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Destination Services:
Tourist media and networked places

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Abstract Tourism exists in the interplay between places and stories. In making sense of travel, we are also making sense of ourselves and the world around us. Indeed, the global tourist industry produces places as "destinations" through stories and souvenirs. The audience for tourism stories has changed greatly with changes in technologies of communication and representation, with one of the most radical changes the introduction of networked media. With the rise of web-based services, tourist experiences have acquired a digital penumbra of content available in ever more formats and locations. This paper examines these technological changes, and the potential consequences for digital storytelling, travel, and the production of destinations.

1 Introduction

From Homer's *Odyssey* to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* to the Travel Channel, the enduring prevalence and popularity of travel stories indicate how much we value leaving home – and talking about it. As any child who has ever forced out a response to that classic question, "And what did *you* do on your summer vacation?" knows, much of conversation lies in producing comprehensible explanations of where we went, what we did, and how we returned improved (or at least unscathed). And we don't just tell those stories out loud. Travel stories include media like maps, diaries, scrapbooks – and now websites, text messages, and cameraphone snapshots. To borrow a phrase from sociologist John Urry, head of the Center for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University, the "tourist gaze" – the activity of viewing and photographing places, people, and things – creates the tourist experience. Tourist stories perpetuate tourism – and tourism perpetuates the telling of stories. Mediated experiences change the actions, but not the original impulse.

Yet the technologies and social opportunities for tourist storytelling have changed dramatically since tourism's beginnings in the 14th century. From 19th century technologies of mass media reproduction to networked media today, tourist stories have become cheaper, swifter, more easily produced and more broadly distributed than ever before. As media produced through "the tourist gaze" saturate the developed world, physical tourist spaces are increasingly translated to online experiences. How will these online experiences affect tourism, and what new kinds of mediated tourist experiences can we create by taking tourism seriously?

2 Self-fashioning: defining "what it means to live a life"

Tourism has been called "democratized travel" – which today means genuinely popular movement around the world. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2006), 2005 saw the greatest number of international tourists in recorded history: 800 million people crossed borders for fun in the "largest ever movement of people across national borders" (Urry 2001) Along with shopping, sport, and sex, travel appears to be one of the great global pastimes of all time.

But why do people travel for fun? In his now classic essay on tourism, Urry condenses a long list of motivations to one word: "co-presence" (Urry 2001). People travel to have experiences they cannot have any other way. If an experience could be replicated at home, people would not travel for it. Tourism as we have traditionally understood it is inextricably entwined with physicality. Co-presence has various dimensions: e.g., seeing a landscape or performance, participating in a mass event, performing physical feats. And co-presence is a phenomenon that lingers because, whether consciously or not, we embody our experiences in memories, and bring them home with us.

One of the most powerful themes in the study of tourism has been the relationship of tourism to human self-understanding. In his 1757 *Instruction to Travellers*, the

economist and social thinker Josiah Tucker offered these rationales for why people travel:

> First, to make curious collections as natural philosophers,
> virtuosos, or antiquarians. Secondly, to improve in painting,
> statuary, architecture and music. Thirdly, to obtain the
> reputation of being men of virtue, and of elegant taste. Fourthly,
> to acquire foreign airs, and adorn their dear persons with fine
> clothes and new fashions, and their conversation with new
> phrases. Or, fifthly, to rub off local prejudices (which is indeed
> the most commendable motive, though not the most prevailing)
> and to acquire that enlarged and impartial view of men and
> things, which no single country can afford. (Tucker 1757)

Tucker's reasons echo a contemporary view of travel as aesthetic performance. As an "art of living," travel is a type of "self-fashioning" – of remaking oneself and one's relationship to the social world by choosing destinations that illustrate self-images and values (Adler 1989). Part of self-fashioning, as Tucker points out, is internal: to improve oneself and to measure one's beliefs against foreign systems. But a greater part (as he also acknowledges) is deeply social: the acquiring of social capital through reputation, elegant clothes, and foreign behaviors. "Fashioning" thus suggests two ideas: self-creation, and also making oneself stylish.

The allure of the foreign forms the basis for another controversial, but powerful, account of tourism's appeal. Tourism has also been viewed as a type of "sacred journey" – a contemporary version of the traditional religious pilgrimage in which personal growth occurs through "rites of passage" along the way (Graburn 1977). Travelers leave their homes looking for authenticity: genuine, compelling experiences that presumably cannot be found in mundane life (MacCannell 1977, as quoted in Crang 2005). Whether sunbathing in Maui or hiking through Nepal, tourist travel can be "a time of great expectations and disappointments, and a way to define what it means to live a life." (Lowry 1994) Many tourist trips can even be described as pilgrimages or "sacred journeys" to culturally meaningful sites, such as Mecca, Washington D.C., or Disneyland (Graburn 1977). These sites become and remain meaningful in part because of tourist stories: representations of place that the interaction between tourist industries, tourists, and inhabitants construct. In leaving home, we affirm what we value most, and perform actions to realize those values in ourselves. Hence the historical irony of travelogues: we tell a story about Oz in order to celebrate Kansas.

3   Stories and souvenirs: imaging the unfamiliar

> One of the main aims of any travel narrative is…to supply a mental
> framework and a set of practical directions for confronting the
> unknown and unfamiliar. (Hunt 1993)

Travel stories are interpretive mechanisms for making sense of unfamiliar situations not just after, but also before and during a new experience. As Tucker reminds us, the

taking, buying, and making of souvenirs (literally, "memories") is not so much an effect of tourism but a cause. The tourist "producing and consuming" of place (Urry 2003) packages seemingly authentic landscapes, people, and situations into images that the traveler can take home. In a word: storytelling.

All tourist stories exist through technologies of communication, representation, and mobility and the cultural infrastructure that supports them. Technologies of mobility transport tourists and supplies around; technologies of representation document experiences; technologies of communication make those records shareable. In the past, tourist stories were born from multiple technologies acting in concert: drives along the scenic route, official Kodak moments in Disneyland, the Eiffel Tower postcard bought at a museum gift shop, or the slideshow of the cruise to the Bahamas. Today, tourist stories are also born from the cameraphone image saved to Flickr, email at an Internet kiosk, a YouTube video uploaded at a hotel. Indeed, one aim of the tourism industry is to encourage and circulate the media and technologies that make tourism desirable and that define certain places and events as "destinations" (Urry 2003). That is, travel does not simply prompt the individuals to tell stories. Instead, tourist stories emerge from a larger economy of tourism in which personal accounts are only one component.

3.1 The new networked tourist

Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Battuta left Morocco for Mecca in the early 14th century. After completing the religious obligation of the *hajj,* he kept going: more than 73,000 miles covered in his lifelong wandering through the Islamic world (Botman 1988). Six hundred years later, his account, titled "A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling," (Bullis 2000) is the sole portrait historians now have of the great African kingdoms of the day. Ibn Battuta, sometimes called the world's first tourist, kept no diaries and sent no postcards. Without the intervention of the Sultan of Morocco, he might have died with his story untold.

Ibn Battuta's story emphasizes how much we take for granted about how tourism occurs and how it comes to be remembered. From camel to automobile, technologies of mobility create the possibility of brief, predictable vacations instead of Ibn Battuta's decades of danger. Technologies of representation enable mass reproduction and distribution, instead of the few copies made of Ibn Battuta's manuscript. Technologies of communication create near simultaneity in experience and reporting. By the time Tucker wrote his Instructions to Travellers the invention of the printing press had brought mass reproduction to text and a reading public had appeared to read his stories. Since the 18th century, the infrastructures of the travelogue have brought a new flood of tourist storytelling. The camera, especially, enabled mass reproduction of images of foreign places, selling newspapers and filling Victorian photograph albums.

The newest change in the travelogues is the introduction of networked text and images (i.e. Flickr and blogs). These rely on the same storytelling impulses that drive the slideshow, the photo album, and the travel diary. Some cameras, such as those in mobile phones, exist to facilitate image sharing over networks. Other "ordinary"

digital cameras1 take photographs that can be shared if transferred to a networked-accessible device.

This change does not merely lie in the move to the digital. Keeping digital photographs on a CD-ROM or a hard drive simply extends existing social photography practices. It is a digital analogue to scrapbooks or photo albums, albeit with much greater storage and searching capacity. But when they are publicly accessible on networks, photographs as digital objects have the potential for more immediate, cheaper, widespread sharing and repurposing, limited only by technological capacities of networks and interfaces. They become invulnerable to the tragedy of the commons, inexhaustibly shareable (aside from the new economics of intellectual property and bandwidth).

Tourist photostreams (on Flickr, or specialized travel narrative services such as Travelpod[2]) compress vast swathes of geographic spaces into the space of a single webpage, creating new dimensions of tourism. Flickr users can vicariously experience "life in other countries" through viewing pools of frequently updated images from far away[3]. Alternately, they may see themselves as representing their own country on Flickr.

4   New experiences of time and place

4.1 Posting in the moment

Once upon a time, paper letters only reached a limited number of readers after days or weeks in transit. But networked communications give stories *simultaneity*: the impression (if not the reality) that a story is being told *as it happens.* This simultaneity can promote dialogue: blogs, photostreams, and text messages allow an audience to respond in real time to events far away. It is, in effect, a compression of physical distance. Simultaneity can also influence travel decisions. Travelpod, a tourist journaling website, facilitates connections – and potential rendez-vous – between users whose blog posts suggest that they are nearby.

4.2 Access to group experience

What differentiates these networked practices from letters and even telephone calls is the aggregation of shared experiences. Publicly accessible personal travelogues mean that accounts of the same tourist space created by strangers at different times can be

1010

[1] As digital cameras in mobile phones proliferate, they begin to outnumber "ordinary" un-networked digital cameras.

[2] http://www.travelpod.com Retrieved February 27, 2007. Also available at:
http://www.webcitation.org/5Mz4U9SeD

[3] For a good example, see http://www.flickr.com/groups/alemarat. Retrieved February 27, 2007. Also available at: http://www.webcitation.org/5N1gPtIIt

viewed together. For example, a tourist in Hawaii who lost her camera used photographs from other people on Flickr to rebuild a travelogue for herself[4]. As she writes, "Since Hawaii is pretty well documented on Flickr, I thought I'd create a trip journal with the pictures of strangers who had taken similar photographs."[5] Yahoo Research Berkeley's TagMaps project[6] aims to "automatically create an 'attraction map' of the world from Flickr geotagged images, and their associated tags" – that is, a collage of disparate viewpoints, linked only by location.

4.3 Remixing places

In addition, digital networks create new experiences of unfamiliar places not possible with earlier technologies. With geographic information systems (GIS), location-based applications link geographic coordinates to virtual locations. A digital penumbra of photographs, blog posts, and other online artifacts augments physical places, people, and situations. These virtual locations host digital content – images, text, audio, or video – that can communicate different views of the same site over time. Unlike a traditional travelogue, these place-sharing sites shift the focus from the storyteller to the site of the story. Tellingly, the social mapping website Platial[7] calls its users "geographers," not storytellers or reporters. In this, Platial insists on the centrality of physical places in online exchange. We can also see in Platial the rise of the mix-and-match spatial information. Their TourMapper function automatically generates tour maps from the MySpace pages of musical acts. In this, they are not alone. A variety of APIs have made creating online maps easier than ever, perhaps suggesting a new role for tourist online services: adaptive tour guide.

4.4 Patterns of use

Online maps can also document aggregated tourist choices, as with the following visualization of geolocated photographs of Barcelona on Flickr (Girardin 2006). Note the glowing hotspot in the center of town – ground zero for tourist snapshots. Swirls of photographic activity mark other Barcelona attractions, creating at once a social, economic, and spatial portrait of tourist spaces seen from above. This information is now available for those who might go to Barcelona – and the businesses in Barcelona that exist to serve tourists. For the first time, we can also read from this networked map the places where tourists do *not* go – those unphotographed spots that never even show up on Flickr. If let it, the extent of information about tourist places that is


1010

[4] http://lostcamera.blogspot.com. Retrieved February 27, 2007. Also available at: http://www.webcitation.org/5N1hwrnA

[5] See: http://lostcamera.blogspot.com/2006/01/koolau-mountain-range.html. Retrieved February 27, 2007. Also available at: http://www.webcitation.org/5N1i0Qts2

[6] http://tagmaps.research.yahoo.com/. Retrieved February 27, 2007. Also available at: http://www.webcitation.org/5N1i5brNM

[7] http://www.platial.com. Retrieved February 27, 2007. Also available at: http://www.webcitation.org/5N1iAwmne

networked, aggregated, and searchable can also remind us of places that we may never see online: the places that are not *destinations*.
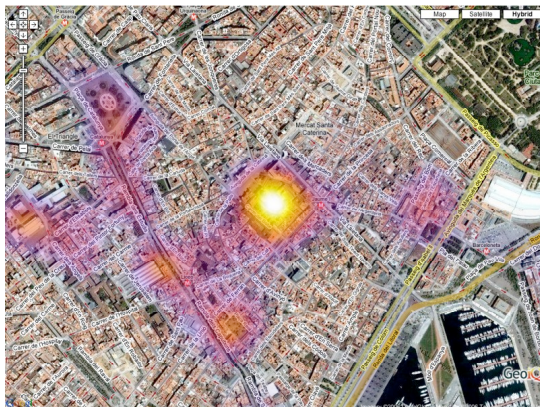
Heatmap of Flickr Geotagged Images (Girardin 2006)

5 Tourist authenticity in the age of digital reproduction

From the beginnings of the tourist industry, the business of travel has demanded and then created spectacles to be documented. Tourist destinations rely upon "authentic" performances that will supply visitors with familiar icons. Designed for the appearance of cultural engagement, these performances can be "pseudo-events" (Boorstin, in Crang 2005) that prevent any further engagement. The value of these spectacles must be justified by proving in some way that the traveler has truly left the ordinary, if only for a moment. Tourist Venice, for example, is an expensively maintained version of a story of itself told in the early 20th century, in which "renovation" consists of first laying new plaster, then discreetly "aging" it.[8] These "extra-ordinary" tourist experiences (Crang 2005) are both places and events: sacred places such as shrines or monuments, mass events that draw huge crowds, unusual or difficult-to-reach scenery, and interactions with strange people and unfamiliar activities. Ironically, these "extra-ordinary" places are so often photographed they become familiar stars of slideshows – tourist "icons" such as tropical beaches or the Louvre (Urry 2003). Access to tourist images that replicate our own memories of a tourist site – that tell us someone else stood where we stood, saw what we saw – may in the end reduce the importance of having one's "own" record of a tourist event. Video cameras bring with them a greater attention to performed actions. But they can also encourage that classic tourist trap: watching the world through the lens of a videocamera.

1010

[8] From a tourist story told by Mike Kuniavsky in conversation.

Thus the 'attraction map' – the world seen through images – can become the simulation: the world as images. The end of goal of some projects is to push storytelling ie, representational narrative – to ever-greater levels of verisimilitude until the digital story becomes an acceptable simulacrum of a "real" story. Microsoft Research's Photo Tourism project asks, "What if all those images of shared experiences were pooled? What could we do with a massive collection of distinct photos of the same subject, each from a unique geographical and temporal perspective?" (Knies 2006) The project software stitches together collections of photographs taken at the same site into three-dimensional environments that can be explored online. It is essentially a digital tourist themepark. The project's website, perhaps over-optimistically, suggests that this virtual tourism might compare well with the physical: "It's almost like being there—better in a way, because you don't have to endure the crowds" (Knies 2006).

Like many other "digital tourism" projects, Microsoft's project promotes a rhetoric of digital replacement: the belief that better tourist experiences can be had through digital representations of places. One newspaper described a recent digital tourism project as making "it possible to visit Pennsylvania's Civil War trails without coming to Pennsylvania."[9] This rhetoric has appeared before, most notably in the 1990's obsession with virtual reality. It introduced the idea of supplanting the physical tourist space with the virtual, as when one 1994 computer science paper breathlessly asked, "Virtual reality and surrogate travel, is it the future of the tourism industry?" (Williams and Perry Hobson 1994)

6   Conclusion: A nice place to visit…online?

Almost fifty years ago, Martin Heidegger mourned "the frantic abolition of all distances" by technologies of mobility, communication, and representation (Heidegger 1958). And yet, as he pointed out, the end of distance does not necessarily bring more "nearness," or intimacy, with the things we perceive.

The compression of space and time certainly streamlines the production and consumption of destinations. Nevertheless, the 800 million people who traveled internationally for pleasure last year suggest that Heidegger may only have been half right. Despite continuing calls for virtual tourism, the flood of travel media off- and online appears to coexist peacefully with…more travel. And as travel media saturates the developed world, extra-ordinary places still exist. They just move to the margins. In extreme tourism, the wealthy hire Sherpas to pull them up Mount Everest, and those even wealthier spend $20 million to visit a space station. For the merely well-off, there is the expense and inconvenience of a desert trip to Burning Man or chilly, dangerous heli-skiing in remote Canadian mountains. Distance has been seemingly abolished, but the representation of a place apparently does not substitute adequately for embodied experience.

1010

[9] *Pittsburgh Business Times*. "Pa. giving grant for virtual tourism." December 11, 2006. Retrieved from http://cincinnati.bizjournals.com/pittsburgh/stories/2006/12/11/daily5.html on December 17, 2006. Also available at: http://www.webcitation.org/5N1lkJ32V

In light of current networked tourist practices, let's return to Josiah Tucker's well-off 18th century traveler. For Tucker, people traveled to acquire things they could not get at home: possessions, knowledge, and social capital. We can relate this also to Urry's idea of co-presence: that the value humans bestow (aka "authenticity") on certain places can only be realized by actually going there. Thus travel, as a kind of "self-fashioning," is both deeply personal and a matter of social self-definition. So what is tourist storytelling? As we see in contemporary extreme tourism, it is the accumulation of social capital through documenting one's expensive participation in "authentic" experience. In travel, what is easy is valueless. While sharing places online may create new destinations and reinforce the importance of old ones, it is too low-cost in all senses to replace actual travel. Even if oil prices rise and mass travel declines, the prestige of actual travel can only rise – along with the social importance of the "authentic" tourist story and the services that enable it.

Despite the pervasive creating and sharing of images, tourist services have the potential to move beyond "the tourist gaze" to the lived experience of travel. We can see the beginnings of this mixed virtual-physical experience design in the travelers who post in the moment, and in how visualizing patterns of use highlight tourism's counterpart: the places that are not destinations. Most important, though, may be the continuing evolution of self-fashioning: from shared representations of experience to the multiple ways in which access to meaningful information – tour dates, political news, the presence of fellow travellers – can alter the paths of increasingly mobile populations.

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