

Discrepant Experiences

The Secular Tourist Gaze in Religious Countries and Vice-Versa

Rund Welten

With this paper, I aim to contribute to a hermeneutical framework for the consideration of the radical representational discrepancies between the secular 'tourist gaze' and non-western world-views that are largely shaped by religion. Tourism has been playing an important part in the economy of countries like Egypt and Tunisia, but in Islamic countries without a traditional tourist market, tourism is growing rapidly as well. Pakistan, for instance, attracted 1 million tourists in 2012 and in 2011, the inbound tourist count in Iran reached 3 million. Also, the number of outbound tourists from Islamic countries is increasing.¹ I want to focus on the 'discrepant experiences' of secular tourists visiting Islamic countries, for instance Dutch tourists that visit the Middle East. 'Discrepant experiences' – a term taken from Edward Said – are, as I will argue, inherent to modern, globalized tourism and I will deploy the notion in the context of a hermeneutics of travel with the intention to develop hermeneutical tools for the consideration of international tourism understood as a play of many voices, with all voices interacting, sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful.

1. The hermeneutics of travel

Hermeneutics, in the smaller meaning a theory of text interpretation, is in a broader sense a philosophical way of human interpretation as the kernel of humanity itself. Contrary to animals, human beings interpret their environment. To Paul Ricoeur, the most influential French philosopher in the field, hermeneutics is the practice of understanding oneself and the other and the world by interpretation. This implies that we take the world as textual, insofar as human existence is expressed through discourse. Discourse is the invitation humans make to one another to be interpreted.² To Ricoeur, the task of hermeneutics is twofold: 'to reconstruct the internal dynamic of the text, and to restore to the work its ability to project itself outside itself in the interpretation of a world that I could inhabit'.³ It is this definition that I take here as starting point.

¹ Source: <http://statistics.unwto.org> (October 1, 2013). Cf. N. SCOTT & J. JAFARI: *Tourism in the Muslim world* (Bingley 2010) 20.

² K. SIMMS: *Paul Ricoeur* (New York 2003) 31.

³ P. RICOEUR: *From text to action. Essays in hermeneutics*. 2 (London 1991) 18.

A hermeneutic interpretation of travel is based on the assumption that the discourse of travel provides a fresh approach for the interpretation of the self and of the relation with the other or, at the very least, that self-interpretation and the interpretation of otherness always play a part in travel. From a hermeneutical perspective, travel implies not only a focus on the experience of time and its stream, but also on place and mobility. Moreover, being abroad produces possibly a paradigm shift in our self-interpretation. Roughly speaking, the self is always embedded in a culture: cultural embedding as such is experienced as part of the self. By contrast, travelers are strangers in strange lands: selves that have abandoned their home soil. Abroad, most aspects of daily life are radically different. Global travel involves encounters in which the self is experienced as alien. Unlike in daily-life encounters with co-citizens or members of the same historical and cultural community, traveling always implies: dealing with strangers and strange cultures, beliefs and habits. Travel can be aimed at immigration and settlement in a new homeland or at new encounters, either with the self or with others, yet in all cases the notion of strangeness is inseparable from human mobility. A hermeneutics of travel takes these aspects into account.

It is clear that our world is rapidly globalizing. In old times, travel was reserved to some people in exceptional situations. Today, every world citizen who can afford it is tourist. From a hermeneutical perspective on travel, tourism plays a special role. Jacques Derrida once described perfect hospitality as the unbiased approach of the other: as the abandonment of the self as the interpretative framework for the consideration of otherness.⁴ Taken as such, tourism is biased travel. The tourist is stepping to another world in order to meet his expectations. One of the most important features of tourism is that it is cyclical: tourists leave home temporarily, only to return. Unlike refugees or the Dispersed, tourists always return to the safety of their homes.⁵

International tourism, being a global social phenomenon, is being spun like a complex web of commodified identities, authenticity (staged or otherwise), orientalism and Occidentalism, secular and religious mind-sets. Though international tourism is often marketed as a way to promote mutual understanding, it can actually reinforce differences between countries, cultures and religions in many cases and in many ways. Tourists and locals have their own specific representations of each other, but the discrepancy between images of self and projected images is often irreconcilable. The tourist gaze enhances this irreconcilability.

2. The tourist gaze and orientalism

I will introduce two authors who, independently of one another but both largely influenced by Michel Foucault, developed the theoretical ammunition to back

⁴ J. DERRIDA: *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford 1999).

⁵ Cf. Z. BAUMAN: *Globalization. The human consequences* (Cambridge 1998).

this approach. The first is John Urry, who described the biased attitude of tourists in his 1990 classic *The tourist gaze*.⁶ Urry broke new ground with regard to the study of tourists as subjects. Instead of describing tourism as an objective reality involving a collection of beaches, must-sees and museums, Urry describes tourism from the subjective perspective he calls ‘the tourist gaze’. The tourist gaze represents a particular intentionality of consciousness. Phenomenologically speaking, tourism is not so much a collection of activities, but rather a specific way of relating to the world. *The tourist gaze* introduces a perspective in which the world materializes exactly according to touristic expectations. Following Urry’s analysis, tourists are consumers par excellence, not straining to broaden their horizons, only looking to confirm the representation of the world as pursued by tourists. The tourist gaze is fixed, and it fixes. Unlike for instance journalists, tourists are not interested in development or change, only in images and appearances. They want to see the country and its locals as they should be, as if time stands still. According to the tourist gaze, it is the tourist that moves, while the locals are standing still. Philosophically speaking, the tourist gaze considers itself as a free subject, while the world (and the ‘locals’) are considered as mere objects. Hence the far reaching commodification of the world in international tourism. The tourist gaze represents a touristic perspective of the world, which incorporates everything other than the tourists themselves.⁷

Following this line of thought, tourism is understood to involve the kind of interpretation that reduces otherness to images and clichés, and defuses otherness by incorporating it into touristic snapshots. The mythology of the other is fundamental to many forms of tourism.⁸ Obsessively fixating, the tourist gaze reduces – and disarms – otherness. This type of tourism involves meeting only others that have been drawn inside one’s own comfort zone, like meeting the actors that come to the tourist resort to stage ethnic traditions.⁹

Today, rather than elaborate on the limitations of this characterization of tourism, or on the difference between serious travelers and tourists, I will address the overall feasibility of encounters between secular world-views and Islamic world-views. Such encounters, mediated by the tourist gaze, are constituted by what Edward Said, the second author I would like to introduce, famously described as ‘orientalism’. His book *Orientalism* describes a generally patronizing western attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies.¹⁰ In orientalism, the east is reduced to a cultural set of essentialist

⁶ J. URRY: *The tourist gaze* (London 1990/2002).

⁷ Cf. R. WELTEN: *Het ware leven is elders. Filosofie van het toerisme* (Zoetermeer 2014); IDEM: ‘Stendhal’s gaze. Towards an hermeneutic approach of the tourist’ (Sage, *Tourist Studies* published online 24 April 2014).

⁸ Cf. S. WEARING, D. STEVENSON & T. YOUNG: *Tourist cultures. Identity, place and the traveller* (London 2010) 62.

⁹ Cf. the notion of ‘staged authenticity’, in D. MACCANNELL: *The tourist. A new theory of the leisure class* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 1979).

¹⁰ E. SAID: *Orientalism* (New York 1978; London 2003).

images that seem to mirror the practices of colonialism. According to the orientalist attitude, the non-western world is merely an object for western intellectuals to study, depict, and reproduce. The book is recommended by tourist sociologist Dean MacCannell, who described *Orientalism* as ‘a helpful book for tourism studies, though not intended as such’.¹¹ Tourists from both the west and bric-countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) fix their fascination for the non-western or other world into often factually incorrect images of locals that appear to live in a paradise regained that is considered more authentic than the paradise lost of our consumer society. Today, global tourists, rather than inveterate colonialists, look for specific Arab or other orientalist representations.

3. Biased views

The combination of the orientalist perspective and the tourist gaze is crucial. Once we travel to Islamic countries, we not only meet people that are different, but we also have to deal with very different interpretative frameworks for the consideration of the meaning of life. Besides meeting strange, other persons, we also meet other cultures and religions that we experience as less fluid than our own culture. To understand this complicated state of affairs, tourists have nothing to go on but their own cultural mind-set and, more importantly, the projections and recasting of other cultures and religions it involves. Tourism, it seems, deploys a type of culturally preconceived understanding of the other as a strategy to safeguard the self against an overdose of otherness.

In both nineteenth century culture and modern tourism, orientalism refers to a well-meaning attitude towards the East, though complexly intermingled with fear for fundamentalist Islam. Negative orientalism (Islamophobia) can easily turn into positive orientalism – quite separate from any professed political color. Many travel blogs by tourists visiting Iran or Pakistan demonstratively focus on the kindness of the locals, with American bloggers happily announcing that – I quote: ‘...not all Iranians are terrorists’.¹² There is an obsessive need to disarm western prejudice about Islam, a tradition that began with Gerard de Nerval’s famous *Voyage en orient*.¹³ It creates a new tourist gaze, a new cultural representation, which is the opposite of the western Islamophobia, though no less fixed. Again, the other becomes an object, an ideal type, a picture, a ‘local’ to be depicted as such. Tourism appears to pioneer in the reversal of western colonialist attitudes, a post-modern phenomenon that reminds us of Paul Gau-

¹¹ D. MACCANNELL: *The ethics of sight-seeing* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 2011) 8.

¹² Cf. www.travelblog.org/Middle-East/Iran/blog-211382.html (October 2013).

¹³ G. DE NERVAL: *Voyage en Orient* (original 1851).

guin's efforts to unveil an unspoiled Tahiti, which in itself was an attitude indebted to the colonialist mind-set.¹⁴

4. Tourism as neo-imperialism

Today's tourist gaze and the nineteenth century orientalism are equally indebted to colonialism, though a-politically. Jointly, the tourist gaze and orientalism imply that modern global tourism is a neo-imperialistic practice: however not in terms of war, but in terms of economics and fun. In any case, the idea of the westerner visiting countries in the Middle East involves many complicated post-imperialistic patterns that call for further investigation and I believe that before we can work on the development of a so-called sustainable tourism, the full scope of the (neo-)imperialist implications of modern tourism needs to be explored. Talking about 'mutual respect' or 'unity in difference' is not enough: the words sound right, but fail to recognize the excluding tensions that arise through modern globalized tourism. The question is whether tourists can approach the other as the other instead of rearing chimeras in their own minds.

To do so, it is essential to make a difference between imperialism and colonialism. I quote Said: 'At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others.'¹⁵

'In our time', Said continues, 'direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political ideological, economic, and social practices'. Applied to international tourism today, this quote appears to have lost nothing of its validity.

5. Discrepant experiences

In order to further frame an understanding of neo-imperialistic mechanisms of modern globalized tourism, I will focus on the hermeneutical relevance of what Said describes as 'discrepant experiences'. Said introduces the concept in his book *Culture and imperialism*. A study of literary criticism, it confronts the western cultural tradition of oriental imagery with imperialism. He does not understand imperialism as simply the desire to conquer other worlds, but as a fine-tuned practice of reciprocal projections. According to Said, 'discrepant experiences' are cultural experiences of misrecognition that ultimately cannot be solved at a meta-level of interpretation. At the same time, it is this misrecognition

¹⁴ Cf. R. WELTEN: *Onder vreemden. De ander in de reisliteratuur* (Zoetermeer 2014), and S.F. EISENMAN: *Gauguin's skirt* (London 1999).

¹⁵ E. SAID: *Culture and imperialism* (New York 1993) 7.

tion, this mis-meeting, that creates an opportunity for the approach of the other as other.¹⁶

Let me explain this by quoting, as an example of a discrepant experience on an individual level, from a literary report of an encounter between a non-religious traveler and a local in an Islamic country. The following passage is taken from *Among the believers. An Islamic journey* by travel writer and Nobel Prize winner V.S. Naipaul. The book chronicles a seven-month journey in search of Islam that Naipaul made in 1979 and 1980 through Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia. In Khomeini's Iran, Naipaul questions a certain Mr. Jaffrey about his personal beliefs, and I quote:¹⁷

He had been for Khomeini right through the revolution, because during the rule of the Shah the alternatives had become simple: religion or atheism. Every kind of corruption had come to Iran during the Shah's rule: money corruption, prostitution, sodomy. The Shah was too cut off; he woke up too late to what was going on.

'And I thought, even in those days', Mr. Jaffrey said, 'that Islam was the answer'. I couldn't follow. Religion, the practice of religion, the answer to a political need? I said, the answer to what, Mr. Jaffrey?

'The situation of the country. Islam stands for four things. Brotherhood, honesty, the will to work, proper recompense for labour'.

Still I didn't follow. Why not call for those four things? Why go beyond those four things? Why involve those four things with something as big as Islam?

Naipaul traverses several Islamic countries to learn about Islam, not as an institutionalized religion, but as the day to day practice of individual people, each with their own stories. The traveler observes, converses and listens. In *Among the believers*, Naipaul is an open-minded traveler, not interested in touristic highlights, but in conversations with the people he meets.

Naipaul is indefatigably questioning his Islamic conversation partner:

- His book is not the report of an objective research, but the account of an entirely subjective and unsuccessful endeavor to understand the other;
- This is an example of an encounter – in narrative form – instead of mere representation;
- 'Knowledge' about Islam is mediated by a translator-cum-travel guide.

Naipaul's book is primarily the experience of the westerner trying to come to terms with the concrete other in a radically different culture. The quote is interesting because Jaffrey, though in fact an unbeliever with a British-Indian education, nevertheless supports Islam in a way that is incomprehensible to a westerner. Naipaul describes his own inability to understand the other. He can understand why a political revolution took place, but not why it resulted in the political dominance of a religion, Islam, which in his perspective is inferior to

¹⁶ SAID: *Culture and imperialism* 31-43.

¹⁷ V.S. NAIPAUL: *Among the believers. An Islamic journey* (London 1982) 32.

the western culture separation of church and state in many ways. The traveler is not only confronted with the other person as an individual, but the other as a member of another culture, history, religion. It is obvious that Naipaul's reflections on his experiences are constituted by his home culture. Otherness, then, even if experienced on the individual level, is simultaneously experienced at a cultural or religious level. Naipaul describes the discrepancy between his own intellectual and cultural background and that of his interlocutors. The seminality of the meeting is not fixed in advance, its outcome remains uncertain.

True, Naipaul is not the prototypical western tourist, yet *Beyond belief*,¹⁸ unlike works like *Among the believers*, lacks all knowledge of Islam.¹⁹

The discrepancy between secular world views and religious ones provides a striking example of differences in the world today. The causes of seemingly insurmountable intercultural problems may be differences in culturally determined interpretative frameworks, rather than differences of opinion about the exact meaning or applicability of religious rules – Islamic, Judaic or otherwise. The question, in particular as far it concerns western and Islamic world views, is whether it is possible for people to reach or even meet beyond the sphere of representation. The quote of Naipaul can be taken as an example: even though representation is presumed in every question the author asks, and though that does cause some misconceptions, there is also an encounter between Naipaul and his host.

A discrepant experience is a very specific 'experience' of otherness. Faced with either the self or another human being, people use the interpretative framework that has been cultivated during their upbringing in a certain culture, which thus actually determines who or what it is they perceive, they are faced with: both self-knowledge and knowledge of the other are mediated by a culturally determined interpretative framework. This means activities like facing, meeting or encountering the other all presuppose rational moderation: the immediate experience of the other is too discrepant to allow communication.

Besides being caused by an interpretative framework malfunction, a discrepant experience is also generated by a perhaps unconscious feeling of superiority: the other culture fails to understand itself and is in need of our support. This is implicit in every imperialistic or paternalistic relation to the other. Through western efforts, the authenticity of non-western culture, nature and even peoples is recognized, preserved, and ends up a touristified commodity. The tourist singles out the other and calls it 'authentic', 'original', 'typically local', in other words: frames the other as an object of the tourist gaze.

To Said, discrepant experiences not only signal clashing cultures, but also open the door to the analysis of imperialistic mechanisms. Involving more than

¹⁸ V.S. NAIPAUL: *Beyond belief. Islamic excursions among the converted peoples* (London 1998).

¹⁹ I leave aside for now the fact that Said's reaction to *Among the believers* was highly critical. See my discussion in WELTEN: *Onder vreemden*.

just cultural projection, his orientalism underpins the political, imperialistic behavior of western countries towards Arab and eastern societies. Said:²⁰

One of imperialism's achievements was to bring the world closer together, and although in the process the separation between Europeans and natives was an insidious and fundamentally unjust one, most of us should now regard the historical experience of empire as a common one.

Contrary to the militarist colonialism, imperialism is often hidden, unintended, and even unconscious. Rather than explicit, it is an intangible process inherent in the self-understanding of a culture and its attitude towards other cultures. Said:²¹

In an important sense, we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations (although part of their enduring appeal is that they seem and are considered to be like essentializations) but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions: Greeks always require barbarians, and Europeans Africans, Orientals, etc.

Culture and imperialism, thus, are interrelated. Tourism is therefore about more than just harmless holidaymakers visiting countries with gentle climates to discover other cultures. Tourism colors in areas on maps, fills in representational gaps so convincingly that features that are actually no more than projections become incarnated, embodied, in the self-understanding of host countries. Today, this leads for instance to a kind of tourist-oriented orientalizing of Arab countries. The difference between the contemporary political situation of Egypt today on the one hand and the Egypt perceived through the tourist gaze on the other – westerners visiting the Pyramid of Cheops, clinging to camels and enjoying Verdi's *Aida* at Egypt's Luxor – is absolute. The western fascination for pharaonic Egypt, which began with a Napoleonic expedition, has since been enthusiastically enlarged on by travel writers and archaeologists. Today, the imaginary Egypt is alive in many more minds than in the time of the Napoleonic expedition. Rather than the locals, it is the tourists that define what is authentic and what is not. The discrepancy between the western image of Egypt and the land of Arab Spring and revolt is incontestable and to understand this we need contrapuntal analysis.

²⁰ SAID: *Culture and imperialism* xxiv.

²¹ SAID: *Culture and imperialism* 52.

6. Contrapuntal analysis

The above-mentioned discrepancy is not an internal Egyptian matter, but the result of misconceptions about Egypt in the west. Studying this play of interpretation, Said has named it ‘contrapuntal’. Contrapuntal reading of texts, representations and experiences means: reading without an overarching theoretical framework, a hermeneutic practice in which the fabric of different narratives is revealed. Contrapuntal reading also means: reading a text ‘with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England’.²² Contrapuntal reading takes in both accounts of an issue: it addresses both the imperialist perspective and the resistance to it, demonstrating, first, the reciprocity of influences and second, the integration of imperialist projection in the self-understanding of the east. The tourist gaze, thus, does not remain a mere projection but, in the words of Said, engages in a contrapuntal play of imagination and representation. Tourism is a cultural phenomenon, or rather a field of mutually influential cultural phenomena, that cannot be understood as a separate practice, a separate market. In order to analyze this, argues Said:²³

We must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others.

If we approach tourism from this angle, we see that it is constituted as a whole of antithetical relationships that reaches even beyond the tourist gaze. The tourist gaze is always motivated by the wish to see the other, otherness. Introducing Said’s ‘contrapuntal perspective’ in tourism studies, we acquire a theoretical framework of mutual influences for the consideration of tourism.

Dr. Ruud Welten is assistant professor Philosophy at Tilburg University, and full professor Ethics (‘Lector’) at Saxion University of Applied Sciences (Deventer / Enschede). His philosophical dissertation (2001) is on the phenomenology of religion in Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion. He has published several essays on contemporary French phenomenology, a book on Jean-Paul Sartre and terrorism, and several articles on Michel Henry. In recent years he has been engrossed in the philosophical interpretations and implications of business ethics, consumerism, tourism, travel and global citizenship. He is the author of two books and several articles on travel and philosophy.

E-mail: r.b.j.m.welten@tilburguniversity.edu

²² SAID: *Culture and Imperialism* 66.

²³ SAID: *Culture and Imperialism* 32.

