

From:

*Framing The Sign:*

*Criticism and Its Institutions*

© University of Oklahoma Press, 1990

## The Semiotics of Tourism

JONATHAN CULLER

Tourism is a practice of considerable cultural and economic importance and, unlike a good many manifestations of contemporary culture, is well known in some guise to every literary or cultural critic. Some may claim ignorance of television or rock music or fashion, but all have been tourists and have observed tourists. Yet despite the pervasiveness of tourism and its centrality to our conception of the contemporary world (for most of us, the world is more imperiously an array of places one might visit than it is a configuration of political or economic forces), tourism has been neglected by students of culture. Unlike the cinema, popular romance, or even video, tourism has scarcely figured in the theoretical discussions and debates about popular culture of recent years.

The problem may be that tourism has so few defenders, constitutes an embarrassment, and seems such an easy target for those who would attack modern culture. The tourist, it seems, is the lowest of the low. No other group has such a uniformly bad press. Tourists are continually subject to sneers and have no anti-defamation league. Animal imagery seems their inevitable lot: they are said to move in droves, herds, swarms, or flocks; they are as mindless and docile as sheep but as annoying as a plague of insects when they descend upon a spot they have 'discovered'. Here is Daniel Boorstin, Librarian of Congress and guardian of our cultural heritage, on this contemptible species of American:

The tourist looks for caricature; travel agents at home and national tourist bureaus abroad are quick to oblige. The tourist seldom likes the authentic (to him often unintelligible) product of a foreign culture. He prefers his

own provincial expectations. The French chanteuse singing English with a French accent seems more charmingly French than one who simply sings in French.<sup>1</sup>

There are perhaps interesting reasons why this should be so, but Boorstin does not stop to inquire. 'Tourist "attractions" offer an elaborately contrived indirect experience, an artificial product to be consumed in the very places where the real thing is free as air'. What could be more foolish than a tourist paying through the nose for an artificial substitute when the real thing, all around him, is as free as the air?

This discussion is not untypical of what passes for cultural criticism: complaints about the tawdriness or artificiality of modern culture which do not attempt to account for the curious facts they rail against and offer little explanation of the cultural mechanisms that might be responsible for them. If cultural criticism is to go beyond nostalgic vituperation, it needs to find ways of analyzing the cultural phenomena in question, and tourism, that marginalized yet pervasive cultural practice, seems to demand a semiotic approach. If for the tourist the French chanteuse singing English with a French accent seems more charmingly French than one who simply sings in French, the reason might be not stupidity nor moral turpitude but a semiotic code. American films treating foreign people and places characteristically have minor characters speak with charming foreign accents, to signify Frenchness, Italianity, Teutonicity, while the main characters (even though foreign) speak American English. There are mechanisms of signification here with which tourism is deeply intertwined.

Roland Barthes, who might be regarded as the founder of a semiotics aiming at demystification or culture criticism, writes in

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 106

his *Elements of Semiology* that ‘dès qu’il y a société, tout usage est converti en signe de cet usage’ [once society exists, every usage is converted into a sign of this usage].<sup>2</sup> By wearing blue jeans, for instance, one signifies that one is wearing blue jeans. This process is crucial, Barthes continues, and exemplifies the extent to which reality is nothing other than that which is intelligible. Since it is as signs that our practices have reality, they swiftly become signs, even if signs of themselves. Of course, once a sign is constituted in this way—a usage become a sign of this usage—society may very well refunctionalize it and speak of it as a pure instance of use. A fur coat one wears is a sign of its category; it signifies fur *coat* as one wears it. But, Barthes says, a society may well attempt to mask this mythological function and act as if the coat were simply an object that serves to protect one from the cold.<sup>3</sup> This process is what Barthes in *Mythologies* calls the ‘alibi’, or the general tendency of a culture to convert history into nature.<sup>4</sup> The task of the semiotician, according to Barthes, is to penetrate the alibi and identify the signs.

The notion of a usage become sign of itself might remain somewhat obscure and offer the analyst little methodological instruction in how to penetrate alibis and what to look for were it not for the exemplary case of tourism, which can provide considerable guidance and illumination. The tourist is not interested in the alibis a society uses to refunctionalize its practices. The tourist is interested in everything as a sign of itself, an instance of a typical cultural practice: a Frenchman is an example of a Frenchman, a restaurant in the Quartier Latin is

---

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), P. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard writes, ‘Far from the primary status of an object being a pragmatic one, it is the sign exchange value which is fundamental - use-value is often no more than a practical guarantee (or even a rationalization pure and simple). Such, in its paradoxical form, is the only correct sociological hypotheses.’ *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St Louis: Telos, 1981), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 128-9.

an example of a Latin Quarter restaurant, signifying ‘Latin Quarter Restaurantness’. All over the world the unsung armies of semiotics, the tourists, are fanning out in search of signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behavior, exemplary Oriental scenes, typical American thruways, traditional English pubs; and, deaf to the natives’ explanations that thruways just are the most efficient way to get from one place to another or that pubs are simply convenient places to meet your friends and have a drink, or that gondolas are a natural way to get around in a city full of canals, tourists persist in regarding these objects and practices as cultural signs. They put into practice Jean Baudrillard’s claim that an accurate theory of social objects must be based on signification rather than needs or use-value.<sup>5</sup> Dean MacCannell, author of a superb study, *The Tourist*, records his pleasure and surprise in discovering that the tourists he was studying were in fact his allies in the sociological study of modernity: ‘My “colleagues” were everywhere on the face of the earth, searching for peoples, practices and artifacts that we might record and relate to our own socio-cultural experience’.<sup>6</sup> In their most specifically touristic behavior, however, tourists are the agents of semiotics: all over the world they are engaged in reading cities, landscapes and cultures as sign systems.

If semioticians have not recognized tourists as their allies, it is perhaps because they are so universally maligned. Even books that celebrate travel engage in denigration of tourists. Paul Fussell, a reputable and intelligent literary critic, in a celebration of British literary traveling between the wars, attempts to convey ‘what it felt like to be young and clever and literate in the final age of travel’.<sup>7</sup>

‘Final age of travel’ because since 1939 there is no more travel, only tourism, which is totally different. ‘Perhaps the closest one could approach an experience of travel in the old

---

<sup>5</sup> Baudrillard, *Political Economy*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>6</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist* (New York: Schocken, 1976). Henceforth cited as T.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Fussell, *Abroad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. vii.

sense today would be to drive through Roumania or Afghanistan without hotel reservations and to get by on terrible French'. What distinguishes the tourist, Fussell continues,

is the motives, few of which are ever openly revealed: to raise social status at home and to allay social anxiety; to realize secret fantasies of erotic freedom; and most important, to derive secret pleasure from posing momentarily as a member of a social class superior to one's own, to play a role of a 'shopper' and a spender whose life becomes significant and exciting only when one is exercising power by choosing what to buy. Cant as the tourist may of the Taj Mahal and Mt. Etna at sunset, his real target today is the immense Ocean Terminal at Hong Kong, with its miles of identical horrible camera and tape recorder shops. 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. The resemblance between the tourist and the client of a massage parlor is closer than it would be polite to emphasize.<sup>8</sup>

Fussell's hysterical smugness is puzzling until one realizes what the problem might be. When this Professor of English at the State University of New Jersey, as he then was, goes to England, the natives probably mistake him for another American tourist. Ferocious denigration of tourists is in part an attempt to convince oneself that one is not a tourist. The desire to distinguish between tourists and real travelers is a part of tourism—integral to it rather than outside it or beyond it.

The ubiquity of the distinction between travelers and tourists is quite striking. Fussell contrasts the fake travelers of the past thirty years with the real travelers of the inter-war period: young Englishmen, generally of the better classes, who went off to the south of France, or to Italy, to the Middle East, to Tahiti, and

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 42

wrote about getting drunk in run-down hotels. But for Boorstin the character of travel begins to change markedly in the mid-nineteenth century, with the success of Thomas Cook and Sons: mass transportation—railways and ocean liners—brings about what he calls 'the decline of the traveler and the rise of the tourist:

The traveler, then, was working at something; the tourist was a pleasure seeker. The traveler was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes 'sight-seeing' (a word, by the way, which came in at about the same time, with its first use recorded in 1847). He expects everything to be done to him and for him. Thus foreign travel ceased to be an activity—an experience, an undertaking—and became instead a commodity.<sup>9</sup>

Boorstin here echoes Ruskin's view that 'Going by railroad I do not consider as traveling at all; it is merely being "sent" to a place, and very little different from becoming a parcel'. This sounds strange today, when travel by rail, like travel by steamship, has become the last refuge of the traveler trying to avoid being a tourist and is celebrated nostalgically as true travel reminiscent of a bygone age. But Ruskin is not alone in denigrating the mass of nineteenth-century travelers as tourists; nineteenth-century travelers are as ferocious in their denunciation of tourists and tourism as twentieth-century travelers. Boorstin quotes an Englishman in 1865 fulminating at the race of tourists:

The cities of Italy are now deluged with droves of the creatures, for they never separate, and you see them forty in number pouring along a street with their director—now in front, now at the rear, circling round them like a

---

<sup>9</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, p. 85. Baudrillard notes that 'the structure of the sign is at the very heart of the commodity form', *Political Economy*, p. 146.

sheepdog—and really the process is as like herding as maybe. I have already met three flocks, and anything so uncouth I never saw before, the men mostly elderly, dreary, sad-looking; the women somewhat younger, travel-tossed, but intensely lively, wide-awake, and facetious.<sup>10</sup>

Even earlier, in 1826, Stendhal complained, when writing a book for tourists, *Rome, Naples, et Florence*, that ‘Florence is nothing better than a vast museum full of tourists’.<sup>11</sup> The true age of travel has, it seems, always already slipped by; other travelers are always tourists.

This repetition and displacement of the opposition between tourist and traveler suggests that these are not so much two historical categories as terms of an opposition integral to tourism. The historical explanations are excuses for what travelers always do: feel superior to other travelers. As MacCannell notes, denigration of the tourist ‘is so prevalent, in fact, that it is part of the problem of mass tourism, not an analytical reflection upon it’ (T, p. 104). To be a tourist is in part to dislike tourists (both other tourists and the fact that one is oneself a tourist). Tourists can always find someone more touristy than themselves to sneer at: the hitchhiker arriving in Paris with a knapsack for an undetermined stay feels superior to a compatriot who flies in on a jumbo jet to spend a week. The tourist whose package tour includes only air travel and a hotel feels superior, as he sits in a cafe, to the tour groups that pass by in buses. Americans on bus tours feel superior to groups of Japanese, who seem to be wearing uniforms and surely understand nothing of the culture they are photographing.

Tourism thus brings out what may prove to be a crucial feature of modern capitalist culture: a cultural consensus that creates hostility rather than community among individuals. Tourism is a system of values uniting large segments of the

world population from the richer countries. Groups with different national interests are brought together by a systematized knowledge of the world, a shared sense of what is significant, and a set of moral imperatives: they all know what one ‘ought to see’ in Paris, that you ‘really must’ visit Rome, that it ‘would be a crime’ never to see San Francisco and ride in a cable car. As MacCannell points out, the touristic code—an understanding of the world articulated by the moral injunctions which drive the tourist on—is the most powerful and widespread modern consensus, yet the effect of these shared values is not to create solidarity within the international community of tourists but hostility, as each wishes the other tourists were not there. The idea of a consensus which sets members of the group against one another is a remarkable feature of modernity which demands further analysis.

Once one recognizes that wanting to be less touristy than other tourists is part of being a tourist, one can recognize the superficiality of most discussions of tourism, especially those that stress the superficiality of tourists. Tourists are inevitably reproached, by Boorstin and his ilk, for their satisfaction with the inauthentic, the spurious: ‘the tourist seldom likes the authentic product of a foreign culture’, Boorstin writes. ‘The American tourist in Japan looks less for what is Japanese than for what is Japanesey’.<sup>12</sup> We shall later take up this semiotic structure, but one should emphasize that tourists do set out in quest of the authentic. Proof of that desire is that authenticity is a major selling point in advertisements and travel writing. Perhaps the most common motif in travel columns is the hotel, restaurant or sight ‘just off the beaten track’. The genre is familiar: ‘Only a couple of blocks from the main tourist hotels lies a street of small shops where one can see real native craftsmen at work and whose wares sell for a fraction of the prices charged at tourist traps on the main street’. Or, ‘only ten miles further down the coast you will find an unspoiled fishing village with a few inns

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Stendhal (Henri Beyle), *Rome, Naples, and Florence* (London: Braziller, 1959), p. 317.

---

<sup>12</sup> Boorstin, *The Image*, p. 106.

patronized by locals, where the innkeeper's wife will happily make you a hearty lunch to take on your rambles'.

The distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic, the natural and the touristy, is a powerful semiotic operator within tourism. The idea of seeing the real Spain, the real Jamaica, something unspoiled, how the natives really work or live, is a major touristic *topos*, essential to the structure of tourism. It is even the explicit selling point of commercial tours: 'Take "De tour", Swissair's freewheeling fifteen day Take-a-break Holiday that lets you detour to the off-beat, over-looked and unexpected corners of Switzerland for as little as \$315 ... including car. Take de tour. But watch out for de sheep, de goats, and de chickens'. Even tourists who take the most packaged package tours, who are indeed, as Ruskin predicted, sent from one place to another like a parcel, venture bravely forth from their hotels in search of atmosphere and discover something which for them is unusual, authentic in its otherness, a sign of an alien culture—say a butcher's shop with undressed fowl and rabbits hanging in the window. And characteristically tourists emphasize such experiences—moments regarded as authentic—when telling others of their travels. The *authentic* is a usage perceived as a sign of that usage, and tourism is in large measure a quest for such signs.

In their quest, tourists engage in a practice which attracts volumes of scorn: they purchase mementos of various sorts. The denigrators of tourism make fun of the proliferation of reproductions associated with tourism: picture postcards, travel posters, miniature Eiffel Towers, piggy banks of the Statue of Liberty. These reproductions are what MacCannell in his account of the semiotic structure of the tourist attractions calls *markers*. Like the sign, the touristic attraction has a triadic structure: a marker represents a sight to the tourist (T, p. 110). A marker is any kind of information or representation that constitutes a sight as a sight: by giving information about it, representing it, making it recognizable. Some are 'on-site'

markers, such as plaques telling that 'George Washington slept here' or that this vial of dust comes from the moon. Some are mobile markers, such as pamphlets and brochures designed to draw people to the site, give information at the site, and serve as souvenirs or representations off the site. MacCannell quotes a brochure which marks and thus constitutes tourist sights in the state of Iowa: 'Kunkle cabin site. In 1848 Benjamin Kunkle and his family became the first permanent settlers of Guthrie County. Mr. Kunkle raised the first hogs in the county. The marker is attached to a large elm tree in the Myron Godwin farmyard' (T, p. 114). Finally, there are off-site markers, reminding one that the attraction is an attraction, such as a kewpie doll bearing a flag that reads 'Souvenir of Yellowstone'.

The proliferation of markers frames something as a sight for tourists. The existence of reproductions is what makes something an original, authentic, the real thing—the original of which the souvenirs, postcards, statues etc. are reproductions—and by surrounding ourselves with reproductions we represent to ourselves, as MacCannell astutely suggests, the possibility of authentic experiences in other times and in other places (T, p. 148). One of the characteristics of modernity is the belief that authenticity has been lost and exists only in the past—whose signs we preserve (antiques, restored buildings, imitations of old interiors)—or else in other regions or countries. 'The United States', MacCannell writes, 'makes the rest of the world seem authentic. California makes the rest of the United States seem authentic' (T, p. 155). And, of course, Los Angeles makes the rest of California seem authentic. But the semiotic process at work has a curious effect: the proliferation of markers or reproductions confers an authenticity upon what may at first seem egregiously inauthentic. The discussion of Los Angeles, the reproduction of its features in a variety of media, creates originals of which these reproductions are reproductions and a desire to see the signified of which these markers are signifiers. Describing what he calls 'sight sacralization', MacCannell writes, 'it is the mechanical reproduction phase of sacralization

that is most responsible for setting the tourist in motion on his journey to find the true object. And he is not disappointed. Alongside the copies of it, it has to be The Real Thing' (*T*, p. 45).

The denigrators of tourism are annoyed by the proliferation of tacky representations—postcards, ashtrays, ugly painted plates—and fail to grasp the essential semiotic function of these markers. Not only do they create sights; when the tourist encounters the sight the markers remain surprisingly important: one may continually refer to the marker to discover what features of the sight are indeed significant; one may engage in the production of further markers by writing about the sight or photographing it; and one may explicitly compare the original with its reproductions ('It's not as big as it looked in the picture'; or 'It's even more impressive than I imagined'). In each case, the touristic experience involves the production of or participation in a sign relation between marker and sight.

Moreover, the sight/marker relation in the sign structure of the touristic attraction is responsible for the phenomenon that Boorstin and others deplore when they complain that 'the American tourist in Japan looks less for what is Japanese than for what is Japanesey'. This is scarcely surprising, for to be Japanesey is to signify 'Japaneseness', to be marked by various sorts of representations as typically, interestingly Japanese. Boorstin and his like assume that what is reproduced, represented, written about, is inauthentic, while the rest is authentic: tourists pay to see tourist traps while the real thing is free as air. But 'the real thing' must be marked as real, as sight-worthy; if it is not marked or differentiated, it is not a notable sight, even though it may be Japanese by virtue of its location in Japan. The authentic is not something unmarked or undifferentiated; authenticity is a sign relation. Even the sights in which the most snobbish tourists take pleasure are not unmarked; they have become for these tourists the 'real' Japan by a process of semiotic articulation, only their markers are more recondite

and less tacky than the plastic reproductions or souvenirs of the most famous sights.

There is, nevertheless, a problem about the relation between these two sorts of authenticity that I have been describing: the authenticity of what lies off the beaten track and is thus apparently unexpected and the authenticity a sight derives from its markers, so that tourists want to encounter and recognize the original which has been marked as a sight. These seem rather different cases but they are in fact intimately related in a process which can be approached through a description of another talented author, Walker Percy. His book of homespun semiotics, *The Message in a Bottle*, makes naive assumptions, but its account of tourism is rich and suggestive.

Percy's 'The Loss of the Creature' begins with a myth of origins, the story of a first traveler who can experience authentically—as a pure unmediated experience—what later travelers can only experience superficially and mediately: 'Every explorer names his island Formosa, beautiful. To him it is beautiful because, being first, he has access to it and can see it for what it is. But to no one else is it ever as beautiful'.<sup>13</sup> This is an attractive myth but highly dubious, especially in its notion that the context in which the explorer first comes across a sight is so much the privileged context as to make the sight what it truly is. (One should note, by contrast, Prosper Merimée's astute claim that 'Rien n'est plus ennuyeux qu'un paysage anonyme' [Nothing is more boring than an unnamed landscape]. A visitor to Niagara Falls who does not know that it is 'Niagara Falls' he is seeing, will immediately demand, 'What is this place?' since a great deal of its interest comes from its relation to its marker or 'symbolic complex'.)

When Percy turns, though, to the Grand Canyon—discovered by a Spanish explorer and then set aside as a National Park so that others might see and appreciate this sight—his

---

<sup>13</sup> Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One has to Do with the Other* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1975), p. 46. Henceforth cited as MB

reflections become more pertinent. When a man from Boston takes a bus tour to the Grand Canyon, does he in fact see the Grand Canyon? Possibly, answers Percy,

But it is more likely that what he has done is the one sure way not to see the canyon. Why is it almost impossible to gaze directly at the Grand Canyon and see it for what it is... ? It is almost impossible because the Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by a symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind. Seeing the canyon under approved circumstances is seeing the symbolic complex head on. (MB, p. 47)

This is why I suggested earlier that tourism was an exemplary case for the perception and description of sign relations. The sightseer confronts the symbolic complex head on and explores the relation of sight to its markers. 'The term of the sightseer's satisfaction', writes Percy, 'is not the sovereign discovery of the thing before him; it is rather the measuring up of the thing to the criterion of the preformed symbolic complex' (MB, p. 47).

The question for Percy, then, is 'How can the sightseer recover the Grand Canyon?' How can one escape semiotic mediation? He imagines various strategies: one might get off the beaten track and come upon the canyon through the wilderness, avoiding markers, trails and lookout spots. Or one might attempt to recover the canyon from familiarity by an exercise in familiarity, visiting the canyon 'by a Greyhound tour in the company of a party from Terre Haute'. The visitor 'stands behind his fellow tourists at the Bright Angel Lodge and sees the canyon through them and their predicament, their picture taking and their busy disregard' (MB, p. 48-9). This technique is superior to the first—getting off the beaten track, he admits, is the 'most beaten track of all'—but it is not satisfactory either, for it does not deliver an unmediated experience.

Committed to the idea of an original, authentic experience, Percy finds that the strategies he imagines all involve semiotic mediation—as any semiotician could have told him—and so falls back on the stratagem of apocalypse: a war destroys civilization and, years later, an expedition from Australia lands in southern California and makes its way east. 'They stumble upon the Bright Angel Lodge, now fallen into ruins. The trails are grown over, the guardrails fallen away, the dime telescope at Battleship Point rusted. But there is the canyon, exposed at last' (MB, p. 49). Percy here follows Victor Hugo who, in a poem of 1837 about another tourist attraction, 'A l'Arc de Triomphe', imagines that three thousand years hence, when all Paris save Notre Dame, the Vendôme column and the Arc de Triomphe has fallen into ruin, a shepherd making his way at dusk will come upon the Arc de Triomphe, and it will, at last, be truly beautiful.<sup>14</sup> But Hugo, more astute than Percy, recognizes that this situation of a civilization in ruins is a very particular semiotic frame which confers a conventional authenticity on what persists amid ruins. The sublimity of the Australian explorers' experience (assuming that they did not boorishly consider the canyon just an obstacle to their eastward progress) would come from the juxtaposition of the canyon with the markers which it had outlasted.

Percy tells another story which in fact illustrates very well both the impossibility of escaping semiosis and the complex relation between authenticity in touristic experience and mediating sign structures or symbolic complexes. He imagines an American couple visiting Mexico, who see the usual sights and enjoy themselves, yet feel that something is missing.

Although Taxco and Cuernavaca are interesting and picturesque as advertised, they fall short of 'it'. What do the couple have in mind by 'it'? What do they really hope for? ... Their hope has something to do with their own role as tourists in a foreign country and... something to do with

---

<sup>14</sup> Victor Hugo, *Poésie* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), I, pp. 375-81.

other American tourists. Certainly they feel that they are very far from 'it' when, after traveling five thousand miles, they arrive at the plaza in Guanajuato only to find themselves surrounded by a dozen other couples from the Midwest. (MB, p. 51)

Their problem, as he diagnoses it, is to find an 'unspoiled' place, an attraction that has not attracted tourists or become encrusted with renown. While driving to Mexico City they accidentally do so. Lost on back roads, they discover a tiny Indian village where an elaborate native ritual is in progress. They know at once, Percy says, that this is 'it'. 'Now may we not say that the sightseers have at last come face to face with an authentic sight, a sight which is charming, quaint, picturesque, unspoiled, and that they see the sight and come away rewarded? Possibly this may occur. Yet it is more likely that what happens is a far cry indeed from an immediate encounter with being' (MB, p. 52). The failure to have an immediate encounter with the sight, which Percy earlier attributed to symbolic encrustations with which a culture has surrounded the sight, is here recognized as a feature of the encounter itself—intrinsic to it and not an accidental corruption that might be put right. The village seems unspoiled; there are no signs of other tourists, so the couple ought in principle to be like Percy's explorer, coming upon an authentic sight and finding it splendid. But in fact their pleasure is anxious and divided, not a plenitude of fulfillment.

The clue to the spuriousness of their enjoyment of the village and the festival is a certain restiveness in the sightseers themselves. It is given expression by their repeated exclamations that 'this is too good to be true', and their anxiety that it may not prove to be so perfect, and finally by their downright relief at leaving the valley and having the experience in the bag, so to speak—that is, safely embalmed in memory and movie film. What is the source of their anxiety during the visit? We have

another clue in their subsequent remark to an ethnologist friend. 'How we wished you had been with us! ... Every minute we would say to each other, if only you were here! You must return with us'. (MB, p. 52-3)

This is not, Percy notes, a desire to share their experience with others but a need of a different sort, essential to the semiotic structure of tourism: 'They need the ethnologist to certify their experience as genuine. This is borne out by their behavior when the three of them return for the next corn dance. During the dance the couple do not watch the goings on; they watch the ethnologist! Their highest hope is that their friend should find the dance interesting. And if he should show signs of true absorption ... then their cup is full. "Didn't we tell you?" they say at last' (MB, p. 53).

To be truly satisfying the sight needs to be certified, marked as authentic. Without these markers, it could not be experienced as authentic—whence the couple's anxiety, anxiety from the absence of markers. The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes. We want our souvenirs to be labeled 'authentic native crafts produced by certified natives using guaranteed original materials and archaic techniques' (rather than, say, 'Made in Taiwan'), but such markers are put there for tourists, to certify touristic objects. The authentic sight requires markers, but our notion of the authentic is the unmarked.

Percy's idea of a friendly ethnologist who accompanies the tourist is the most positive version of this double bind. The expert here is in fact nothing other than a personalized, individualized projection of the cultural sign systems that articulate the world, attaching labels, producing reliable and unreliable markers, certifying sights as genuine instances of what one should look for. The authenticity the tourist seeks is at one

level an escape from the code, but this escape itself is coded in turn, for the authentic must be marked to be constituted as authentic.

Another version of this basic semiotic mechanism is the dialectical relation between what MacCannell, following Erving Goffman, calls front and back regions. In their quest for an authentic experience, tourists want to see the inside of things, so social and economic arrangements are made to take them behind the scenes, ranging from guided tours of the Paris sewers, the morgue, or the stock exchange to schemes whereby small groups of tourists willing to pay handsomely for the privilege can stay at a ducal castle and breakfast with the duke. The authenticity markers attached to these tourist attractions indicate that they are already coded, and therefore not the true back regions, which become in turn a further source of attraction (the dream that the duke might invite one to see something he does not show to tourists). In English stately homes that are open to the public, the grandest and most attractive regions are generally turned over to the tourist parties, but visitors avidly hope to catch a glimpse, through an open door or down a passageway, of the smaller and architecturally ordinary back regions where the noble family now lives in bourgeois style. In regions frequented by tourists, MacCannell observes, the distinction between front and back, or between what is there to be shown to tourists and what is genuine, is operationally decisive but has become highly problematic: 'the continuum is sufficiently developed in some areas of the world that it appears as an infinite regression of stage sets' (T, p. 105). Every 'original' is a further representation.

A semiotic perspective advances the study of tourism by preventing one from thinking of signs and sign relations as corruptions of what ought to be a direct experience of reality and thus of saving one from the simplistic fulminations against tourists and tourism that are symptoms of the touristic system rather than pertinent analyses. Tourism, in turn, enriches semiotics in its demonstration that salient features of the social

and natural world are articulated by what Percy calls 'symbolic complexes' and its revelation of the modern quest for experience as a quest for an experience of signs. Its illustration of the structural incompleteness of experience, its dependency on markers, helps us understand something of the nature of semiotic structures.

Particularly interesting are the processes by which touristic attractions are produced. We have already noted the dependency of sights on markers: 'empty' sites become sights through the attachment of markers. An unremarkable piece of ground becomes a tourist attraction when equipped with a plaque reading 'Site of the Bonnie and Clyde shootout', and as more markers are added—informative historical displays, a little museum, a Bonnie and Clyde amusement park with shooting galleries—the markers themselves quite explicitly become the attraction, the sight itself. These markers would then have further markers attached to them: postcards depicting the Bonnie and Clyde Museum, pennants depicting Bonnie-and-Clyde-Land and its more famous attractions. MacCannell notes that analysis of the touristic attraction demonstrates the interchangeability of signifier and signified: the Statue of Liberty, originally a marker—a sign welcoming travelers to New York—has become a sight; but then as a celebrated tourist attraction it has become at another level a marker, used on posters and travel displays as a marker for the United States as a country for tourism. The Eiffel Tower, a major touristic signified, represented by a variety of different signifiers, is itself a signifier which signifies 'Paris'. The Empire State Building is a sight that serves as a marker for the sightseer's Manhattan. Buildings constructed to mark and preserve sights often become the sights themselves: the Sainte Chapelle, built to contain and display for visitors the 'true crown of thorns', is now the principal sight and the crown is forgotten. The arbitrary nature of the sign, we can infer, prevents there being a difference of nature between signifier and signified, so that not only may the signified marked by a marker prove to be another marker or signifier in its turn, but—a less frequently

recognized semiotic possibility—a signifier may itself function as a signified.

The production of touristic sights relies on semiotic mechanisms whose operation may seem quite local and contingent, but the general framework and product of these signifying mechanisms, the touristic code, is a modern consensus of vast scope, a systematized, value-laden knowledge of the world. Groups which disagree on a range of moral and political issues know what tourists ought to see and, when they flout the value system to ‘get off the beaten track’, for instance, they do so in terms that are already prescribed by that system. Our primary way of making sense of the world is as a network of touristic destinations and possibilities which we ought in principle to visit. Tourism, MacCannell writes, ‘is a ritual performed to the differentiations of society’, an attempt to overcome fragmentation by articulating the world as a series of societies, each with its characteristic monuments, distinctive customs or cultural practices, and native scenery, all of which are treated as signs of themselves, non-functional displays of codes.

This touristic system accompanies and is tied in with the world system of multinational capitalism, which has created much of the infrastructure, such as airports and Western hotels, on which tourism depends. Like tourism, this capitalism seeks to make the world a series of accessible sites, equivalent as markets for goods and interchangeable as sites of production according to the momentary advantages of wage scales and local conditions. Could one not say that modern tourism, with its reduction of cultures to signs and celebration of the distinctiveness of those signs, is a mask for the capitalist world system, a celebration of signification and differentiation which conceals the economic exploitation and homogenization that underlies it; that tourism, which celebrates cultural difference, makes cultures museum pieces to conceal their destruction at the hands of the world economic system? One could certainly make this claim, but as Fredric Jameson notes when discussing the post-modern culture of the simulacrum, while this cultural practice to some extent

masks the economic reality, it also reveals aspects of that system, foregrounding its mechanisms, making clear, for example, that what we visit is not an organic, autonomous native reality but attractions marked and thus constituted by an international touristic practice—signs produced within a international system of signification.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, there are few clearer indicators of shifting lines of force within the economic order than changes in the flow of tourists.

Tourism reveals difficulties of appreciating otherness except through signifying structures that mark and reduce it. It is tempting to see here nothing more than the result of an exploitative international order. But the Marxist condemnation of tourism as the reduction of otherness to caricature in complicity with multinational capitalism risks falling into a sentimental nostalgia for the organic or the unmediated that resembles nothing so much as the vituperative nostalgia of conservatives, who fondly imagine a time where the elite alone traveled and everything in the world showed itself truly to them. Baudrillard, in his critique of the Marxist appeal to an authentic ‘use-value’, maintains that ‘Every revolutionary perspective today stands or falls on its ability to re-interrogate the repressive, reductive, rationalizing metaphysics of utility’ so as to study sign relations.<sup>16</sup> Certainly in the case we are dealing with, to condemn tourism may be morally satisfying, but to do so is also, I fear, to rely on the naive postulate of an escape from semiosis and to cut oneself off from the possibility of exploring semiotic mechanisms which prove persistent and ubiquitous, central to any culture or social order.

---

<sup>15</sup> See Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, *New Left Review*, 146 (July/August 1984), pp. 53-92, especially, pp. 86-8

<sup>16</sup> Baudrillard, *Political Economy*, p. 138