

The Paradox of Authenticity: How the Inauthentic Emerges from the Touristic Quest for the Authentic

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The elusive, indeed paradoxical nature of the concept 'authenticity' relates to the intrinsic, constitutive relationship between observer and observed. What the observer takes to be authentic is, in fact, a situation already influenced by the act of observing itself: observed subjects, rendered self-aware by the action of the observer, begin to tailor their behavior to match what they imagine the observer is seeing or expecting to see. Though the typical result of this observer-influenced process is in fact inauthenticity, this reality more often than not remains outside the observer's awareness, most likely because the experience conforms to expectations. In his book *On Language Change: The Invisible Hand in Language*, Rudi Keller, referring to the Prussian philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), introduces the term 'Humboldt's maxim' to capture a parallel phenomenon that structures linguistic interaction. This maxim, "Talk in a way in which you believe the other would talk if he or she were in your place", can be seen as supplying or sustaining linguistic homogeneity ranging from dialects to occasion-specific speaking styles or 'registers' to the ways in which we adapt our speech when addressing, say, children or animals (1994: 99). Put

another way, the semiotic field, across which meaning is transacted, is itself inescapably structured through the process of dyadic interaction. The sociolinguist William Labov coined the term 'observer's paradox' to underscore how subjects self-consciously modified their routine way of speaking to match the formality of the interview situation (1972: 209). As he phrased it in his path-breaking book *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, "the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation."

Whether in regard to speech or, more broadly, behavior in general, self-awareness and concomitant monitoring and 'staging' can project a state of affairs that diverges widely from the unmonitored, routine, normal 'authentic state'. Rather than simply 'doing', self-monitoring subjects are actually, and intentionally, 'projecting' behavior they imagine corresponds to the observer's expectations. In touristic venues this translates into what Dean MacCannell, in his magisterial analysis *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1999: 91ff.), dubbed 'staged authenticity': think of 1-2-3-smile photography. So what the typical tourist takes to be a display of cultural authenticity is in fact, more often

than not, an assemblage of stereotypical elements broadly considered emblematic of a given culture, elements which, once churned through the mechanisms of mass marketing and promotion, seldom bear but the most basic resemblance to their 'authentic' originals. In a word, the typical yields to the stereotypical, presenting not a picture but rather a caricature. From these considerations it is clear that the whole process of identifying and promoting the authentic is riddled with rituals of appropriation, reduction, and conformity that depend on, and therefore require, sustained production not of the real, but of the expected. Whole cultures are accordingly reduced to mere assemblages of caricature-convenient, reductive emblems, ripped roughly from the context upon which their meaning depends, and staged conveniently for tourist consumption. Seen in this way there is a discernibly coercive, exploitative side to the whole touristic quest for authentic experiences, a quest which reminds of colonialism writ large, and which, it could be argued, verges on being a type of terrorism. In its document "Definitions of Terrorism in the U.S. Code", the FBI includes, among the key characteristics of 'International Terrorism', actions that "Appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population". By that measure, touristic transactions, albeit mutually arranged and compensated, amount to a virtual pillaging, not of artifacts from tombs, but of ideas appropriated and

recycled outside the cultural heritage matrix. In essentially forcing tourist destinations and their inhabitants to conform to their expectations and demands, tourists are, in their own way, acting in a terrorizing fashion, often unwittingly sowing seeds of resentment. This inverts the more frequent situation in which tourists themselves fall victim to terrorism.

Far from being but a benign economic boost to local economies, tourism is thus potentially also a threat to both cultural and natural resources, particularly to fragile ecosystems: witness Galapagos Islands species currently teetering on the verge of extinction, endangered Coral reefs perennially pillaged by souvenir seeking snorkelers, determined to return home with a piece of 'the real thing', and the U. S. Customs and Border Protection's extensive list of items tourists are prohibited from bringing into the country, all of which proffer grim confirmation of the damage to ecosystems and cultures tourists have been known to inflict. Zip lines through jungles, Antarctic excursions, and other exotic adventures similarly exact a considerable environmental toll.

As a conduit for alien values, expectations, and behavioral norms, tourism also has the potential to disrupt and disorient the value and belief systems of local populations, which can easily lead to dangerous resentment. While colonialism was about occupying land, tourism often results in the occupation of

minds, hence the outlawing, in Iran, of western music and customs, and the uproar, in India, over Valentine's Day. Every culture, it seems, seeks to vouchsafe its own authenticity lest it be infiltrated and diluted by threatening forces from outside.

Like tourists, terrorists often seek liberation by flouting the norms that otherwise constrain their behavior. The common denominators relating their behaviors do not end here, either. Like the terrorist, who counts on camouflage and subterfuge to arrive, undetected, at his target, the tourist, too, takes on a new persona, unfettered by such niceties as reputation and social standing that constrain in the home arena. For that matter, the act of touring distant destinations may itself magnify social status back home. As Paul Fussell observes in his insightful monograph, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*, "The fact that a tourist is best defined as *a fantasist equipped temporarily with unaccustomed power* is better known to the tourist industry than to anthropology" (1982: 42; emphasis mine). It is remarkable how this characterization seemingly captures, with equal aptness, the profile of the terrorist. Suicide bombers, in particular, spring to mind: propelled by leaps of faith and other explosive materials, they own the moment to which they sell themselves, body and soul.

Tourists and terrorists alike, it seems, share a proclivity for opportunistic appropriation of what is not properly theirs to take, be it objects or lives.

Moreover, and more concretely, tourists, in their eagerness to capture the magic of the vacation moment in some tangible form, often supplement their souvenir purchases with souvenir thefts, taking mementos not only from the natural environment but also from their temporary lodging. Even beyond the acquisition of physical objects, tourists remain takers: they take pictures, often in fact expending more effort in this pursuit than in taking in the experience of the moment itself. Why this compulsion to experience and take possession at all costs, or at no cost, of authentic otherness? What is the lure of authenticity?

The sheer fact that tourists set out in quest of authentic experiences suggests that they consider the life they are temporarily leaving behind to be in some way inauthentic or at least less than authentic. On the one hand, life that has succumbed to the blandness of routinization may take on an inert, unreal aspect: on the other hand, modern culture has become so riddled with replicas, simulations and brandedness –so surreal– that concrete reality can seem but a distant memory, the object of a nostalgia, a longing that can find its fulfillment only in escape to elsewhere –to an idealized past, an alternate and more ‘perfect’ present, or an outright fantasy world of unbridled ‘fun’. Hence the magic appeal

of Disneyland and similar theme-parks, –or should we perhaps more accurately speak of ‘meme-parks’? These destinations, by definition, encapsulate and embody not the real, but the imagined, and as such are emblematic of the conscious production of the ‘authentic’ to match what are –or are thought to be– tourists’ expectations. In these ultimate ‘fantasy-scapes’, life mimics art, rather than the other way around, with real people posing as the cartoon abstractions they’ve anointed as the vessels of their fantasies. In this world of conscious make believe, the caricature is to the photograph what the photograph is to reality, with the ‘authentic’ original ever becoming more distant, more elusive. In its place odd posturing, prancing, and exaggerated facial expressions, all following a bizarre, yet somehow expected, choreography, enchant even as they enthrall in trappings of the inauthentic.

Yearnings for the pristine, the original, the tangible –typically simultaneously the quaint and the charming– propel the tourist to seek out an alternate, ‘authentic’ reality, one that has not somehow been mediated into a state of suspended animation. But herein lies the very paradox of the ontologically unstable category ‘authenticity’: to be experienced as ‘authentic’ requires having been marked, designated, declared ‘authentic’, –requires, that is, mediation. But precisely what has undergone mediation is now less than pure,

original, unspoiled –less than authentic. The tourist can escape everyday reality, but cannot escape semiosis, cannot experience as ‘authentic’ what has not already been christened ‘authentic’. The terrorist, too, seeks fulfillment through attainment of an altered state of existence, one in which a new system of values imagined to be superior and more legitimate will obtain.

An economy of excess underwrites the juggernauts tourists and terrorists undertake: tourist excesses in spending, posing, and stimulating the senses find reflection in terrorist excesses in disguise, ideological commitment and use of brute, as opposed to economic, force. Yet despite all this overt over-action to exchange their current reality for one more ideal, more authentic, neither tourists nor terrorists can ever truly escape to the authentic, utopian ‘elsewhere’ they imagine. The impossibility of appreciating, as tourist, or altering, as terrorist, any component of culture or socio-economic circumstance in isolation from its systemic totality is doomed from the start to failure. The observer’s paradox, too, precludes entry into authentic or otherwise alternate worldviews precisely because the presence and action of outside agency itself inexorably alters that which it intersects, that which it would experience –or destroy.

In concluding I would like to emphasize that the analogies cited as uniting the motives and missions of tourists and terrorists, though perhaps unsuspected and hugely divergent in degree, are real enough, and warrant further study. The paradoxical nature of the concept of authenticity itself relates directly to the transformative power of the observer-observed dialectic, which essentially guarantees that originals always morph into simulacra. By calling attention to parallels between tourism and terrorism, I hope to have initiated a new way of understanding just how, from a semiotic point of view, the quest for authenticity can be seen as uniting otherwise unrelated behaviors.

Notes

1. See especially Chapter 5, "Staged Authenticity".
2. Cf. Aziz 1995.
3. "On the extinction of species: Tourism is imperiling a wildlife paradise". *The Economist* (June 3, 2010).
4. See "Prohibited and Restricted Items".
5. See <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,251879,00.html>. See also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7880377.stm>.
6. In her acclaimed analysis *On Photography* (1973), Susan Sontag relates the tourist's compulsion to diligently record every experience to the tyranny of the work ethic: "Using a camera appeases the

anxiety which the work-driven feel about not working when they are on vacation and supposed to be having fun. They have something to do that is like a friendly imitation of work: they can take pictures” (10).

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