The contemporary tourist: Is everything old new again

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ABSTRACT - This paper examines three authors who have been at the forefront of criticism regarding contemporary tourists. Boorstin's (1987) criticism focuses on both tourists' manner of travel and lack of motivation to have an authentic experience. MacCannell (1976) feels that while the contemporary tourist actually seeks authenticity, he is doomed to fail miserably. Most acerbic is Eco's (1983) contention that tourists are happiest with a specific type of inauthentic experience B the hyper-real tourist site. By examining three time periods of major travel activity (ancient Rome, the medieval pilgrim, and the Grand Tourist), this paper shows that the qualities that are loathed by these intellectuals are not new in travelers.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary tourist has been ridiculed for his manner of, motivation for, and achievement in travel. In this paper, I will examine three authors who have been at the forefront of criticism regarding modern tourists. Boorstin's (1987) criticism focuses on both manner of travel and lack of motivation to have an authentic experience. MacCannell (1976) feels that while the contemporary tourist actually seeks authenticity, he is doomed to fail miserably. Most acerbic is Eco's (1983) contention that tourists are happiest with a specific type of inauthentic experience B the hyper-real tourist site.

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The primary purpose of this paper is not to argue that these authors are inaccurate in their assessments of the modern tourist, but rather to show that the qualities that are loathed by these intellectuals are not new in travelers. Three time periods of major travel activity will be the focus: ancient Rome, the medieval pilgrim, and the Grand Tourist.

BOORSTIN: TRAVEL AS TRAVAIL

Boorstin (1987) decries the modern traveler's manner of travel. He points out that the word travel came from the word "travail," traveling meant engaging in an activity that was troublesome and laborious. In the past, he says, the traveler was active; traveling required much planning, time and money. Now the tourist expects all planning to be done for him. On a package tour, there is no risk involved. When on his own, the tourist has guidebooks to tell him what to see, with a star system so he knows what is most important.

Boorstin (1987) claims that, until the end of the nineteenth century, the traveler endured "the hardships of a virtually roadless landscape" (p. 83) with the risk of robbers and disease. So only the very serious actually traveled, and rarely met a fellow traveler from home. Furthermore, with modern forms of transportation, especially air, the traveler can not see the landscape, "[the experience of going there has been erased]" (p. 95). As a result, "when getting there is #fun, arriving there somehow seems not to be arriving any place" (p. 97). Boorstin (1987) paints a picture of the pre-modern traveler as a Marco Polo or Christopher Columbus. However, this is a distorted picture. Yes, there were such adventurers in the past; there are also such adventurers today (Costello 1998). However, travelers seeking such dangerous experiences have never been the norm.

The Ancient Roman Empire: Traveling for Pleasure

Ancient Romans were the first to engage in much discretionary travel. Due to the Pax Romanus, people could travel widely within the Empire. The sea was free of pirates (Balsdon 1969). Travel on roads was safe, at least during the day. At night, there was lodging available. The rich
Generally, servants cooked for the wealthy traveler. For others, restaurants were available. These varied from snack bars to more elaborate places where diners could recline while eating. The quality of food was low, although some restaurants prided themselves on the high quality of their wine, which was as or more important than the meal (Casson 1974).

The roads were good. "A carriage ride was frequently smoother in the second century than in the eighteenth" (Feiffer 1985, p. 9-10). Forms of transportation varied. Some rode on horseback or on a mule; others rode in carriages. The rich could travel by litter. "The most luxurious litter was covered and curtained, and some even had windows . . . with good bearers . . . reading and writing were easy; when you were tired, you could sleep" (Balden 1969, p. 214). The covered litter does not seem too different from today’s jet, where activities not relating to the passing landscape keep travelers’ minds occupied.

The Medieval Pilgrim: Trying to Minimize Discomfort

Tourism declined during the Dark Ages because the transportation infrastructure had fallen apart with the fall of Rome, except the main roads. There were dangers from bandits and barbarians (Rowling 1971). After 1000 CE, there was a period of relative peace and prosperity. New towns were built, with new, busy roads between them (Rowling 1971).

The motivation to go on a pilgrimage was supposedly religious. But there was also a social focus; medieval pilgrims were looking for adventure and a break from home (Fiacan 1977; Pearce 1982; Tudor-Craig 1996). Pilgrims often traveled by group in order to try to minimize dangers (Fiacan 1977). By the 13th and 14th centuries, the pilgrimage was a mass phenomenon. A tourism infrastructure had developed to serve them. Package tours were available from Venice to the Holy Land, including transportation, meals, lodging, and bribes (Loschburg 1979). Ships were inspected by the Venetian government, which had enacted many laws regarding minimum standards (Rowling 1971). The leading tour operator, Agostino Contarini, had travel agents as far away as the Low countries (Feiffer 1985). "Everybody profited from the pilgrims’ travel . . . It was all a well thought-out business not unlike modern tourism. Pilgrimages were organized just like the packaged tours of our day" (Loschburg 1979). The trips were not lacking danger, but the tours were meant to minimize these dangers. There was even a medieval system of credit vouchers, similar to traveler’s checks (Rowling 1971). There were guidebooks for the pilgrim; those for Rome informed the tourist of the latest indulgence for each site. This was today’s equivalence of the star rating system (Feiffer 1985).

The Grand Tour

The goal of the Grand Tour was supposedly to educate young rich Englishmen to become future leaders. While travel in the 17th century, after the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, conditions improved, and the Grand Tour really increased in popularity (Feiffer 1985). Contrary to Boorstin’s (1987) image of the old-time traveler as being isolated in foreign lands, the Grand Tourist was quite common. One estimate in the 1780s was that there were over 40,000 Englishmen on the Continent at one point in time. While this is probably an overestimate, the numbers were still high (Pimlott 1947). Travel did lessen and even stopped altogether in times of foreign conflict (Trease 1967).

By the mid-18th century there was a tourism infrastructure on the Continent, including transportation across the Channel, hotels, and coaches that catered to the English (Pimlott 1947; Trease 1967). Travelers tried to see as many sites as possible, following a standard route (Pimlott 1947). On these routes, roads and inns were good and reasonably safe (Pimlott 1947). A vetturino acted as a tour manager and guide. He arranged lodging and transportation and protected his clients from bandits. The Grand Tourists’ equivalent of traveler’s checks, “bills of exchange,” could not be used if stolen (Trease 1967).

The image of the Grand Tourist was, in his own time, certainly not that of the lofty adventurer. Rather, by the late 18th century Grand Tourists were looked upon sarcastically. They were referred to as members of the Macaroni Club (Italy being the “must see” destination for all Grand Tourists) (Pimlott 1947).

Travel as Traval: Conclusions

History indicates that danger and discomfort were not the goals of the vast majority of travelers throughout history. Most travelers tried to maximize their comfort. Travel declined or even ceased in times and places when dangers were high, and increased when risks were lower. This demand spurred the development of a tourist infrastructure, which further increased convenience and comfort; this in turn further increased demand.

INAUTHENTIC TOURIST EXPERIENCES

Boorstin (1987), MacCannell (1976) and Eco (1983) all criticize the inauthenticity of the modern tourist experience, but each has a different perspective. Boorstin (1987) feels that the tourist is too shallow to care that his experiences are inauthentic. MacCannell (1976) feels the tourist is a failed seeker of authenticity. Eco (1983) feels the tourist prefers inauthentic, specifically hyper-real, tourist sites. Hyper-realism, as a special type of inauthenticity, will be addressed in a separate section.

Boorstin (1987) feels that people used to travel to see the unfamiliar. This would change their thinking and ultimately change their society. Now tourists are not affected by their travels because they are insulated. “The tourist . . . seldom knows the authentic (to him often unintelligible) product of the foreign culture; he prefers his own provincial expectations” (p. 106). Hosts cater to these tourists, giving him what he expects, on schedule. “Everywhere, picturesque natives fashion paper-mache images of themselves. Yet all this earnest picturesqueness too often produces only a palid imitation of the technicolor motion picture which the tourist goes to verify” (p. 107). Boorstin’s (1987) perception of the traveler of the past was that of a literary sophisticate who journeyed to have “conversation with the great and the witty” (p. 80) and to see the wonders of the world. They were well read and could really appreciate the sights. They would see art and artifacts in the homes of the rich. This contrasts with the inauthentic setting for art and artifacts today, in modern museums.

MacCannell (1976) is perhaps more empathetic to the modern traveler, whom he compares to the pilgrim searching for authenticity. He says “sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived . . . and, at the same time, they are depredated for always failing to achieve these goals. The term #tourist’ is increasingly used as a derisive label for someone who seems content with his obviously inauthentic
they do in nature historical experiences, such interesting are those architectural styles and time having more must fabricate the tourist attraction. because of a simple lack of interest in and even disdain for from the tourist. It appears that the Grand Tourist's experience was often isolated from the locals, just as today's participant on a packaged tour. While the Grand Tourist did make sure he saw the important local sites, such as churches or ancient ruins, he was more interested in pleasure, relaxation, and regression, especially in some of the seaside resort areas (Friedlander 1907). They also traveled for novelty and education, e.g., to the Middle East and the ancient ruins in Greece (Casson 1974). Motivation for the medieval pilgrimage was not only religious. Other reasons included: escape; regression (including sexual escapades); and prestige (which they attained when they returned home, by displaying the pilgrim badges they had bought at various shrines) (Fiacuce 1977). While one motivation for the Grand Tourist was supposed to be education, even Boorstin (1987) says he also traveled to "sow his wild oats" (p. 81) (i.e., regression). Certainly the Macaroni Club was not perceived to be comprised of highly educated, literate young men. Boorstin (1987), who quotes Adam Smith in the Wealth of Nations (1776) as saying " . . . Our young people, it is aid, generally return home much improved by their travels . . . " ignores the rest of this quote. Smith says that, since these travelers leave at 17 or 18 years of age and come home in three or four years, "at that age it is very difficult not to improve a good deal in three or four years" (p. 81-82). Boorstin (1987) also says that in the 17th and 18th centuries, Europeans traveled for status. Thus it seems that motivations for travel have not changed much in the last two millennia; there have always been a variety of incentives. The concern about authenticity in tourism " . . . seems to be a particular occupational hazard among modern intellectuals" (Redfoot 1984, p. 306).

Authenticity of Tourist Destinations in the Past

Ancient Rome.

Although Roman travelers could see primitive people in Greece in rural areas, this was not of interest; most tourists only visited the cities (Friedlander 1907). While they did see the great works of art and ruins of Greece, they were not the literary experts that Boorstin (1987) describes. They were often inundated with guides in Greece. These guides were unappealing partly because they embellished fact with fiction. But visitors were also not interested in maximizing their knowledge of the sites they were seeing (Casson 1974). "The Roman saw in order to have seen, like modern Englishmen whose interest is mainly historical" (Casson 1974, p. 380). Travelers were also not interested in seeing real nature, except as a spiritual experience (Casson 1974). Rather, well landscaped gardens and parks were considered the ideal (Friedlander 1907).

The Medieval Pilgrim.

Similar to the ancient Romans, "[t]he pilgrim had no romantic or ethnographic interest in the #primitive or the #quaint" B the culturally prescribed response was simple revulsion" (Feffer 1985, p. 37). The natural beauty of rugged landscapes was unappreciated by the medieval pilgrim. Like the ancient Roman, Chaucer thought highly of well-landscaped gardens (Friedlander 1907) and was not interested in raw nature.

The Grand Tourist.

Feffer (1985) says that the Elizabethan traveler of the 17th century, the precursor to the Grand Tourist, really did look for authenticity. He was of the privileged class. If he had a proper introduction to a Duke, he could visit his palace. But his interest was not in fine art, but rather in more mundane curiosities, such as the Duke's private zoo. By the early 18th century, the goal was both study and pleasure. By the mid 18th century, the focus was the simply pleasure (Pimlott 1947). In 1760, the Grand Tourist was described by Samuel Johnson in the Idler:

"The greater part of travelers tell nothing because their method of travelling supplies them with nothing to be told. He that enters a town at night and surveys it in the morning, and then hastens away to another place, and guesses at the manners of the inhabitants by the entertainment which his inn afforded him, may please himself for a time with a hasty change of scenes . . . but let him be contented to please himself without endeavoring to disturb others" (quoted in Pimlott, p. 71-72)

It appears that the Grand Tourist's experience was often isolated from the locals, just as today's participant on a packaged tour. While the Grand Tourist did make sure he saw the important local sites, such as churches or ancient ruins, these sites are also available to today's tourist.

Authenticity in Tourism: Past and Present

Authentic experiences are not now, and have never been, the sole purpose of travel. Many travelers of old tried to insulate themselves from the "picturesque" local people. This was in part because they were more interested in pleasure, relaxation, and/or status, but also because of a simple lack of interest in and even disdain for "natives".

HYPER-REALITY

Eco (1983) offers the most hypercritical description of the contemporary tourist. He particularly loathes the specifically American postmodern tourist attraction. He describes this hyper-real tourist attraction, "where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake . . . " (p. 8), both with respect to culture and nature. He feels the American concept of prosperity, which is having more than is needed, results in artificial tourist attractions that try to be extravagant and better than the original.

Eco (1983) devotes many pages to describing the Hearst castle and condemns it for mixing original art with copies as well as mixing architectural styles and time periods. Eco (1983) also ridicules "cities that imitate a city . . . [s]ome are reasonably authentic . . . but more interesting are those born from nothing, out of pure imitative determination. They are #the real thing"(p. 40). When there is a real historical site, but nothing remains of the original, tourists go to simply look at a sign that describes what happened there. Imitation reenactments of historical experiences, such as pirates attacking a ship, are also absolute fakes, deplored by Eco.

Eco (1983) criticizes different types of hyper-real nature attractions. At Disneyland, spectators do not have to worry about crocodiles hiding as they do in nature or even zoos; perfectly faked animals are always available on demand. The result is an artificial setting that tourists experience."
perceive as being better than reality. Eco (1983) is also disturbed by the presence of real animals in tourist sites, especially when animals are part of an orchestrated performance. "In the humanization of animals is concealed one of the most clever resources of the Absolute Fake industry. . . . in the Marinellins . . . [the killer whales] perform a square dance and answer the trainers' questions not because they have acquired linguistic ability, but because they have been trained through conditioned reflexes, and we interpret the stimulus-response relationship as a relationship of meaning." (p. 52).

Hyper-Realism: Maximizing or Satisficing Utility?

Eco (1983) is certain that tourists prefer hyper-realism to real sites. However, tourists may simply be satisfying different types of utility: form, time and place. While seeing a real hippopotamus in a real setting might be preferred, it may simply not be possible, given time and place constraints. Also, it must be admitted, the tourist may not wish to suffer the travails of a trip to a remote locale. Seeing a real "wild west" city has a major time constraint; there are no time machines to take travelers back to the "real thing." So the tourist satisfies his experience, while perhaps actually learning something about the "real thing."

"Acceptable" Hyper-realism

Eco (1983) is willing to accept certain types of hyper-realism. While he deplores museums for taking objects out of their real context, the great museums of the world such as the Louvre are acceptable because outside the museum is real, historical Pari. If all the great works in the Louvre were shipped to California, they would no longer have value, according to Eco's opinion. Similarly, while the Hearst Castle and the Ringling estate are simply bad kitsch due to their mixture of architectural styles, similar mixtures in the Wall Street area in New York are "a jam session in stone . . . they illustrate the revivalist awareness of the period when they were built. . . . real cities redeem, in their context, even what is architeconitically ugly." (p. 28-29). Eco (1983) feels that the Ringling home, if transported to New York, might be acceptable because it would have the "correct" urban surrounding. Rather than praising the nonconformist visions of Hearst and Ringling, Eco (1983) disparages them for creating their own vision out of the context of urban areas where others have already ascribed to similar visions.

Hyper-Real Tourism in the Past

While Eco condemns the contemporary tourist for his love of hyper-realism, this attitude is itself rebutted by Lurrry (1990). Lurrry points out that ". . . social scientists may well be prone to a kind of nostalgia for a Golden Age when the mass of the population were supposedly not taken in by the new distorting cultural forms . . . . There has, of course, never been such a period" (p. 110).

One might argue that as long as the tourist thinks a fantasy-laden tourist site or experience is real, then this is simply inauthentic; if the tourist knows the site is fake, and still likes it, perhaps even more than seeing the real thing, then this is hyper-reality. However, this taxonomy condemns as merely inauthentic many tourist sites and experiences that are so fantastic, the traveler should have realized they were fake, and perhaps did so on at least some level of consciousness. Therefore, this section will also discuss these fantastic types of tourist sites, in order to show that they are not new in the history of travel.

Ancient Rome.

Travelers in the Empire were treated to many culture-based sites that could certainly be considered hyper-real. In Athens, ancient Romans visited graves of mythological figures, especially Odysseus. At Troy, guides pointed out places such as where Zeus carried off Ganymede (Feiffer 1985). In Sparta, tourists could see the giant egg of Leda the swan, from which Helen of Troy had emerged; the armor of Odysseus; the web of Penelope; and the remains of clay from which Prometheus made men (Friedlander 1967). If there were no ruins, the site would still be considered important as the alleged location of a historical or mythological event (Friedlander 1907). Because these sites were based on mythology, these tourist attractions surpassed hyper-real sites like reconstructed cities, which are at least based on real history. With respect to reenactments, Eco is correct that ancient Romans would never have relished fake entertainment such as a performance of actors playing pirates who are attacking a ship. Why look at a fake, when they could see real people dying, albeit in a fake setting? Mock sea battles were performed, either on a real lake (Balsdon 1969) or in a flooded arena, complete with sea creatures (Feiffer 1985).

Hyper-real entertainment dealing with nature was also available. One type of public entertainment consisted of bringing hunters from Africa to demonstrate their real animal-hunting abilities. The arena was made to look like the natural landscape, with trees and shrubs planted temporarily. Rocks and cascading water were also added (Balsdon 1969).

Romans also went see performances of trained animals. Monkeys were dressed as soldiers and rode on goats or in a chariot pulled by goats. Elephants were particularly popular. One show consisted of elephants, dressed for dinner, who entered the arena and proceeded to recline, each at his own place setting. There they dined, delicately eating and drinking their meal. Elephants also performed tightrope walking (Balsdon 1969).

The Medieval Pilgrim.

Relics offered pilgrims many opportunities for hyper-real experiences. When the skeletons of saints were kept whole, there was little opportunity for fraud. But when people started dismantling them (which was forbidden but occurred anyway), fraud began to proliferate. "Since missionaries had created a demand among their converts the supply of relics B real and fake B increased to meet that demand" (Finucane 1977, p. 30). People paid a small fee to be able to bow in front of the relic. Some relics were truly fantastic, for example, "Christ's breath in a bottle, his tears or blood, Mary's milk, even the tip of Lucifer's tail" (Finucane 1977, p. 31).

Souvenirs were also popular, specifically the badges that pilgrims collected at each shrine to show they had been there. At Compostela, the badge consisted of St. James' emblem, the cockleshell. Originally, the pilgrim had to go to the beach to find his own cockleshell. By the beginning of the twelfth century, pilgrims could buy the shell in the church square. By the end of the twelfth century, he could buy a small shell-shaped badge made of lead (Feiffer 1985). Other souvenirs were more fantastic. At Canterbury, in Chaucer' time, pilgrims could buy ampuilae reputedly containing miraculous water that had been diluted with the blood of the martyr St. Thomas (Rowling 1971; Tutor-Craig 1976).

The Grand Tourist.

It must be admitted that the Grand Tourist did not have many hyper-real adventures. Feiffer (1985) does give an example of an experience of some Elizabethan travelers, who were the earliest Grand Tourists. If they were fortunate enough to visit the estate of Pratolino, they could see statues that moved, powered by water.

Hyper-real Tourist Attractions: Past and Present

The fantastic has long fascinated people. One could argue that some of the public entertainment available in ancient Rome offered perhaps the most hyper-real experiences of all time. The more subdued experiences of medieval pilgrims, however, can also qualify as offering a level of inauthenticity that attains the level of hyper-reality. The difference in the two time periods reflects the interests of the travelers. While public entertainment in Rome delved into the depths of the dark side of humanity, the hyper-real experiences of the medieval pilgrim were spiritual.
Compared with these extremes, many of today's hyper-real tourist attractions seem rather tame.

THE CONTEMPORARY TOURIST: IS EVERYTHING OLD NEW AGAIN?

This paper has shown that while several well-known intellectuals have severely criticized contemporary tourists, these criticisms can be applied to travelers of past eras. Throughout history, people have tried to minimize discomfort and danger on their travels. Travelers did not always seek, or experience, authenticity. There have always been many motivations for travel. Some travelers experienced local culture but without appreciation, and even with vilification. Some travelers encountered what we would consider now to be hyper-real experiences. It appears that the contemporary tourist is not so much a new type of animal, but rather a decision-maker with a new array of options. One might wonder whether travelers of old would envy these options, and wish to book a package tour to Disney World.

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Look Up - The superbly imagined and restored painted decoration in the Great Hall, Exhibition Building, Carlton Gardens Melbourne. Great design that pleases the eye and connects with the soul in any age is worthy of our admiration and attention. The Melbourne Antiques Fair recently held in the only surviving â€œGreat Hallâ€™, which once housed a 19th century international exhibition, was a great success for both the dealers involved, who were doing a brisk trade, and the public who turned out in droves. Set in ceremonial gardens, The Royal Exhibition Building was the largest in Melbourne in 1880 w