of a continent-sized nation such as the US, where, according to the US Travel Association, 77% of domestic trips by American residents were taken for leisure purposes, then one comes to the realization that leisure traveling in the life of Americans has reached staggeringly high levels and its cultural significance has not waned despite the setback that the industry incurred in the decade between 2000 and 2010.

A modern practice par excellence, tourism has reached such unprecedented levels in the 21st century that it can hardly be ignored by any thinker, irrespective of their field of expertise. While revisiting theories of tourism since the 1960s until present day, this paper aims to explain how this alleged constantly growing exploration, this unique opportunity for cultural enrichment seems to have the same functions and the same effect as all the other forms of entertainment made available by popular culture today. We will attempt to show that the once challenging and enlightening experience of traveling has, in the hands of the technological culture, been transformed into the diluted and contrived experience of mass tourism in order to suit the different priorities of the American postmodern mass man, who, by definition, accounts for the majority of the population and is therefore significant for the culture as a whole.

Before launching into analysis and defense of any claims, let us pause for a cautionary thought on the risks of over-generalization, essentialization or, simply put, the blithe ignorance of sheer variety and complexity that any conclusion on such a vast phenomenon might entail. Today's post-modern logic is non-dualistic, anti-hierarchical and goes quite severely against any clear labeling. How then, with such a wide range of tourist experiences, can one attempt a homogenizing explanation, especially since Erik Cohen's 1979 adage that different kinds of people may desire different modes of tourist experiences? One only needs to remember how the exact same products of multi-national corporations like Coca-Cola, MacDonald's or, for that matter, American movies and popular music are all able to reliably animate so many different types of people from such different walks of life and such diverse cultures. Naturally, profound diversity persists, but only as niche or elite, while the

vast majority of people are bound to behave as they do with Coca-Cola or the latest Steven Spielberg movie: consume in similar and predictable manners irrespective of the aspect of life or the industry catering for it.

Admittedly, some people today practice tourism precisely to distinguish themselves from the mass and many scholars dedicate their effort to them. Such tourists do exist and the freedom of the Western world allows for their endeavors, as their personal strength of character and independence of thought enables them to resist manipulation and regimentation. However, they will not be the scope of this paper. Our analysis will target statistically significant majorities instead.

Before the advent of the Industrial Revolution, people in Europe and elsewhere used to travel for two main reasons, depending on their social status. The poor and oppressed traveled in search of material freedom, while the privileged did it to mark their status by reaching further knowledge and maturity of thinking. Youngsters from noble families were often sent on a journey immediately after graduation in the hope that the trip would bring them a sense of responsibility and more experience of the world.

Throughout history, these noble travelers have been responsible for constantly challenging the way of life in their country by confronting it with their experience of other countries. This is what brought about such progressive cultural phenomena as Renaissance and Enlightenment in Europe. Those explorers actually went through a genuine exchange of values and a cultural debate, eventually passing their restlessness onto their fellow countrymen.

Furthermore, people traveled out of their limited environment to places where they could meet with great minds or people sharing the same interest, thus being able to develop their particular interests rather than allow their community to level them down.

To a large extent, globalization has erased the cultural differences of most tourist destinations around the world, as connectedness also brings about some leveling and natural uniformity. Moreover, people in today's technological societies tend to sleep on the cozy assumption that instant communication through technology and the entertainment provided by the mass media can guarantee wealth of knowledge and

wisdom. Unfortunately, the fact remains that making it physically easier to gain knowledge and open-mindedness is not the same as actually gaining that knowledge and open mind.

The journey then meets other needs than those of past explorers. Sati Iso-Ahola claims that holidaying today meets the pervasive need for escaping from routine. However, routine has always been a part of stable civilized life, so one would need to explicate further the evils of today's routine to set it apart from the otherwise significantly less eventful lives of people living in previous centuries, when it was commonly deemed a mark of safety and stability, hence nothing to desire escape from. What exactly lies behind today's routine and what does traveling have to offer?

Dean MacCannell argues that this routine may play out as an increasingly artificial lifestyle in the West which leads today's people on a lifelong quest for authenticity, signaling to the ever higher popularity of the developing world as a tourist destination. According to him, tourists are fascinated with the natural or primitive side of such destinations which are less affected by modern civilization. Unfortunately, this quest is rarely more than a search for superficial exoticism, a search for intense sensations or experiences and the traveler is neither equipped nor willing to find meanings, explanations or implications for them. A particular instance of this alleged quest for authenticity is, according to MacCannell, is the surge of interest in unspoilt nature, including communities that seem to live in primitive harmony with it. What disqualifies this modern passion is its exaggerated bucolic vision of a peaceful harmonious ordered world, which was never a reality in the history of mankind and is not one now. It is our contention that such drives of today's tourists are better identified by the psychological term of regression: faced with the surging intricacies of the global village they live in, people crave for a simpler more harmonious world, similar to what they may have perceived in childhood. Once again, this is indeed a form of escape and an effort for self-preservation.

Daniel Boorstin suggests that popular tourist destinations are especially modernized, changed and forged in order to give the tourist a pre-staged experience similar to that of a TV show: strange and shocking, but faithfully matching people's expectations of it and, most importantly,

an essentially western, thus familiar experience in its material comfort and technical support. No actual contact with the host country or genuine dialogue with the natives is sought.

The question then is not whether the sight or the culture targeted by tourists is authentic, but whether the quest itself is genuine. One may argue, as Sine Heitmann does, that authenticity is socially constructed, since what some may regard as authentic or professional, others may deem fake or kitschy and, admittedly, cultures change constantly, reshaping their perception of what is authentic: *"A cultural product or a trait thereof which is at one point judged as contrived and inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognized as authentic"* (Erik Cohen 381). Moreover, tourism may actually help develop authentic realities over time. All of this amounts to a version of the favorite postmodernist mantra that there is no basis to judge what is authentic or not, what is real or not. However, if authenticity were indeed the goal, then tourists may go beyond the stage set out for them by travel agents into the much less dramatic backstreet, from the high street parade into the Brazilian favela, from the exotic dance to the rich variety of modern lifestyle that all nations, whether developed or not, still retain and wait to impart on eager explorers. Instead, as we will show later in this paper, tourists choose drama-laden spectacles over the unmediated experience of locals' lives. There is no need to look for primitive societies because, indeed, the various regions of the United States also have authentic content and experience to impart. Therefore, it is not the destination that needs to be authentic, but the tourist's intent: are they looking to learn about new worlds? Are they eager to taste purity? Do they simply want to rest or relax? Rather, are they lying about their true intent because it is not a conscious one? It is clearly not authenticity that draws tourists, but a more acute need.

Post-modern Americans' life tightly revolves around their career, inside a highly organized society which has already created all the choices and alternatives for their existence, which makes for a pre-determined standardized life, despite some obvious shallow variations. This is also due to the fact that today's civilized American is confined in a thoroughly materialistic existence that overshadows the diluted socially oriented

religion he or she may still practice. Thus, living a materialistic standardized restrictive life, the digital age westerner feels a dire need for transcending, for getting the feeling of going beyond, for finding novelty and otherness, but is only equipped to experience his standardized technological life. In this sense, MacCannell's idea of tourists in search of the other may be true to life. This is what gave rise to popular culture as a standardized system of remedies for the soul which provides exactly that novelty. In fact, it only provides people with a sensation of liberation or transcending, by means of forged experiences like tourism. If we were to imagine as an ocean the now diluted and fading spirituality that the founders of America left behind and which has repeatedly been revived through the Great awakenings of the past and if we pictured current materialism as dry land, then today's American is an amphibian on dry land whose sophisticated reason cannot accept the existence of the ocean, though their heart needs it badly; this is why they need to at least fantasize about that ocean or find ways of experiencing something similar.

With such goals by default, the experience of traveling is designed to provide a concentrated feeling of adventure, exploring novelty, while, as Boorstin suggests, keeping the tourist confined in the same way of life. For example, while traveling to Thailand, an American will encounter basically the same culture as that of home: his transport will be ensured by a large company that guarantees the same standards everywhere, the hotel will be part of a worldwide chain like Hilton, Sheraton, Four Points or under such franchise to guarantee the same rooms, beds, showers and service everywhere, irrespective of local traditions. The entertainment facilities will match the American style too, only adding a superficial local perfume. This scant liberated experience cannot be that of authentic Thai culture, since the tourist is not equipped for that learning experience and, even allowing a superficial experience of it, one risks getting bored, because what the tourist needs in order to reach satisfaction is a physically appealing, extremely concentrated experience, therefore by all means one carefully contrived in advance by the tour operator or entertainment business. MacCannell himself acknowledges that, surrendering to the tourist industry, the modern traveler is doomed to inauthenticity:

Tourists make brave sorties out from their hotels hoping, perhaps, for an authentic experience, but their paths can be traced in advance over such small increments of what is for them increasingly apparent authenticity proffered by tourist settings. (MacCannell 602)

Finally, the reality at the end of the journey is not only forged to match the actual reality in homeland America, but also the nature of excitement prescribed by popular culture at home. Thus, the tourist destination in Thailand will have to match the American fantasies of an exotic isolated piece of heaven popularized in the mass media. In other words, Thailand will have to match the exotic kitsch that American television says it has to be in order to become satisfactory.

There is also the commercially fortunate situation where a certain destination gains exotic significance after a successful Hollywood movie is shot there. In cases like Tunisia and *Star Wars* or New Zealand and *Lord of the Rings*, the association of fiction to otherwise intrinsically valuable landscapes and cultures is the spark that triggers tourists' interest. The destination itself does not need to be altered, but its culture is obliterated in order to make room for the much more simplistic and powerful impact of a popular culture story or fictional character. New Zealand now finds it in its interest to market itself as Middle Earth in order to falsely acquire uniqueness and appeal, while tourists find it rewarding to immerse themselves in a sensational fictional environment rather than the possibly complicated real environment of a certain country.

One other aspect of today's tourism that is relevant to the authenticity vs. simulation debate is its shrinking material challenge. Once, a trip involved careful and skilful planning, large expense, it was physically difficult, tiresome and posed serious threats to the traveler's health and even to their life. Now, modern technology provides transportation that is becoming more and more comfortable each day, as well as more reliable, safer and far cheaper. Thanks to that development, almost no effort is required from the prospective traveler: journeying across the continent and even across the world has become almost as commonplace as commuting to work everyday (though the latter might actually involve more risks and difficulties). Furthermore, the practical challenge of being in an unknown city or country has been obliterated too.

The emergence and development of travel agencies has fostered a tradition of surrendering to professionals all the worries related to organizing a trip, choosing routes and destinations, deciding how long to allow for enjoying each spot and when to take a break, all by simply buying a package holiday. Like any other action in his life as a mass man, all that this adventure and exploration comes down to is buying. As a result, the guided tour or package holiday falls within the requirements of today's materialistic American culture, which bids people to seek pleasure and material comfort above all. Subjecting oneself to needless pain and strife by taking control of one's journey is no longer thought to be good for building character and opening eyes to personal discovery as it used to be. It is simply regarded as ridiculous.

The sense of authentic reality for tourists is also affected by the car culture of the west. The vast network of highways and expressways across developed countries forms a world of its own which seems to be floating above the respective countries, perfectly insulated from the rich diversity of their regions. For practical reasons, highways are built over the duller possible route and they not only help, but actually force the long-distance traveler to avoid the cities in their path. Getting out of the highway to drive on small countryside roads or to go through a city is potentially so complicated, stressing and time-consuming, especially by unfair comparison to the tempting ease and comfort of the highway that no one will venture out of that colorless highway and most people will remorselessly choose to see practically nothing new or enriching during their journey. Just like an actual tourist destination, highways have all the blessings of the traveler's home civilization: there are gas stations, supermarkets and hypermarkets, bridge restaurants accessible to drivers in both directions and high-quality motels of standardized comfort which, together, make it practically unnecessary for the traveler to go into cities. That is why many people end up having their vacations mostly on the road, with little time reserved for the destination: the highway itself is the destination.

Like the contrived tourist destinations of package holidays, cars and highways make up a world that replaces reality because they suit the technological culture of the digital era. Driving and traveling by plane

annihilate two essential dimensions of reality – space and time – because contemporary life no longer takes place in that reality, but in that of technology, an artificial reality that functions according to its own laws. Distances are no longer relevant, since what was once daunting can now be covered with no effort, blurring notions of far and near. Time itself, understood as history, is irrelevant since society now rejects the past as a series of illusions or abuses and ignores the future, since materialism bids all individuals to just live the moment. While in other ages, people felt as if they were carrying on a millennial history towards a religion-driven eternity, today's people see no relevance of either the past or the future for them. Whereas people in the past were often judged according to their contribution to tradition and history, today's people have become addicted consumers of technology whose personal worth is often judged according to their involvement with state-of-the-art technology. Time has disintegrated and life today develops in the dimension of technology. As a consequence of civilization eliminating natural reality in postmodernity, worlds of fiction such as theme parks rule as the most popular tourist destinations to the detriment of genuine local communities. A new form of hyper-reality fills the American space, it erases, as Umberto Eco (1987) put it, "the distinction between historical reality and fantasy . . . it is the confusion between copy and original" (in Heitmann 52).

Works Cited

- Boorstin, Daniel. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- Cohen, Erik. "Authenticity and Commoditisation in Tourism." *Annals of Tourism Research* 15 (1988): 371-386.
- Heitmann, Sine. "Authenticity in Tourism." *Research Themes for Tourism*. Ed. by Peter Robinson, Sine Heitmann & Peter Dieke. CABI, Wallingford, 2011.
- MacCannell, Dean. "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings." *American Journal of Sociology* 79. 3 (1973): 589-603.
- U.N. World Tourism Organization. *World Tourism Highlights*. 2013 ed. <http://mkt.unwto.org/en/highlights>. 28 Nov. 2013.
- Uriely, Natan. "Theories of Modern and Postmodern Tourism." *Annals of Tourism Research* 24. 4 (1997): 982-984.

U.S. Travel Association. *U.S. Travel Answer Sheet*. March 2013.
<http://www.ustravel.org/news/press-kit/travel-facts-and-statistics>. 28 Nov.
2013.