

Tourist Bubble Everywhere

TOURISM, DIFFERENCE, AND THE TOURISTIFICATION OF THE EVERYDAY

Michael Zinganel

A Critique of Tourism Criticism

In its view towards the tourism practices of the majority of the population, the culture industry of the German-speaking world has long been dominated by Hans Magnus Enzensberger's seminal thesis that tourism is nothing more than an escape from the seemingly alienated living conditions of the industrialized cities. Instead of attempting to change everyday living conditions for the better, residents of the cities use their leisure time to escape political responsibility as quickly as possible and to recover from the strain of urban life. (Enzensberger, 1958)

In contrast to Enzensberger, the educated classes fancied themselves to be exempt from this criticism, claiming to travel differently or, in any event, 'better' than the uncritical, robotic masses, bringing home more from their trips than just snapshots and souvenirs, but rather cultural learning and commensurate gains in insight for the good of the foreign country and, most importantly, their own culture.

Indeed, the introduction of package holidays, in which know-how, marketing, transport, and services are economically and expediently rationalized for people with limited time and financial resources, provided the elite with a perfect and lasting symbol of the typical holidays of the lower classes—a form they strongly frowned upon.¹

When Enzensberger's essay was first published in 1958, the magnitude of today's mass tourism was inconceivable. Looking at the history of tourism reveals that, for quite some time, the urban elite kept to themselves in their escape attempts, initially preferring destinations such as 'spas,' then later lakes, beaches, and mountains. In particular, they fancied the supposed authenticity of simple, rural life and the aesthetic sensations of sublime nature to be a type of counter-world to the civilized, yet alienated, life in the city. In contrast, Thomas Cook's first charter trip in 1841 took travellers on a tour of cities,² visiting not only centers with old humanistic roots, relics of his travellers' own bygone high culture, but also sites that posed a challenge to contemporary society;

Cook's first tour of Europe in 1855 led travellers to the iniquitous capital of the nineteenth century, Paris. One of the main attractions was the morgue, in which anonymous corpses were put on display to be identified by the public.

Image Production or Performance

Image-oriented disciplines have attempted to suggest that the traveller's touristic experience consists almost exclusively in the consumption of signs and images, or even in the comparison between images experienced *in situ* with those of the professional tourism industry. These disciplines would also have us believe that tourists are passive—entirely at the mercy of the image producers' guidance (Urry, 1990). Not only brochures and catalogs, but also literature, films, art works, and, of course, the photographs and souvenirs of the travellers themselves participate in the production of images. Showing the latter as an indicator of one's own success produces additional desire in one's circle of acquaintances. The German sociologist Karlheinz Wöhler deems this cycle of central importance in the construction of new attractions; according to him, *all* attractions could, theoretically, be marketed as tourist attractions as long as significant images of the destination are produced and the cycle discussed above is set in motion (Wöhler, 1997).

Sociologists stress that tourists consistently live and move about within one or more protective bubbles created specifically for them during their trips (Urry). These bubbles filter their gaze and their social contacts, shielding them from 'dangers,' but also from opportunities for cultural exchange with supposedly authentic local cultures. After their charter flights, the travellers transfer to shuttle busses to self-contained hotel complexes, private beaches, touristified sightseeing- and consumer zones, etc. All of these socio-spatial zones are designed for undisturbed consumerism. The extraordinary experience and the alleged authenticity sought are performed or entirely staged by professional service industry workers in manageable, consumable doses. The travellers are integrated into the temporary and non-committal circle of a substitute family—the travel group—which, in turn, is caringly supervised by trained substitute parents (e.g., tour guides, hotel staff) (Urry).

Performance theories, on the other hand, stress that touristic production is always a co-production of all parties involved. On the part of the travellers, this begins before their departure, in that they have already set their sights on the audience for the experiences that will be brought back. One's own scripts are geared toward bringing back successful indicators that one has experienced the extraordinary. Accordingly, of central importance for the conception of the trip, for the selection of everything from photo ops to souvenirs, is the question of the audience for which the post-vacation slide show will be staged.

What holds true for all target groups is that a minimum of opportunistic behaviour is necessary in order to ensure one's belonging to a group. A certain amount of readiness to make distinctions is sensible if one wants to distinguish oneself from the masses of travellers—or even merely from the

travel habits of one's own parents. In many milieus it is thus indispensable to take the road less travelled and to introduce new images into circulation. In this way, every form of holiday subculture develops its own 'hunter jargon' with whose help nearly all experiences can be dramatized to extraordinary sensations: good experiences become particularly good, bad become catastrophic, etc. In addition, the circulation of images is nowhere near as hermetically sealed as system-theory researchers of tourism would have us believe. To be sure, from a historical perspective, the production of desire generally originated within the elite in the city centres and was projected onto the travel destinations in peripheral locations. Yet, in reality, local residents or service workers at those locations are able to disturb, deny, or undermine the consumption of the expected images, designing their own images and offering them up for consumption. Should these counter-images meet with acceptance, they, too, will be put in circulation. This applies, for example, to deviant youth cultures, whose improvised clubs—like other insider tips—are not immune to being overrun with masses, even one or two seasons after opening, due to the alleged 'authenticity' to be found there.

On the Prehistory of Tourism

In the time before tourism, the world was still manageable: travellers' regions of origin and destination were clearly discernible, and the journeys were long, difficult, and sometimes dangerous. Missionaries, colonizers, and salesmen travelled for work, and pilgrims, noble knights, and, later, young aristocrats and sons of the bourgeoisie were called to take their Grand Tour. Even to this day, the Grand Tour serves as a model for the middle-class educational trip.

Such trips were imbued with a function similar to rites of passage,³ limited as they were to the critical stage of life in which a young man becomes an adult. It made sense to send young men as far away from home as possible so that they could relieve their aggression potential, balance their intellect and hormone levels, and become versed in the roots of our religion and civilization, in order to later fulfill their role as caretaker of hearth and home in a more urbane manner.

Another rule governing the European middle classes' chosen form of holiday travel is its cyclical nature: travel happened and continues to happen in cycles. Each year, thousands of middle-class families commenced and continue to commence their well deserved vacation in coordination with work and school holidays. Hardly anyone can wait a day longer than absolutely necessary to flee the everyday—in summer, to the sea or ocean, in winter to the mountains. Even today, the laws of holiday—with its escape from the everyday—deviate from those of the home.

This deviation applies not only to the legal state of exception in vacation camps, but also speaks to a conspicuous need to regress, be it in reference to one's own stage of life or historical societal epochs (Henning, 1997/Spode, 1996). The fact that these epochs are in the past or in a state of passing is of primary importance, for it means that they can be romanticized as being more authentic than one's current situation.

Thus, when grown men build sand castles on the beach or exhibit adolescent drinking and courtship behaviour in bars, they are regressing in terms of their own stage of life. Similarly, when travellers visit historical excavation sites, memorials, or industrial complexes, they are regressing historically. Yet it is really one's own body that can promise the truly authentic experience—in the form of contemplative self-absorption (relaxation and recreation) or in the form of excess (extreme sports, parties, gluttony, and sex).

Preconditions of Mass Tourism

A series of preconditions were necessary for the development of mass tourism: legally binding minimum wages, the right to holiday and leisure time, and statutory limits on working hours finally allowed the democratization of travel to follow the democratization of desire through mass media, albeit with due delay. Technological developments tapped into ever newer destinations for elite tourism, and later for mass tourism. The development of the railroad represented the first radical acceleration of a pace of travel that had remained nearly constant for millennia.

On a smaller scale, bus tourism provided added flexibility in the choice of travel destination. However, it was only when the number of train passengers in the 1960s was eclipsed by the number of travellers with a private automobile—and then in the 1980s by airplane passengers—that the geographic limits constraining holiday travel were truly broken.⁴ This development, however, did not only produce winners; thanks to railway tunnels and motorways, travellers suddenly bypassed once attractive destinations or flew over them with charter planes; and they discovered destinations with more favourable climates, where services could be better streamlined, or where wages were so low that the middle-class could afford the services despite the greater distance.

Models of Experiencing Difference

The promise of experiencing difference is key to the success behind the tourism-related production of desire. As a rule, difference is geographic: there is something to see, to smell, and to do that does not exist in the same form or intensity back home—or something that the respite from the everyday makes special. And yet the difference always has a social component. After all, for many people holidays represent a switch between serving and being served—a temporally limited reversal in the social hierarchy.

It is self-evident that the collision of expectations between tourists, service workers, and locals can not always run smoothly; service workers must support the former's need for care and recreation, and locals, willingly or not, become extras in this experience of difference. In this triangle, which has been described by sociologists as a 'tourist event space' (Bachleitner/Weichbold, 2000), those involved have adapted successive protective mechanisms with which to guard against disappointment and

painful experiences: the travellers themselves leave their culture of origin for a vacation culture, and the locals in the culture of the destination region pass over into a service culture (Thiem, 2001). And this cultural transfer is usually structured by a stage-like setting.

As early as the 1950s, Erving Goffman introduced the metaphor of the stage as a socio-spatial model of interpersonal interaction, a metaphor that juxtaposes the proscenium, the place of interaction, with a protected backstage area. Here, though, tourism theory assumed for a long time that tourists played the part of the thankful audience in a staging by professional local actors, who in turn hid their real life backstage. Later, this model was expanded to a multilayered continuum of stages and back stages, and the different levels of this stage landscape were equated with various degrees of authenticity: from superficial stagings to the 'true' authentic anthropospheres of the locals. And just as tourists dare venture behind the scenes in varying depths, so, too, do the locals and service workers move among the backstage landscapes, albeit not all with the same freedom of movement.

Not all tourists, however, rely on the construction of theatrical landscapes: an animating atmosphere often results from the heightened will to experiment within the non-quotidian nature of vacation, encouraging travellers to construct, in addition to the play produced on previously existing stages, arbitrarily asymmetrical stages for self-dramatization. Thus, in contrast to the passive consumption of directed theatre, more pleasurable tactics are enabled that displace the stage and cause a permanent rotation between the perspectives of the actors and audience.

Dislimitation of the Theory

The problematic triangle among tourists, service providers, and locals that spans the tourist event space is, however, in no way limited to the actual vacation spot. Many service workers in tourism are migrant workers who travel mostly from structurally weak regions with significantly lower wages for the purpose of their seasonal employment and—like the tourists—transgress borders of nations, national alliances, or even continents.

In this way, there exist streams of migrant workers and tourism that flow not only in opposite directions, but also parallel; they run in opposite directions when seasonal workers from the South meet tourists from the North; and parallel when guest workers and tourists from northern Europe vacation in the South at the same time in the summer; or at the beginning of winter, when seasonal workers from eastern Germany arrive at their jobs in the ski areas of the Tyrolean Alps only days before the first German tourists (Zinganel, 2006). If we expand this simple model of the tourist event space to include the travel experiences of all those involved, it appears significantly more complex than a single triangle: in their home towns, travellers can also become the locals who are being visited, or even serve other travellers as service workers. Locals and service workers also travel and make use of services on their trips, confronting the locals there with their own culture of origin.

Thus, what started as a locally grounded triangle becomes a sheer infinite connection of triangles spanning a large area of the globe, like a fragment of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome. The direction of movement between regions changes according to the configuration of people involved. The images of the production of desire, the staging and its stages interact in both directions. That which is an everyday experience for some is a coveted experience of difference for others—and yet for others merely a prop in a play. The stage landscapes are not an impermeable stage curtain, but rather moving, foldable, porous, and permeable structures that span a dislimited space of tourism.

Diffusion of Difference in Post-Fordism

Due to the development of tourism, formerly rural destinations in the Alps or along coastlines have been built up to seasonally concentrated agglomerations with enormous infrastructures. In addition, centers of tourism distinguish themselves through the fact that people want to find, live, and negotiate cultural differences *in situ*. Even though this cultural transfer is meant to be filtered through rituals, stage landscapes, or even through the membrane of the tourist bubble, a modest exchange between travellers and locals can counteract self-isolation.

The experiences gained through tourism can also have positive effects on the development of the people involved. For the French social theoretician Henry Lefebvre, density of development is not the criterion for a society's level of 'urbanization'—indeed as he saw it, the developed cities were no longer 'urbanized'—but rather the willingness to recognize differences, to face them and negotiate them. While, according to this, travel destinations become increasingly 'urbanized' due to tourism, the 'developed' regions of origin, long imagined to be homogenous, are increasingly segregated, frayed, and perforated—not only with regard to their infrastructure but also their social coherence.⁵

It is not only tourists and service workers who have become more mobile, but also the industrial production sector. Communications technologies and the expansion of transportation have accelerated the worldwide exchange of goods, capital, and ideas and in the process the accompanying successive displacement of production-oriented processes from traditional industrial zones in the United States and Western Europe to countries with low wages on the southern peripheries, in Eastern Europe and Asia. While new markets are arising there and the new elite is gaining access to a form of prosperity we know well, the old markets are falling under pressure to reposition themselves as competitive business locations in the service sector and in research and development.

For this reason, tourism is regarded worldwide as a market of hope, as a substitute for other sources of income that have fallen away with deindustrialization—or as a chance to participate in the purchasing power of wealthy cultures. Indeed city trips are among the most stable segments of the tourism industry today. They also have a function that far exceeds economic gains: the image, the symbolic capital that can be generated with city tourism is supposed to contribute to attracting business or a highly mobile, educated, and comparatively wealthy elite to settle in the cities or spend a

part of their education or career there. Here, cultural events and art institutions play an important role, as do, in particular, the visible presence and the lifestyle of art-proximate milieus and subcultures that stimulate the creative productivity of workers in the fields of research and development. However, if cities lie far from airports or beyond globally connected sightseeing routes, they run the risk of fully disappearing from view. Despite their past importance or beauty, many places have reached a stage of functional irrelevance.

With this heightened competition with other destinations, it is understandable that once locationspecific attractions are being imported into the metropolises and agglomerations of urban sprawl: theme parks, temporary artificial sand beaches, climbing walls, ski halls, temporary ski or snowboarding events, etc. Tourism-related structures and attractions today span all landscapes. If the primary function of vacation under Fordism was recovery from work, in post-Fordism it is supplemented by other needs. Indeed, individuals today are less concerned with fleeing ‘alienation’ and more interested in finding and probing their identities—not merely one single identity per individual, but rather different identities that can be tested in numerous cycles of vacation, which, in turn, are becoming shorter and shorter and can even take place in one’s own city.

The Role of Art

Before the age of tourism artists, painters, and writers fuelled the production of desire with their images and stories, thus opening up new travel destinations for the wealthy and educated classes, including natural spaces or dangerous areas such as the ‘ocean’ or the ‘mountains.’ However, it was not long before the artists began to feel their privilege of ‘authentic’ experience threatened by masses of tourists. In a paradoxical flight reflex, the artists avoided exactly those people that tried to follow their attractive images.

Driven by this reflex and their desperate search for ‘authenticity,’ artists developed into regular ‘space pioneers’—not only in terms of mobility in their own city, but also with regard to their travel destinations. Searching for affordable spaces to work and live in, they repeatedly opened up new marginalized neighbourhoods that soon developed into insider tips for the wealthy creative milieus that had put the appreciation of such neighbourhoods in motion. As a result, groups with low purchasing power, and often the pioneers themselves, were successively displaced by rising rents and replaced by financially strong groups.

The preferred travel destinations today are no longer the cradles of Western culture, the aesthetic sensations of sublime nature, or the alleged authenticity of pre-modern cultures in touch with their environment. The search for the non-quotidian and for authenticity is leading artists increasingly to the darker sides of our society—to the places of marginalized groups on the periphery. But even here they meet other travellers who find the dark edges just as attractive as do the artists themselves, for what is perceived to be unusual and authentic is always dependent on the status and bearing of those involved.

Thus, it can be observed that students of architecture, sociology, and ethnology—like artists, typically members of the middle class—increasingly search out suburban mass housing projects during their city trips in order to stroll through them, sometimes with ironic distance, sometimes with open admiration (Tue Halgreen, 2004). While some of these travellers may criticize the inhumane circumstances and the buildings as proof of the tragic development of the social and cultural history of modernity, as unhappy consequences of the unconditional belief in progress—others make a primarily aesthetic argument: the tenement blocks are fascinating because of their enormous dimensions that recall the visionary dreams of equality. Their brutal appearance merely mirrors a brutal planning process, the more brutal the better. They serve the students as an object of a nostalgic longing for a past era in which society still believed in big theories, planned for the long-term, and had the courage to accomplish these goals.

Many students mentioned in conversation the tension and emotional shock of roaming among the old, the unemployed, and idle youth—often from immigrant families—to whom they attributed a direct, physically oriented form of interaction, an ‘authentic’ form of rawness, belligerence, and accordingly heightened sex appeal.

Large parts of the culture industry (including the author) are characterized by the tendency to search for the remainders of authenticity—of which our modern enlightenment or postmodern serenity has dispossessed us—in the difficult working and living conditions of disadvantaged groups. In their own patterns of thinking, they attempt to assimilate themselves into those who have a much harder fight for existence, or to authenticate their artistic or scholarly work by positioning themselves in the margins. With this, however, the artistic milieu falls back on tried-and-true traditions: beginning no later than the urban novels of the 1830s and with the rise of urban sociology in the 1920s, utopian potential was ascribed to outsiders, the Other, and the sharp eye of the ‘excluded.’

In extreme cases ghettos, slums, and camps are now being discovered as new travel destinations.

Ethnographically motivated, these trips resemble ‘dark tourism,’ a term coined by British writers—in other words, trips that search for and find ultimate authenticity at the site of catastrophe, massacres, or impending or actual death (Foley/Lennon). When strong texts, striking metaphors, and attractive images emerge from these journeys, then these works serve as a guidebook that, in turn, encourages other artists to embark upon research trips to the margins of our society and to introduce their aesthetic trophies into the discussion on the art industry.

If we do not doubt the mechanisms behind the production of desire in the field of tourism, then they should—I propose—function analogously in the field of the art industry; in the art industry, as well, there exists a network of tour guides, informants, and agencies. Within this field, too, there are dominant images and counter-images, travelled paths and small deviations. An ‘artist’s gaze’—the typical critical gaze of the artist—stands directly opposed to the typical ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry). And while some drift on one or more ‘tourist bubbles,’ the others do so in an ‘artist bubble.’

Escape, it would seem, is futile. Thus, the true members of the avant-garde in the art industry visit the destinations of mass tourism for their research, which they problematize as ‘camps,’ ‘heterotopias,’ ‘third spaces,’ ‘non-places’ etc.—or they go one step further and, as theory-schooled meta-tourists (Köck 2004), they analyze with enthusiasm the set design and staging of these places, much like theatre or performance critics.

Package holidays appear to be necessarily destined to failure without exception, at least as their critics would have us believe. According to the rules of Freud’s pleasure principle, only the first days of a holiday like this can be exciting; afterwards, with each passing day, the excitement of more new attractions dwindles. According to Freud, extreme pleasure can only occur episodically, and frustration, boredom, or melancholy immediately follow a surge of emotions (Schwarzer, 2005, 31). The fact that this criticism has not been applied to all forms of travel is likely a result of a need for distinction.

Footnotes

1 On July 5, 1841, Thomas Cook organized a railroad trip from Leicester to the nearby city of Loughborough for 570 activists from the abstinence movement, all for the special price of one shilling per person. Excursions to Liverpool (1845), Scotland (1846), and to the *World Expo* in London (1851) followed.

2 Pre-modern societies used rites of passage to mitigate the destructive power of disturbances to the order of social life caused by spatial, temporal and social transitions (van Gennep); during these rituals, social hierarchy, authority, and obedience in the community were temporarily reversed. While some claim that this reversal can have the effect of allowing social differentiations to emerge more pronounced than they had been previously (Turner), others ascribe a certain utopian, or at least productive, potential for societal change to this liminal state (de Certeau).

3 To put the numbers in perspective, it should be mentioned that fifty per cent of all Germans still go on holiday in Germany, and that long-distance trips account for no more than five per cent of holiday travel. The remaining forty-five per cent are trips offered by discount airlines to nearby destinations around the Mediterranean.

4 The French architect and urban planner George Candilis propagated the enormous vacation resorts that he conceived in the 1960s as laboratories of modernity in which subjects could regain a lost sense of community beyond the realm of the everyday (Avermaete, 2005).

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