

Interview with Prof. Dean MacCannell

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ISSN 1989-7022

Dilemata: Your work *The Tourist: The New Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976) continues to be a paramount reference for us when trying to understand the tourism phenomenon. We would like to know your opinion on that book today. How would you review it or recommend it?

DMacC: *The Tourist* (1976) was published eight to ten years before several ground-breaking texts that addressed important societal-level changes that had been gathering momentum from about the middle of the 20th century. Influential among these were Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986), Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism or the Cultural logic of Late Capitalism* (1984). Only in the past 10 years have some readers noticed that the new social formations analyzed under the heading "postmodernity" first appeared on the pages of *The Tourist*. E.g., Ricard Pié Ninot and his collaborators for their study *Turismo Liquido* (2013) note on the cover of their book, "Turismo liquido como ejemplo de la sobre-modernidad que anuncia Dean MacCannell."

For the most part, *The Tourist* is read as a study of tourists and tourism. I tried to make my intent clear to write an ethnography of "post-industrial modernity." I.e., "post- [industrial] modernity." If I had aimed to write only about tourists and tourism, it would have been a very different book. *The Tourist* stands almost accidentally at the head of the emerging field of Tourism Studies. Even a cursory glance at the thousands of books, and articles that reference *The Tourist* will quickly reveal that they bear little resemblance to it. This is as it should be. The field is about tourists and tourism. *The Tourist*

and the next book I published, *Empty Meeting Grounds*, are about globalizing new social formations that happen to be powered in part by the movements of tourists.

To answer your specific question: Tourism today no longer resembles the tourism I studied as a key to understanding postmodernity. The large scale social changes described in the book are bending back onto and changing tourism itself. I hypothesized that the fundamental structural feature of the emerging new kind of society, what came to be called “postmodern” society, was its relentless *differentiation*. I argued that in postmodernity, every old binary gives way to complex series. The class structure is no longer owners/worker, but is now upper class/middle class/lower class. And each class in this series is further differentiated into (e.g.) upper-middle/middle-middle/lower-middle, etc. In 1976 I wrote “sexual differentiation progresses beyond its typically peasant biologically based binary opposition into publicly discriminated third, fourth, fifth and sixth sexes.” (p.11) Today I am told that the number of sexes has increased to more than 30. The central thesis of *The Tourist* is that “sightseeing is a ritual performed to the differentiations of society . . . a way of attempting to overcome the discontinuity of [post] modernity, of incorporating its fragments into unified experience.” (p. 13)

In the summer of 1968, after a semester of study in Paris and Zurich, Juliet and I hitch-hiked to Brussels, Copenhagen, Berlin, Zagreb, Belgrade, Sofia, Istanbul, Venice, Nice, etc. We regarded our fellow tourists who were carrying the popular guidebook *Europe on \$5 a Day* as “wealthy.” If we couldn’t keep our costs below \$3.50/day (about 27 Euros in today’s money) we might still be stranded somewhere in Eastern Europe. Under 30 Euros was enough for at least one restaurant meal a day and a hotel every night, and not of the lowest quality.

The tourists I followed while researching *The Tourist* had a focused, organic relationship to the attractions they visited strong idiosyncratic reasons to present themselves before specific objects that are redolent with symbolic and also personal meanings.

Tourism in the 1960s was not a mass phenomenon. There were never lines waiting to enter any attraction no matter how famous. Off-season, on several occasions, I stood alone beside the Mona Lisa waiting in vain for a tourist to come by that I might observe communing with Da Vinci’s masterpiece. Peak-season there were usually no more than six to ten tourists in the gallery. Artists were still allowed to set up easels to try to re-produce the illusive smile. Artists often outnumbered tourists. There were so few visitors to the Prado in the 1960s that they did not bother to turn on the lights in the galleries even during peak season. In June of 1968 Juliet and I spent a day in Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. There was only one other couple in the Palace the entire day. The last time I visited the Louvre, I wasn’t able to get in. The line was too long.

The kinds of tourists I observed in the 1960s and ‘70s still exist. But they are now submerged in the multitude. I believe they are still key to understanding important aspects of the post-modern condition. But another kind of tourist, a product of the tourist industry, has emerged as revelatory of other dimensions of postmodernity.

***Dilemata:* Following up the same question, and considering the methodologies that you presented in that work, which ethnographical tools are, in your opinion, the most suitable to analyze the tourism phenomenon nowadays?**

DMacC: Ethnographically, we need to be able to discern the differences between the industrial (mass) and the (idiosyncratic) organic tourist, the kind I observed in the 1960s. Both types continue to exist. What can we learn from each of them both about tourism and emergent tendencies in the larger society?

Let me suggest that the questions that are asked determine the methods best suited to answer them. The choice of method is secondary to framing our research questions.

So far, tourism studies is defined solely by its empirical domain. It does not have a theory or method, nor does it make distinctive use of the theory and methods of another discipline or disciplines. Name ten things that tourism researchers would agree are settled knowledge based on their research so far. Name one thing. We do not have a foundational body of tested and retested, widely agreed upon findings. The field exists as myriad case studies, each one representing itself as a new beginning. Earlier studies, mine among them, are often referenced but very rarely engaged on more than a nominal or superficial level. The current proliferation of disconnected case studies would not be tolerated in established social science journals, or for finding a foothold in universities programs and departments. Tourism research as we know it today, exists only because there is a general sense that tourism is an important new factor reshaping social, cultural, psychic and economic life. The widespread belief that tourism is “the world’s largest industry” is the primary enabler of its current permissive disarray. The field has been given the benefit of the doubt in hopes that its scatter-shot approach might someday produce insight and understanding.

After 50 years of research on tourism there are still a number of basic questions that need to be addressed. Here is a partial list:

- We still don’t know with any precision how tourist desire differs from other desires.
- We still don’t know how human *experience* (the tourist “commodity” what the tourists are paying for) is different from other (material) consumer commodities like automobiles or books.
- We still have no general conceptual model of the specific impacts of the arrival of tourists on local cultural forms and expressions. We know that every culture is affected by its contact with other cultures like the incorporation of Moorish, Islamic, and Arabic elements into contemporary Spanish language and culture. But how do the changes caused by the arrival of mobs of tourists differ from earlier and other forms of cultural influence.

Tourism researchers today identify themselves as experts in, and produce case analyses, of putative “types” of tourism that correspond with different types of tourist business and products: sun, sand and sea tourism, sex tourism, cruise tourism, luxury resort tourism, dark tourism, medical and dental tourism, pro-poor tourism, solidarity tourism, eco tourism, extreme tourism, disaster tourism, roots tourism, etcetera, etcetera. Case studies of different “types” of tourism may be of potential value to developers of tourist attractions and accommodations as they attempt to shape their brand identity and outreach to potential customers. But so long as the above basic theoretical questions remain unanswered, this kind of applied work will need to be re-done every year or two as destination popularity, tastes and regional

economies change or evolve. If this is the future, there will never be a field of tourism studies. It will effectively devolve into a new kind of busy-work for professors.

Dilemata: In *Empty Meeting Grounds* (1992), you pointed out the ways in which tourism affected cultural identities by producing new “ethnicities”. How would you qualify such thing today? Is it something avoidable, undesirable, harmful for the local culture? Or, is it a way to make it survive with adaptations? How would you approach this relationship that is here created between visitors and natives performing or adapting their habits/customs specifically for them?

DMacC: It is not so much a matter of creating new ethnicities as a strategic mobilization of cultural traits for purposes of communicating with tourists and other outsiders.

Even free of tourist influences, ethnic identities are dialogic. They are formed in human communication at individual and group levels. They have no firmly fixed basis in biology, biography, culture or logic. They are subject to contestation and co-evolution as in the recent resurgence of rhetorics of “White superiority” in response to “Black lives matter.” No individual is the perfect embodiment of the traits or characteristics that have been attributed to his or her ethnicity. It is more like ethnic traits are cultural “ready to wear” that can be selected to burnish or diminish a person’s sense of self or pride. “Identity” is nothing in- and of-itself. It is only the skeleton we hang our putative personality and ethnic traits on in order to claim that we are somebody. Problems start to occur when people begin to believe that the traits attributed to them by others are real. This can lead to groundless high or low self-esteem.

I wrote the chapter on “Reconstructed Ethnicity” out of concern that ethnic groups were beginning to trade on their value as tourist attractions. Their economic survival as a components of the global system of attractions requires that they transform themselves into colourful cultural entities in the eyes of others, untouched by the modern world: authentic peasants and primitives. I was concerned that tourism was becoming a way of perpetuating their economic underdevelopment that began with their exploitation during the period of European colonial expansion, and continues now under a positive sign. ‘We came and underpaid you for your natural resources because you were economically backward. Now, if you will just stay economically backward we will come and admire you for your authenticity.’

Having had the opportunity to observe ethnic minorities who make their living as tourist attractions, I am no longer very much concerned about this. They prove themselves to be perfectly capable of an awareness of the false backwardness that is imposed upon. They are fully capable of doubling their awareness of their role as an attraction *and* of their position as a player in the global economy. A great deal of their humor is founded on their gulling of the tourist with acts of false “authentic simplicity and tradition.” And the tourists, for their part, do not seem to mind seeing fabricated shows of generic, folklorishness.

Dilemata: All these complex issues make us wonder if it is really possible to find any kind of authentic experience today. Does authenticity almost inevitably disappear when put into contact with tourism? Or is it authenticity a fiction constructed by commerce and the tourist eye?

DMacC: I am going to go with “authenticity is a fiction.” Only I would reword the last part as “. . . constructed by commerce based on tourist *desire*.” Because tourists very often see through *staged authenticity* but this does not stop them from continuing to desire the real thing. “Is it possible to find any kind of authentic experience today?” Let me suggest that all of our experiences are authentic except for those we encounter when we are searching for authenticity. I know this may sound a bit too elliptical or dialectical. But if you pause for a moment and remember trying to revive a failed relationship, or make spontaneity happen, or to believe in someone who no longer deserves your confidence, you will understand the dialectics of authenticity. It was always there until someone tries to find it or produce it. The search for authenticity, the demand for authenticity, the need for authenticity, means it has gone away.

Dilemata: The Frankfurt School theorized that the culture industry involved the Fordist regulation of leisure and cultural experiences. In light of what we can see today, could we argue that, because of so many available platforms, tour operators and etcetera, the tourist experience has become more programmed and predictable than work itself, (as it is growing precarious and flexible)? Is this a natural thing to happen?

I do not recommend putting all of tourism into the industrial ideal of tourism. Your comment about it being more programmed and predictable than work itself is correct for industrial mass tourism. Recall the “industrial (mass)” versus “organic (idiosyncratic)” division from my previous answers. Let me add a parallel distinction between tourists “who just want to get away from it all” versus tourists “who are searching for something.” John Urry and Nelson Graburn hypothesize that the fundamental touristic motivation is to take a break from their humdrum, boring, work-a-day lives. Urry posits a “basic binary division between the “ordinary everyday” and the “extraordinary.” All the Urry tourist wants is a few days of something “extraordinary.” I once commented that there is no doubt in my mind that there are tourists whose everyday lives are uninteresting, who travel because they fantasize a break from their ordinary dull experience. I hope their numbers are as small as they possibly can be. I also have no doubt that there are tourists whose everyday lives are exciting and rarely boring; whose work is productive, creative and appreciated; who maintain strong erotic and other attachments to their lovers; and who are buoyed by a large network of engaging friends, relatives, and acquaintances. These would be people for whom there is little difference between their everyday lives and life on tour, at least in terms of interest value and pleasure. And I hope their numbers are as large as possible. They should not be viewed as lesser tourists just because their life on tour is merely different from their everyday lives and not separated from the everyday by a basic binary division between pleasure and displeasure.

The tourist industry, mass tourism, with all its Fordist leanings, will naturally find its strongest appeal among the Urry tourists who believe themselves to have boring ordinary everyday lives. The industry has little sway over those who are traveling *to* something rather than merely *away* from home. It is much easier to tell someone they are about to have an experience that is “extraordinary” than to try to discover the idiosyncratic curiosity of those whose lives are fully satisfying even when they are not on tour. Ironically, but not unexpectedly, tourists who are functionaries in Fordist work arrangements are the ones most likely to end up in “extraordinary” Fordist packages while on tour.

Dilemata: In *The Ethics of Sightseeing* (2011) you raised your concerns again for an ethics of tourism or of the traveler. Did you feel supported (or, at least, understood)? By whom or

by which organizations particularly? Are there any particular stakeholders or responsible institutions, organisms, heads... that, in your opinion, should be involved with this today?

DMacC: My *Ethics of Sightseeing* was addressed to individual tourists, not to the industry or those who monitor the positive and negative impacts of tourism. I posed the question, 'Does my presence in this strange land help or harm the people or the natural systems I encounter here? Are they joyful about my presence, indifferent, or hostile? Do they seek cynically to manipulate me?' (p.66). My underlying question was the same one that I have been asking for the past 50 years: What is the good of tourism? This ethical question has been driving my critique of the postmodern condition and my search for a moral ordering and sensibility in tourism that hitherto has been confined to its negative cultural and environmental impacts, eco-tourism and sustainability. I wanted to make it plain: Ethical tourists take responsibility for understanding their own pleasure and what, if any, 'good' it serves (p.53).

Except for five or six reviews written by readers who understood my intent well enough to explicate and extend my thinking on the subject, the book has received no notice. It is the only monograph I have written that has not been adopted for classroom use and republished in multiple languages. I don't think it is a failure, but I may not live long enough to see it succeed.

Dilemata: The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) adopted a "Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics" in 2017 that aims to promote more "sustainable" tourism. Many countries have signed up. Could we ask you your position or opinion about this? How do you envision the future regarding this issue?

Since the aforementioned framework convention has been accused of covering up some abusive practices of the tourism industry, we wonder whether and under what conditions "sustainable tourism" is indeed possible. Could you say something about this?

DMacC: I am not familiar with this particular UNWTO initiative. But if there is one consistent lesson throughout *The Ethics of Sightseeing* it is that all ethical thought and behavior is susceptible to turning into its opposite in an instant. I am familiar with requests to tourists to not litter, to stay on trails, to avoid approaching or feeding the wild animals, etc. These are made under the positive sign of "ethical tourism," but often their actual aim is to justify setting aside restrictions on the numbers of visitors to fragile eco-systems.

Regarding sustainable tourism, so long as there is an uncontrolled tourist "industry", tourism will continue to grow. It is sustainable from the standpoint of ever increasing profits. It is only "unsustainable" from the standpoint of local people whose lives are made miserable by having unruly mobs of vacationers dumped on them, and natural and cultural attractions crushed under the feet of torrents of adoring tourists.

Dilemata: From where we stand (Córdoba, Andalucía), after Covid tourism seems to be recovering at the speed of light reproducing the same non sustainable practices as before, if not more aggressive. It is almost as if everyone has forgotten the negative effects that it brings to rely on a non-solid/non respectful touristic model. We are certainly discouraged by this and have almost lost all hope that changes are possible. Which are your views about the pandemic and post-pandemic situation in relation to touristic practices? And your feelings?

DMacC: The pandemic might have been an opportunity for popular destinations like Cordoba to initiate discussion of what tourism would be like if there were no tourism industry, or if the impacts of industrial scale tourism were substantially reduced. The basis for this discussion should be an understanding that without the industry gathering up and dropping off massive numbers of tourists, Cordoba would continue to be visited by those interested enough and curious enough to go there and motivated enough to find their own way. This discussion would parallel the debates about industrial agriculture versus organic sustainable agriculture that began about 50 years ago.

Here, in my view, is the change that opened the door to unsustainable tourism. When I was doing my research in the 1960s, airfares were substantially more expensive. Until the 1970s all large international carriers flying the same routes were required to charge the same price per seat for air travel. They were not allowed to compete based on price. The comfort of the seating and quality of food, drink, and other services drove consumer choice. Only tiny Icelandic that was still flying propeller planes was exempt from the one-price rule. In 1968 every open return roundtrip coach seat from New York to Madrid cost \$525.00. That is equivalent to 4,590 Euros at today's (October, 2022) exchange rate. Tourists could realize some savings by booking a stay of no less than three or more than four weeks before returning home. The pan-industry cost of one of these three-week "excursion" tickets was \$331.00 equivalent to 2,885.00 Euros or double what the same flight costs today.

It is important to know that the higher costs of airfares did not absolutely restrict international travel to those with substantial economic means. Often the only other tourists Juliet and I encountered at famous attractions were very nearly penniless students like ourselves. It required a great deal of focus, saving, and motivation commensurate with the greater investment. But we did it. Enough of us scraped together the cost of the trip (on Icelandic in our case) to make *Europe on \$5 a Day* a best selling guidebook. But even along with those who could afford it, there were not enough tourists to form a visible mass or to disturb the routines of people in the host countries. Locals and tourists of all classes shared the same accommodations, restaurants and services of all classes. There was sufficient capacity of existing lodging, restaurants and other services to accommodate both locals and tourists.

The rapid growth of tourism to a position of preeminence is based on a unique characteristic of the tourist "product." The startup costs for tourist enterprises never include the cost of the *attraction*, the reason for tourism in the first place. Anyone can make a room available to Air B n B visitors and keep it filled every night because it is walking distance to the city's art museum. They didn't have to house, and protect the artworks in the museum in order to sell out their room. Tourist motivation and desire is not, in and of itself, the source of overtourism. It is the many ways airline charters, cruise ships, oversized busses filled with packaged tourists, resort chains, internet enabled home rental schemes, etc. exploit tourist desire that leads to super-saturation in places like Spain's Costa del Sol and Venice. Fodors can double the numbers it brings to the Mona Lisa without painting another Mona Lisa. Freddy Laker Enterprises can quintuple the numbers it drops on a Spanish beach without manufacturing more beach. The industry can exponentially increase the number of tourists it squeezes into a region without contributing anything to create or maintain the attractions which are, in effect, crucial free goods provided to the industry.

Tourists don't "consume" the tropical beaches they visit. They don't buy and take home the masterpieces. They leave the beaches and the paintings behind for the next tourists to experience. The industry for the most part, doesn't contribute to the maintenance or protection of the things the tourists come to experience. The raw materials, research and development, manufacture, maintenance, brand recognition, etc. of the Cordoba, the Alhambra, Pyrenees, a Goya masterpiece, have all been donated gratis to the tourist industry. And because a moment in the presence of an attractions (with a photo opportunity) satisfies most tourists, the industry can double and triple the number of visitors by simply crowding more in and speeding up the assembly line.

There are straightforward solutions to the problem of overtourism. Governments at all levels can consider prohibiting, or imposing size limits and/or head taxes on air charter landings, cruise ship dockings, and tour bus parking. The taxes could be increased until the numbers of arrivals dropped to acceptable levels. The revenue from the taxes could be used to meliorate the economic losses to the local tourism sector. Local police departments could enforce littering, loitering, public intoxication, drug, noise and lewd behavior laws on tourists who believe that "getting away from it all" means throwing off all social constraint. District attorneys could also more rigorously enforce anti-corruption laws that prohibit local politicians from becoming rich by granting exceptions to zoning regulations to those seeking to build resorts and high-rise hotels without consideration for the impacts on local infrastructure or the environment.

When the quality of life of those who are not profiting from industrial scale tourism becomes intolerable, they will organize and demand that some, or all of the above measures be considered. There are numerous tools for reducing the impacts of overtourism if it is genuinely regarded as a serious problem.

It happens that one of the best books I have read about these matters, about the intersection of tourism, ethics, activism, social and environmental concerns, and social theory was written by one of your own, *Souvenir souvenir: un antropologo ante el turismo* by Fernando Estevez Gonzales, (Concreta, 2022)