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Life as Itinerary: Tourism, personal narratives and gratification in a culture of the continuous present.

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Abstract

It is argued that the proliferation of personal communications technology is effecting a change in the condition of life. Usage of these devices sequesters personal time and removes delay, with negative consequences for gratification. The ‘culture of the continuous present’ draws an analogy with the present tense in the English language: the simple present, ‘I do’, gives ground to a continuous present, ‘I am doing’, wherein the mind is engaged and unavailable for reverie, anticipation and recollection. Life, it is suggested, is analogous with a journey, punctuated by ‘landmark’ experiences by which individuals construct *personal narratives* and thereby make sense of their lives. Gratification in life thrives on anticipation and thus depends on delay, but is threatened by a growing culture of instant gratification. The proliferation of ‘happiness’ surveys may be secondary evidence of this problem. Tourism is largely insulated from these changes: trips are the subject of daydreams, and require planning; they are long in duration, and recorded photographically; are remembered long afterwards; and are thus powerful contributors to personal narratives. Tourism, therefore, enjoys augmented salience in a culture in which gratification is otherwise compromised.

Introduction

The author is a lecturer in the Business School at the University of Lincoln, a cathedral city in the east of England. He became an academic some twenty years ago. Prior to that, he held management positions in destination marketing and arts management. Born of that experience has been an abiding interest in understanding how people enjoy themselves: that is to say, the innate nature of enjoyment. A privilege of academic work is to have the opportunity to pursue such interests. This paper brings together two strands of thinking: the concept of personal narratives,

and the nature of gratification. A concept termed the 'culture of the continuous present' is introduced as a theoretical paradigm. This seeks to explain changes in the cultural condition which, it is suggested, are threatening the gratifications gained through consumption. Tourism stands out as a field relatively unaffected by these changes.

A new sociology: the culture of the continuous present

The thesis is that human subjects are being led into an intensive 'continuous present' by the usage of personal communications media: a culture defined increasingly by 'doing' rather than 'being'. The 'continuous present' is a metaphor drawn from a linguistic construct in the English language: the difference between a simple present, and a continuous present. 'I do' is the simple present, as in, 'I give a lecture at 1100 on Mondays'. 'I am doing', by contrast, is the continuous present, expressed in French by '*en train de*'. The continuous present is deployed when the individual is occupied, and time for reverie and reflection is curtailed.

Neurophysiological studies have shown that, when human subjects permit themselves time for reverie, particular areas of the brain become active. Research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology shows cerebral areas that become active when the brain is in a 'default' resting state (Vincent *et al*, 2006, p.3528). There is speculation that this may constitute 'a kind of spontaneous mental time travel (that) lends a sense of coherence to one's past, present, and future experiences' (Mason *et al*, 2007, p.395). One can only speculate as to what a deprivation of default mode activity on the human brain may mean: whether, for example, it is analogous with sleep deprivation. What seems certain is that default-mode activity reduces when the mind is focused.

Engagement by the continuous present may be a physical task, or something cerebral: as in, 'Will you stop talking please, I *am thinking*'. Experience tells us that preoccupation with doing inhibits the pleasures of being: the New Testament story of the sisters Mary and Martha is a noteworthy example (Luke 10: 38-42). A more contemporary example was witnessed by the author, at a concert by an ensemble known as the *Scissor Sisters*. From his balcony seat, the author watched a large crowd of young concert-goers standing in the well of the arena, jostling to record images using photographically-equipped mobile telephones. Eventually the band's female singer, stage name Ana Matronic, addressed the sea of communication devices before her: "You are putting so much effort into getting pictures. Why don't you enjoy the *moment*?"

A look at selective data indicates the extent to which the virtual has infused the real. A 2010 report from the UK's Office of Communications showed that UK adults spent half their waking hours engaged by electronic media: television, internet, mobile communications devices (Ofcom, 2010). A survey of university student lifestyles conducted by the *Times Higher* in late 2011 suggested that the average student spent nearly thirty hours per week in front of a computer: 8 hours studying online, 10 hours on games, shopping and other interests, and 12 hours on social networking sites (Grove, 2012). A survey of UK under 25s suggested that eight out of ten used mobile communication devices to contact friends, and to access networking sites, while simultaneously watching television (Digital Clarity, 2011).

The sociologist John Urry published a text at the turn of the millennium subtitled, 'Mobilities for the twenty-first century' (Urry, 2000). He was credited with having written, to quote the back cover copy, 'a manifesto for 21st century sociology'. That was twelve years ago, when Google was still operating out of someone's garden shed. It is suggested here that a sociology for the continuous present is now needed, to account for the arrival of media engagement as a defining feature of life and time, as evidenced in the data cited above.

Jean Baudrillard was prescient when he foresaw a surfeit of electronically-mediated information, driving populations into passivity (1988, p.212). The effects of the culture of the continuous present may not quite be described as 'passive' as such: on the surface, engagement with personal communication devices looks very active. But it is clear from the data cited above that the production, consumption and management of electronically-mediated information occupies a huge amount of the individual's personal time. In that sense, the cultural effect is one of distraction: it occupies and sequesters time and attention.

Life as a journey

What is life? According to William Shakespeare, it is piece of theatre. "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts..." (*As You Like It*, Act 2 Scene 7 Line 139). That is the analogy one would expect from a dramatist: life as theatre. John Bunyan, the English Puritan writer of the 17th century, wrote a celebrated book, the *Pilgrim's Progress*. His book is an allegory, presenting the Christian life as a journey, for which the celestial city is the destination: life as a quest for Godliness. Alternatively, as the band *10CC* suggest in the title and lyrics of their eponymous song, *Life is a Minestrone*: a maelstrom of experiences.

An analogy proposed by the author is that of a *personal narrative*: an evolving story, told through the actions and reactions of the individual, as disposition, intention and serendipity combine to shape an itinerary by which the individual seeks to make sense of their lives. The author's attention was attracted to this concept, around which there is an emerging literature (see for example Shankar *et al*, 2001; Escalas, 2004), when conducting research into the satisfactions derived from visits to cathedrals. Visitors had difficulty incorporating the experience of the visit into their own lives. Cathedral guide books typically spoke of intellectual matters such as history and architecture, but to incorporate the experience into their own personal narrative, human visitors needed something to enable them to identify with the human endeavour that had produced those structures (Voase, 2007).

Personal narratives appear to be punctuated with what shall be termed, 'landmark' events: lives are narrated, not by the everyday, but by the extraordinary. These landmark events may include personal celebrations, rite-of-passage events, and inevitably, tourist experiences. It has been shown through psychological studies that tourist experiences enjoy particular salience in the construction of the long-term memory (Larsen, 2007).

Moreover, there are generic stories by which people make sense of the world, which crop up repeatedly, and which the Hollywood film industry will not allow us to forget. For example, the

film, *Pretty Woman* is, in fact, *Cinderella*. The idea of generic myths was something developed by structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968, ch.9), but a more recent and monumental study argues, persuasively, that human beings are hard-wired, so to speak, to comprehend the world in terms of seven basic plots (Booker, 2004).

Consumption and gratification

It has been argued by Campbell (1987) that the pleasure of consumption begins, not with the act of consumption, but with anticipation; and anticipation requires delay. For example, the author testifies that the best cup of tea is the one consumed after mowing the lawn on a Sunday afternoon. Campbell goes so far as to suggest that, on occasions, the actual consumption of products and services can be disillusioning, because the reality can never measure up to the pleasurable anticipation (1995, p.118). This resonates with lived experience. Gratification is dependent on delay, because without it, the advance daydreaming, that may emerge as the best part of the experience, cannot be enjoyed.

The continuous present is a culture where delay is all but edited out. Google provides ready answers; consumer credit provides ready finance; Twitter provides an instant medium to air views; brands provide instant individuality (Voase, 2007a, p.545). Concerning brands, Nike's slogan speaks volumes: 'Just Do It'. Whatever you do, don't think about it. The continuous present removes the anticipation, and thereby, *much of the recollection*. The author knows when the best cup of tea is to be had, because he can remember it; and he remembers the daydreaming of it, while mowing the lawn, more than the drinking of the tea. The continuous present removes delay, takes the waiting out of wanting, and denies us the journey.

The contentment crisis

Governments are troubled about declining levels of happiness (for example, see BBC News, 2010; Earlam, 2012). This is secondary evidence of what? Perhaps some English-speakers do not quite understand their own language. Happiness, surely, is something that comes and goes, and is mood dependent: one can be happy and sad within a period of 24 hours. A more useful concept is that of contentment. A person who experiences contentment has ambitions that are realisable, and attainments that have given them a sense of self-worth. Happiness can be a contingent outcome of contentment. In French, the use of terms is perhaps clearer: to be loosely happy is to be *content*. But on our birthdays, we are urged by friends and well-wishers to be *heureux*: to enjoy a special state of happiness.

Western consumer society has been the creator of immeasurable benefits. But consumer society relies on the generation of discontentment, in order to work. Ideological Westerners are led to believe that choice is an unqualified blessing: but freedom to choose is a burden as well as a benefit (Shankar *et al*, 2006, pp 486-7). Consumer society satisfies needs and wants; but in order to get us to buy, it nurtures those needs and wants by fuelling desire. Advertisements would not work if they did not convince us that we are deficient if we do not have what they offer. Therefore consumer society works by fostering a cycle of desires that are never quite consummated (Belk *et*

al, 2003). The art of living contentedly in a consumer society, one must suppose, is to develop a certain resistance to its allures.

A by-product of the culture of the continuous present is the removal of delay in acquisition. This arguably has an infantilising effect on consumers. A child, lacking the adult discipline of restraint, seeks to satisfy desires immediately and repeatedly. Brands, in particular, are arguably instruments of infantilisation. One thinks again of Nike's strapline: 'Just do it'. The brand's short-cut to individuality is complemented by commercial offers to remove complexity in acquisition. This is often represented by the epithet, 'easy': as in easy listening, easy finance, EasyJet (Barber, 2007, p.86). To just 'do' it seems very ideologically proactive and Western; to make 'doing' 'easy' or 'instant' would seem a worthy commercial objective. But it is in polar opposition to the original spirit of modernity, as we shall now see.

Conclusion: Tourism, where the journey matters

Does the culture of the continuous present change the tourist experience? Not really. Tourism stands out as a field of consumption largely unaffected by these changes.

Campbell observes that tourism is a quintessential example of a consumption experience whose antecedence is anticipation (1995, pp 117-9). Even if booked at short notice, a trip requires advance conception and planning. The experience is longitudinal: over days, and weeks. The tourist makes a photographic record, and acquires souvenirs and mementos, to re-create and recollect the trip long after it has finished. How long does it take to drink a cup of tea? Two minutes. How long is a typical holiday? Two weeks. Do people make photographic records of themselves drinking tea? No. Do they make photographic records of their holidays? Yes. The vacational venture is neither easy nor instant.

It was suggested above that the culture of the continuous present subsists in polar opposition to the original spirit of modernity. The nineteenth-century American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, has these words attributed to him: "If a man write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mouse-trap than his neighbour, tho' he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door" (Partington, 1997, p.137). There we have it: the spirit of the modern. He was commenting on a society where enquiry was central, knowledge was sought out and applied, and progress was the consequence.

Do we recognise our consumer society in those words? No. These days, if the mouse trap is any good, it appears on the first page of a Google search; press a few buttons, and it is delivered to your door, overnight; gift-wrapped, if you choose. How sad. Because the trip to the house in the woods sounded rather exciting, didn't it? We who work in tourism are the stewards of a field of endeavour where the journey – the search for the metaphorical house in the woods – and its anticipations, its enjoyments and its recollections - are central, celebrated, and building blocks for the narratives of our lives. Let us meet the challenge.

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