January 2015

Reclaiming the Dérive: the Tourist, the Souvenir, and the Search for the Utopic

Ashlee Joyce
University of New Brunswick, Ashlee.Joyce@unb.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss3/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Word Hoard by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlsadmin@uwo.ca.
Everyday Abstract:

As a remedy to the banality of the modern urban experience, the surrealist collective Situationist International conceived of the dérive: the unplanned, improvisational meandering through urban space. Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project examines the commercialization of individuals’ interaction with the city in a way that complicates the Situationist’s notion of the dérive as entirely free of ideology. In this paper, I examine how the tourist industry attempts to recuperate the sense of engagement with the “unexplored” that formed the motive for the Situationist’s original project. Linking theories of tourism put forth by Carolyn Cartier, Jon Goss and D.M. Lasansky to the everyday life theories of Michel de Certeau, I argue that the posture of distance adopted by the tourist allows for an idealized experience of the self in relation to space, since the tourist, by temporarily condensing his/her existence into the enclosed spaces of the suitcase, the hotel room, the resort or the tourist bubble, temporarily relinquishes his/her broad networks of everyday social, familial, and work-related commitments in favour of a mode of interaction with space based solely on desire.

The tourist’s engagement with touristed space is an attempt to reclaim a sense of the utopic in the everyday by surrendering their ideological connections. The irony of this attempt, however, lies in the heavily commodified nature of touristed space, the material trace of which can be found in the tourist souvenir collection, which gathers together the fragmentary traces of memories that may cover a vast temporal/spatial range into a presumably coherent whole. I draw on the simultaneously panoptic and fragmentary example of the snowglobe to illustrate the repressions upon which this process relies, and which could be to blame for the at once hypersensitive and exhausted experience of the modern everyday described by Georg Simmel in “Sociological Aesthetics.” Finally, drawing on the work of Marita Sturken, who argues for kitsch as a healing response to national traumas, I suggest that kitsch may also function as a...
means of coping with the traumatic realization of the impossibility of the archival fantasy of a panoptic view of the everyday.

Theorizing the everyday and its relation to the archive is largely an act of re-acquaintance with space, time, and its material traces. Groups like the Situationist International and social critics like Walter Benjamin have figured the everyday through material culture and the modern urban experience. The surrealist project of attempting to locate the marvellous in the everyday is taken up, and, to a degree, contested by Benjamin, who suggests that capitalism and the commodification of the everyday inhibits one’s ability to engage with urban space in a way that is free from ideology. What these theorists do not fully consider is how the tourist industry attempts to recuperate a sense of engagement with the “unexplored.” I refer to this process as the touristic experience of the everyday: the desire, through travel and tourism, to defamiliarize oneself of one’s everyday experience and reclaim the surrealist fantasy of uninhibited engagement with space. By linking the touristic experience of the everyday to theories of material culture put forth by Georg Simmel and Michel de Certeau, this paper will also suggest that the tourist souvenir collection enacts the panoptic fantasy of the archive, but that the centrality of kitsch to the tourist souvenir aesthetic both acknowledges, and attempts to recover from the trauma of one’s inability to fully achieve this fantasy. Thus, the tourist subject position occupies a complex relation to theories of the everyday, of material culture, and of the archive, in that it adheres to the surrealist fantasy of a utopic experience of space but manifests this desire through heavy commodification: both of space, and of the souvenir items that occupy the tourist’s personal archive. The “kitsch comfort” of the souvenir collection illustrates the individual’s acknowledgement of, and attempt to recuperate from, the increasingly fragmented and commodified experience of the urban everyday, and the impossibility of achieving the archival fantasy of resolving this fragmentary experience into a coherent whole.

For cultural theorists like Walter Benjamin and the surrealists who preceded him, the modern everyday urban experience is one of drudgery resulting from capitalist power imbalances. As a remedy to the banality of the modern urban experience, the surrealist collective Situationist International conceived of the dérive: the unplanned, improvisational meandering through urban space. Necessitated by the monotonous experience of the proletariat everyday, the dérive defamiliarizes the walker to her/his everyday urban environment, and in offering to the wanderer the opportunity to give himself over to the “play of affects and attractions of an urban psychogeography” (Highmore 139), opens up the possibility for “a utopian remaking of social relations” (Smith 104). This notion is at once taken up and complicated by Walter Benjamin, who, in his Arcades Project, imagines the Paris arcades as a “phantasmagoria” (10) of consumption that evidences the commercialization of individuals’
interaction with the city. His description of the glass-roofed passages shows a city that “teems with bodies, images, signs, stimulants, movement” (Highmore 61) in which “a person enters in order to be distracted” (Benjamin 7), and in so doing, reveals the degree to which the forces of consumerism transform the city into a collection of commodities from which the wanderer, or flâneur, may pick and choose. This process both aligns his work with the psychogeographical and complicates the notion of the dérive as a process by which one may break totally free from ideology. Though his work does not explicitly engage with the discourse of tourism, the idea of the historical and spatial qualities of the city being consumed as commodities is of particular interest to the tourist subject position. Like the flâneur, the tourist, in her interaction with the city, comes into her experience of the urban space without the “burden” of the complex network of socio-economic conditions that shape it.

The tourism industry has as its main objective the recuperation of one’s ability, in essence, to perform the dérive. Carolyn Cartier speaks of the tourism industry as primarily the trade in the seduction of place, in which “the unknowns of the journey” are marketed toward individuals, encouraging them “to travel to a place, encounter its landscapes, and open up to its possibilities of experience” (5). The tourist, like the flâneur, “flirts with space” (9) in a way that is detached from its socio-economic context and that is guided, supposedly, by whim. But given that tourism is not unique to the “proletariat” and that often tourists are not completely unaware of how the commercialization of city space shapes his/her flânerie (indeed, many tourists intentionally seek out the conspicuously inauthentic in places such as Walt Disney World, Las Vegas, and all-inclusive resorts), the purpose of tourism appears to extend beyond the attempted erasure of ideologies that entrap the individual into monotonous modes of existence. The tourist who, for example, takes an open-air bus tour of Harlem, or who visits an “all-inclusive” resort without venturing outside its gates, encounters the destination for a finite period of time and only to the degree to which it continues to exist as the tourist’s own idealization, divorced from class struggle. This distance not only allows for an idealized experience of space but an idealized experience of self, since the tourist, by temporarily condensing his existence into the enclosed space of the suitcase, the hotel room, the resort or the tourist bubble, temporarily relinquishes the broad networks of everyday social, familial, and work-related commitments. Seduction—defined by Jean Baudrillard as the process by which “the most ‘superficial’ aspect of discourse . . . acts upon the underlying prohibition (conscious or unconscious) in order to nullify it and to substitute for it the charms and traps of appearances” (152)—is an apt term for the desire and promise of a unified, or “whole” experience of place offered by the tourism industry, as this unification depends upon the repression or temporary nullification of one’s knowledge of the economic and social forces that shape one’s path through the
urban environment. The touristic experience of place is thus, in essence, a utopic fantasy of the everyday.

Of course, tourism is not limited to the "all-inclusive" resort, and our analysis of tourism as an attempt to recapture a sense of the utopic in the everyday must address broader notions of escape through tourism. The act of visiting a new city, for example, is distinct from resort travel, and yet is based on pretenses of relinquishment; only this time, the touristic experience of the everyday is manifest not via the act of disengagement of cutting oneself off, but rather by the desire to view in an idealized manner that the tourist, who comes to occupy the role of spectator, imagines to be all-encompassing. This phenomenon may be understood further through Michel de Certeau's identification of the desire to view the urban everyday from a remove that erases its messiness, which he characterizes as an escape from (or repression of) the forces of urban everyday experience that dissolve distinctions of identity. In "Walking in the City," de Certeau states:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators . . . His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed’ into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. (250)

For de Certeau, this view represents that of the urban planner, who must "disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them" (250). But it could just as easily represent what the tourism industry promises: the panoptic view of space that allows the individual to transcend his/her body, which comes to be replaced with the spectral, (and especially, for the tourist, photographic) eye/I. The view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center becomes a metaphor for the tourist's desire to transcend the "messiness" of the everyday, and read the everyday landscape like a text. But by virtue of the tourism industry's contribution to the economy of a given city, as well as they ways in which tourism can shape the urban environment itself by the construction, for example, of the "clean, safe and attractive environments in which to entertain" known as the "tourist bubble" (Lasansky 2), the tourist is just as caught up in the "anonymous law" (de Certeau 250) (i.e., capitalism and consumerism) which governs one's path through the city as its native inhabitants. In fact, the blurring of the distinction between tourist and native experience of the urban everyday may be seen as not just implicated with, but a
direct outgrowth of, the commodification of the everyday. Cartier describes the phenomenon of “the touristed landscape” (2), which recognizes “the messiness of tourism as a category of activity, experience, and economy. In the touristed landscape people occupy simultaneous or sequential if sometimes conflicted positions of orientation toward landscape experience and place consumption” (3). As landscapes and cities are increasingly marketed for “consumption” by tourists, the shopping experience becomes increasingly tied up in the notions of escapism and the exotic (consider the Paris Arcades as a climate-controlled city-in-miniature or a mall as a space for potted trees, fountains, and artificial waterfalls), thus expanding the notion of escapist practices beyond the uniquely touristic, and allowing it to be applied as a more general theorization of everyday experience.

While the touristic experience (i.e., seduction) of place may be seen as a continuation of the surrealist project to locate the marvellous in the everyday—a process that is complicated by the tourism industry’s ties to the commodification of urban space, the tourist souvenir collection makes tangible what de Certeau identifies as the utopian fantasy of the panoptic view of the city. de Certeau identifies utopic freedom in “this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts” (249), which is at odds with the “messiness” of the street-level city, that is, the complex network of socio-economic tensions that form the urban landscape. The archival fantasy of freezing what is constantly in flux is manifested in the tourist souvenir collection. One type of souvenir, the ubiquitous, mass-produced miniature snowglobe, is the focus of a study by Marita Sturken, and is a particularly significant enactment of this archival desire. In words that echo de Certeau’s fantasy of the view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, Sturken suggests that “[w]e look into the world of each globe as if looking from a godlike position onto a small world” (2), and that their miniatuized and often sentimental contents “offer a sense of containment and control over an event” (2). The purchasing and accumulation of these types of souvenir objects by tourists enacts the primary fantasy of the archive—the panoptic view of the whole—not just by their condensation of emblematic images into a sort of Benjaminian **montage**, but in their condensation of fragments of memories into one totemic object. It is the material trace of the fantasy of a touristic experience of the everyday, that is, innocent, idealized, and detached. In the words of Lasansky, the souvenir “represents the capacity of the commodity to substitute for the entire field of object relations, for a lost world of immanence that is re-stored in the souvenir shops of tourist consumption, and so brought into private possession” (57). The souvenir is the most seductive of commodities; the tourist consumer is not deceived by the snowglobe’s inauthenticity, but instead consciously substitutes the inauthenticity of its contents for the actual lived experience of place. But the irony of the snowglobe is that it is at once fragmentary and panoptic: the idealized view of the cityscape presented by **“Pop/Corn”**
the snowglobe depends on the selective inclusion and exclusion of elements, which renders it a fragment of the unified impression of place it attempts to capture, and which highlights the limits of the archival process in bearing witness in a static and unified way to what is inherently subjective, fragmentary, and always in flux.

In considering the tourist souvenir collection as a manifestation of the desire, through the tourist experience of place, to envision a unified and idealized self, I turn to Georg Simmel, whose work constitutes “an ‘everyday’ aesthetics of the fragment” (Highmore 35) in which “the particularity of the everyday is made to register more general social forces” (37). Simmel invests great value in the “everyday” object, noting in “Sociological Aesthetics” that “[e]very philosophical system, every religion, every moment of our heightened emotional experience searches for symbols which are appropriate to their expression. If we pursue this possibility of aesthetic appreciation to its final point, we find that there are no essential differences among things” (Simmel 1968: 69). Under this theoretical framework, fragments of the everyday such as mass-produced tourist souvenirs can be seen as possessing “material traces of human intentions and actions, or the social relations of its ‘production’” (Goss 56). Aside from creating, through serial repetition and repeated consumption of the souvenir, an imagined link to a shared experience of place, the souvenir also creates a sort of touristic “canon”; the tourist souvenir contributes to the mythologization of place, which then seduces the potential tourist into visiting that place. As the tourist economy develops, it begins to commodify and shape the urban environment so that the desire to redeem the ideological freedom of the dérive is less and less possible. In this act of “touristing” the cityscape, the souvenir remaps and recreates the urban environment just as much as the “spirit” of that environment gives rise to the souvenir. Thus, the tourist souvenir is never unimplicated in its environment, and can never authentically represent the idealized view of space it presents, just as the tourist can never fully achieve the detachment from everyday experience of place she seeks.

The tension inherent in the snowglobe’s attempt to recuperate the disparate fragments taken to be emblematic of a particular place, and to condense these fragments into something which represents a panoptic view of that place may be taken as symptomatic of what, in his essay “Sociological Aesthetics,” Simmel diagnoses as the “neurasthenic experience” of the modern everyday, characterized by “[e]xhausted nerves which are drifting between hypersensitivity and lack of sensitivity,” and which “can be excited only by the most opaque forms and rudely accurate details, or else by the most tender and starkest stimuli” (80). He goes on to describe the Berlin Trade Exhibition of 1896 as a collection of “heterogeneous industrial products,” which are “crowded together in close proximity” and whose effect is to “paralyse[e] the senses” ([1896] 1991: 119). Simmel’s description, according to Highmore, “reads like an allegory of the commodification...
of the urban everyday” (40). Under this characterization, commercial spaces like Benjamin’s Paris Arcades, which juxtapose numerous commodities into a sort of montage, and tourist destinations like Las Vegas and Disneyworld, which condense a multitude of miniaturized and synthetic aesthetic elements in order to envelop the tourist-shopper in the exotic, both become a means of enacting the archival desire to see everything at once and to see it at a distance, removed from its everyday context. Though he does not state it explicitly, Simmel could very easily be offering here a description of the kitsch aesthetic that is so embraced by the tourist souvenir industry, linking the garishness of the mass-produced souvenir object to the increasingly commodified experience of place. The souvenir collection gathers together the material traces of memories that may cover a vast temporal/spatial range into a coherent whole. However, this attempt to recuperate the fragmentary in the panoptic—an archival fantasy that is essentially impossible to realize—could be to blame for the at once hypersensitive and exhausted experience of the modern everyday Simmel describes.

In her book, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*, Marita Sturken links the kitsch aesthetic, specifically that which comprises tourist souvenir collections, to the need in American culture to maintain a state of innocence in the face of national trauma. Though often dismissed, due to its tendency toward mass-production, imitation, and garishness as “the lowest form of culture: ‘not-art’ and ‘inauthentic’” (Nobel 82), kitsch sentimentalism, according to Sturken, is a form of “comfort culture” (5) that allows Americans to occupy a “tourist relationship to history” (4)—that is, an “innocent pose and distant position” in which one “participates uncritically in a culture in which notions of good and evil are used to define complex conflicts and tensions” (10). Kitsch, she argues, offers to the consumer a position of simultaneous distance and proximity, which provides a means to feel one has been authentically close to an event, that one has experienced it in some way. In these sites of tourism, history is understood to be something that is consumed and experienced through images, memory is thought to reside in commodities such as teddy bears, and memorials are accompanied by gift shops. (12)

The investment in the notion of innocence in the face of national traumas such as 9/11 is, according to Sturken, a key factor in the justification of America’s entrance into armed conflict (which must always be seen as retaliation), and in the notion of American exceptionalism more generally. Kitsch objects like souvenir teddy bears, T-shirts and snowglobes embody this sense of innocence. But why does kitsch inhabit the tourist souvenir industry to such an extent, and what is its link to the souvenir as an embodiment of idealized space? One of Benjamin’s goals in his *Arcades Project* was to come to an understanding of the everyday by

“Pop/Corn”
way of an alternate historiography based on the collection of fragments, in a way that is akin to “the nineteenth-century collector of antiquities and curiosities” or to the “ragpicker” (ix), whose objects come to take on an aura of symbolic importance, such that the interpretation of the everyday becomes “something like dream interpretation” (ix). In a discussion of the tourist’s attempt to locate the utopic in the everyday, kitsch comfort becomes a response not just symptomatic of Simmel’s notion of sensory paralysis, but a healing response to it, allowing a relationship of “distant proximity” to the hyperstimulating environment of the commodified everyday.

Understanding the everyday in terms of one’s engagement with material culture has been the project of many cultural theorists. The modern experience of the everyday cannot be divorced from one’s engagement with the commodification of one’s environment, nor can archival theory be understood separately from how this commodification affects the material trace of the everyday. The tourist experience of the everyday may be seen as a special case of the attempt to regain a sense of the “marvelousness” of the everyday in the wake of increasing commodification of the urban landscape. But as this commodification comes to blur the distinction between tourist and non-tourist, the process of “doing tourism” becomes caught up in the same “anonymous law” (de Certeau 250) that shapes the dérive. The touristic experience of space is thus a utopic fantasy—an attempt to experience the everyday in a way that distances the individual from socio-economic realities of place. This posture of detachment is reified in the souvenir collection, which enacts the archival desire to unify the messiness of everyday experience in a self-contained object. In this light, the kitsch aesthetic that is so central to the tourist souvenir industry may be viewed not only as a comfort to specific instances of national trauma. It may also be viewed more broadly as a comfort to the trauma that comes with the recognition of the impossibility of fully achieving the archival fantasy of a panoptic view of the everyday. The Situationist International had as their goal the reclamation of the marvellous in an otherwise monotonous experience of the everyday. With the oscillation between this mode of experience and the increasingly fragmentary nature of the everyday experience of commodified urban space the tourist as a category of identity attempts, albeit with limited success, to cope.

University of New Brunswick

WH, Issue 3, 8 January 2015
Works Cited


“Pop/Corn”