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Of Cannibals, Tourists, and Ethnographers

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Cannibal Tours. Dennis O'Rourke. 77 minutes, color. 1987. Purchase \$995 (16 mm), \$350 (video); rental \$175, from Direct Cinema Limited, P.O. Box 69799, Los Angeles, CA 90069 (213-652-8000).

Cannibal Tours, by Australian filmmaker O'Rourke, is about German, Italian, and American tourists who take a commercial group tour up the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. The title of the film derives from the fascination of Western tourists with cannibalism. The tourists are aware that New Guinea has been pacified and that cannibalism is prohibited, but they want to experience the primitive, to visit a place where cannibalism had been practiced, to observe the peoples whose ancestors had eaten human flesh, and to hear stories about the wild, the savage, and the exotic. If cannibalism were still practiced, or if there were any real danger, or if the infrastructure of luxurious river boats, first class air-conditioned hotels, and modern air transportation were not present, the tourists, of course, would not go to New Guinea. They seek the titillation of a vicarious brush with danger. They want to see firsthand the ultimate savage Other, with penis sheath, painted face, and spear, but only from the secure and safe vantage point of luxury tourism, and only after the disappearance of the original object. Tourism prefers the reconstructed object, and indeed, this preference for the simulacrum is the essence of postmodern tourism, where the copy is more than the original (Baudrillard 1983; Eco 1986).

In the non-Western world, there is probably an optimum time in local history for each kind of European visitor. Explorers, traders, missionaries, and colonialists come first, to discover, exploit, convert, and colonize, and are followed by ethnographers and eventually tourists, who come to study or just to observe the Other. Tourism, like ethnography, is not equipped to handle the rigors of first contact, but does best after other agents of European civilization have pacified the

indigenous peoples, and after power is firmly in the hands of the Europeans. In effect, after the primitive culture has been conquered, it may then be reconstituted in tourism, for the tourist world is one of the reconstruction and the simulacra. New Guinea tourism may well be at a historical optimum, at a point where the natives are no longer threatening but where there are not yet hoards of other tourists. It is upscale adventure tourism, an off-the-beaten-track out-of-the-way place, where European domination is so recent that the tourists feel close to the past era of cannibalism and savagery, an era reproduced for them in narrative and performance.

In what he calls imperialist nostalgia, Rosaldo (1989) notes that colonialism frequently yearns for the "traditional" culture, the very culture that the colonialists have intentionally altered or destroyed. But it is precisely this traditional culture that the tourists come to see, and as it no longer exists, the culture must be reconstructed for them. Tourists long for the pastoral, for their origins, for the unpolluted, the pure, and the original (Bruner 1989), and in New Guinea they see themselves as exploring the forest primeval. The irony is that tourism seeks and occupies the ethnographic present, the very discursive space that colonialism mourns for and that ethnography has long since abandoned. Much as we may try to deny or evade it, colonialism, ethnography, and tourism have much in common, as they were born together and are relatives (Crick 1985; Graburn 1983). Colonialism, ethnography, and tourism occur at different historical periods but arise from the same social formation, and are variant forms of expansionism occupying the space opened up by extensions of power. From the perspective of ethnography, tourism is an illegitimate child, a disgraceful simplification, and an impostor (de Certeau 1984:143), and we strive to distinguish ethnography from tourism, for tourism is an assault on our authority and privileged position as ethnographers. Although for us tourism is an embarrassment, from the perspective of native peoples who are sometimes confused by the social distinctions that are apparently so important to us, what we label as colonialism, ethnography, and tourism are experienced in a comparable manner. The colonialist, the ethnographer, and the tourist are similarly foreigners with great wealth and power who have come to New Guinea, each with their own particular demands and idiosyncratic requirements. To the native peoples, we are the Other.

This brings us to the most recent of these foreign visitors to New Guinea, the German, Italian, and American tourists and the one who represents them, the Australian filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke.

As an interpretive anthropologist with a reflexive bent who is writing a book on tourist performances, I find O'Rourke's film to be a fascinating exploration of Third World tourism, raising questions that have not yet received adequate attention in mainstream anthropology. We have made a good beginning in the study of tourism (Cohen 1984; Graburn 1983; MacCannell 1976; Smith 1977), and due to the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Said and others, we have become increasingly sophisticated about the kind of social theory needed in tourism research, theory that deals with representation and power, practice and discourse, the simulacra and the authentic. In this review essay, I discuss some of these theoretical issues as they were suggested to me by viewing the film.

Cannibal tourism may appear to be a bizarre exception to the general run of Western tourism that seems so mild and benign, but this is not the case. The tours offered in the industrial countries appeal to the deepest recesses of the Western imagination. Tourism has less to do with what other peoples are really like and more to do with how we imagine them to be, and in this respect is like any other form of representation, including ethnography. Here is a list of some organized tours offered in recent years:

- Sex tourism, in which a group of men fly to Thailand, or to Korea or Taiwan, for a week, in order to actualize every sexual fantasy, in any combination, including having sex with children. Most popular in West Germany and Japan, sex tourism turns the country visited into a grand brothel.
- Colonial tourism, developed in Indonesia for former Dutch colonials or their families, focuses on colonial sites and times, including visits to World War II Japanese concentration camps.
- Shopping tourism, taking groups of Americans to Italy for private showings of Italian designer clothing and other goods, with visits to small boutiques, all at a discount, an entire tour devoted to shopping, the epitome of consumerism.
- Commando tourism, in the United States, where “average” Americans receive military training in guerrilla warfare and in commando expeditions, including instruction in various weapons systems, with live ammunition.
- Explorer tourism, that reproduces the great explorations of the Age of Discovery, so that the tourist can follow the route and relive the experience of being the first in a new land. There are \$35,000 tours to the South Pole, and even plans for tourism in space. It may be noted that the river boat that takes the tourists up the Sepik is called the *Melanesian Explorer*, a name which has rather a romantic ring to it.

Cannibal, sexual, colonial, consumer, military, and explorer tours have their roots in Western capitalist consciousness. They are tours of desire and tell us more about our society than about the society to be visited. They reflect a world in which one segment, affluent, civilized, and industrial, projects its desires onto another segment, poorer, more primitive, less developed.¹ In tourism, the Third World becomes a playground of the Western imaginary, in which the affluent are given the discursive space to enact their fantasies. In a remarkable scene in *Cannibal Tours*, on the last day of their tour, the tourists have a farewell party on their boat, in which the tourists paint their faces in white striped Sepik designs and play at being savages. They lunge as if to attack and then dance away, joke about the wooden penis carvings they have purchased, and in a mock performance, enjoy a temporary regression to savagery. But even during the day, in the routine of the tour, the tourists, in their Banana Republic safari clothes, are living out a fantasy.

What O'Rourke does well is to show the activities and interactions of the tourists, and to reveal through interviews the tourists' conceptions of native peo-

ples. As tourists are not a monolithic group, there are vast differences in their understanding of Papua New Guineans. One Italian tourist says about the people of New Guinea that "nature provides them with the necessities of life," so they are satisfied, "happy and well fed," and they don't think about tomorrow. The natural man. This tourist reports that cannibalism was a custom, practiced for "reasons of survival," even though he says that wildlife was abundant, but he is corrected by a young woman, apparently his daughter, who says that cannibalism "was symbolic," so in a spirit of compromise the tourist states that cannibalism was "mostly for survival, but it was also symbolic," Shades of Marvin Harris, materialism versus symbolism! Another tourist reports that native life is "slow and peaceful," and that it was worthwhile to travel to New Guinea "to see a way of life so opposite to that of Europe." The binary opposition between us and them, between subject and object, is inherent in tourist discourse.

A woman from New York reports that she took the tour because she had seen museum exhibitions on New Guinea and became interested in primitive art. Her concern now, however, is that rather than producing art for themselves the people are producing souvenirs for tourists. The trope of the disappearing primitive appears many times in tourist discourse, just as it had been prominent in anthropological discourse (Clifford 1986). A well-traveled German tourist notes that native culture has been disrupted and that New Guinea is a poor country, so we must "share our wealth with them." Tourist views run the range from naive to sophisticated, but despite the variation, the tourists are fascinated with cannibalism and with spirit beliefs, and they all engage in the same activities on the tour; mainly, they take pictures and bargain for souvenirs. In the O'Rourke film, most of the time, the tourists are shown taking photographs or purchasing handicrafts, and this is in accord with my own field observations on the behavior of tourists in Indonesia, as well as in Kenya, Egypt, and other Third World areas.

A New Guinea elder says "We don't understand why these foreigners take photographs of everything," which is a very good anthropological question. An answer to that question might proceed along the following lines (Barthes 1981; Mulvey 1975; Sontag 1973). The major sensory mode for the perception of the native other is visual, through the viewfinder of a camera. Such a perspective isolates the native people from their larger social context, in that everything outside the frame of the viewfinder is removed from view, including the politics of the situation. In this sense, photography decontextualizes, and is essentially conservative. Further, the camera serves as a protective device for the tourist-photographers, socially isolating them so that they do not have to relate directly to the New Guineans, face to face, eye to eye. They can hide behind the camera lens. The camera is a wonderful device for closet voyeurs, in that they can look, even stare, without embarrassment.

After the tour is over and the tourists are back home, the major physical mementos of their trip are photographs and souvenirs, which serve as devices to elicit stories and memories. The narratives told by the tourists are less about the native culture as such, and more about the situations in which the photographs were taken, and about the specific occasions in which the souvenirs were purchased.

Photographs and souvenirs are both collectibles, and it does not make too much difference if the photographs are very good, or if the souvenirs are “authentic” to the culture, as long as the photographs and souvenirs are “authentic” to the experience of the tourist and to the context in which the collectibles were acquired (Stewart 1984). Having stories to tell about the photos or about the objects purchased serves to personalize an impersonal group tour, for the hero of the story becomes the tourist. My comments about the function of photographs and souvenirs are speculative, of course, but valid or not, there is no doubt of the central importance of photographs and souvenirs in tourism, and of their prominence in *Cannibal Tours*.

Native views of the touristic encounter are insightful and realistic, at least as O’Rourke presents the indigenous perspective. One older New Guinean says that the tourists read about us in books and come to see if “we are civilized or not.” The New Guineans refer to themselves as “native peoples” and as “backward peoples.” A man notes that “We don’t have money so we stay in the village; we don’t go to see other countries,” and another observes “If they paid me more (for my carvings), I could go on that ship with the tourists.” The major theme that emerges from the interviews with New Guineans is the disparity in wealth between themselves and the tourists. One woman says “You white people have all the money,” and is particularly disturbed by the bargaining practices of the tourists who, prompted by the tour guides, always reject the first price offered and ask for a “second price,” and even a “third price.” An elder notes that when he shops for a shirt or for trousers in town, he must pay a fixed price.

The system for handling money on group tours makes for a kind of mystification. The tourists must pay the tour agents in advance, for the entire tour, a lump sum payment for an all inclusive package, including transportation, lodging, and meals, so that while actually on tour there are no further exchanges of money. Thus, in the interactions between the tourists and the local representatives of the tour agency there is no necessity to pay for anything on tour, as everything has already been prepaid, nor need the tourists even ask what anything costs. Thus, the local agents and the guides can present themselves as noncommercial friendly helpers. There is no occasion to remind the tourists of the economics of the relationship, of the fact that the services and help so graciously offered are provided only because they have been paid for.

In opposition to this, tourists give money to native people who pose for photographs, and one local entrepreneur charges the tourists \$2 per camera to take pictures inside the spirit house. Money is exchanged. When tourists purchase native crafts and souvenirs the bargaining is bloodthirsty, with the tour guides taking the side of the tourists. The tourists are not familiar with local purchasing practices, are in a strange land, and are afraid of buying the wrong objects or of paying too much. Many tourists are elderly or retired, and part of what they have paid for on the group tour is the assurance that they will be protected and cared for. The tour guides, who know the local system, present themselves as helping the tourists to purchase the best objects at the right price. In many countries, the tour guides receive a commission on all purchases, but this is not disclosed to the tour-

ists. The system is so constructed that the tour operators and their agents, who are the masterminds of the entire operation and who gain the most profit, pose as the defenders of the tourists against the crooked natives who are trying to cheat by overcharging for their handicrafts. The victims of the system are the native vendors, who find themselves confused by their predicament of dealing with obviously wealthy tourists who, strangely, insist on hard bargaining for every item. Tourists who spend \$4,000 on a two-week tour package will bargain the price of a carving down from \$5 to \$3, for part of tourist discourse is that naive tourists pay higher prices than local residents, and the tourists do not want to be duped. Certainly, some tourists are duped, but the way the system operates in New Guinea and elsewhere victimizes the native peoples. Given the fact that international mass tourism is part of a purely commercial transaction, an exchange of money for experience and memories, I find the host-guest metaphor, sometimes used to describe the native-tourist relationship, to be thoroughly misleading.²

In *Cannibal Tours* one hears the tourist and the native voices, but what of the filmmaker's voice? My major criticism of O'Rourke is that his film is not reflexive enough. At times, one hears a question asked by an interviewer, but all too often the informants' statements are presented without any indication of the context of the interview, or of the presence of the interviewer. I find it especially annoying when what is clearly a single interview is broken up into two or three segments, I suppose for aesthetic effect, but it makes following the argument difficult. Interspersed with the film showing present day New Guinea are old black and white still photographs of the colonial era, of the time of German colonization before World War I. Some of these photographs are exquisite, and serve O'Rourke's purpose of contrasting the old days with the present, of comparing colonialism with tourism. O'Rourke is very sophisticated in his use of sound effects, and I especially enjoyed the music by Mozart and the sounds of someone turning the dial of a shortwave radio, as if to remind us that we are still in the modern civilized world.

There is much about tourism in Papua New Guinea that O'Rourke leaves out of the film that I wished he would have included. I wanted to see more of the performances for tourists, the sing-sings and dances, and I wanted more attention devoted to the tour agents and the tour guides. Why couldn't we have had interviews with these guides, so as to hear their voice and their perspective? The entire infrastructure of tourism, not only the agents and guides but also the hotels, the crew of the *Melanesian Explorer*, and certainly the scene in the towns could have been included, but maybe this is asking too much. O'Rourke is not an ethnographer, he is a filmmaker, and there is no doubt that he has made a visually interesting film on a fascinating topic, one that I have shown to my seminar on tourism and ethnographic representation. That showing led to a good discussion comparing film and ethnography, or visual and verbal representations, and to a comparison of the strengths of each medium.

The advertisement for the film states, "This gently ironic film neither condones nor condemns the tourists or the Papua New Guineans." I disagree. As I see the film, O'Rourke's view is that tourism is neocolonialism and that the New

Guineans are exploited. The film is not strident, but it mocks the tourists, however gently. Not that there is anything wrong with O'Rourke's perspective, but rather than to present it ever so subtly, or to disguise or deny it, or to present the film as if it were an "objective" account that neither "condones nor condemns," I wish O'Rourke's point of view had been more explicitly presented in the film, taken as an object of investigation, discussed, and reflected upon. In ethnographic film, we have moved away from the off camera authoritative voice-over, and we are doing more, as O'Rourke has done, to let the actors, in this case the tourists and the natives, speak for themselves. Now we need to hear a stronger more explicit voice from the filmmaker.

Notes

¹The reverse trend, of course, as MacCannell (1989:1) and Buck-Morss (1987) note, is one in which there is a flow in the opposite direction, as workers, refugees, and displaced peoples from the periphery move to the capitalist centers, undoubtedly with their own projected images of wealth, security, and power.

²The book edited by Valene L. Smith, *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, especially the revised 1989 edition, contains some excellent materials, despite the title.

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