

Photography and the Spaces of Travel

FINA 543

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Description

Course Concerns: This course is concerned with the ways photography orders the spaces of travel, and vice versa. With the invention of photography in 1840, travel became a highly mediated activity. The subsequent experience of film, radio, television and the worldwide web in the 20th century has only served to make it more so. Today we are saturated with travel imagery (and it needs to be said, every other kind, too) that has profoundly reshaped the experience of everyday life. In a telecommunicating age of faxes and factoids - not to mention digitalized camcorders and the web - the virtuality of the "travel experience" is one means by which global sociocultural relations are being restructured. One way of defining the character of the photographic-cum-electronic age is by examining the idea of transportation as a mediating form of communication.

"Communication" as a term was used in connection with sea routes and roads, rivers and bridges, long before it was associated with the information highway. It referred to various kinds of transportation--various mediums of transportation, in the lexicon of Marshall McLuhan--all of which had the effect of transforming the content of the messages carried along them. Not only is photography a medium of communication, it is also a medium of transportation.

Since the 1960s, especially, visual artists have been proposing new possibilities for re-thinking relationships between "travel" and "photography". Their photographic interventions and taxonomies often bear little connection to the work that preceded them. In the realm of the "photo" book, for example, there is a huge leap from William Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) to Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958), and then another huge leap from *The Americans* to Edward Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963). In the post-Ruscha period, I am thinking of work that ranges from Robert Smithson's *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967) to Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking, England* (1967) to the N.E. Thing Company's *Sixteen Compass Points Within the Arctic Circle* (1969) to Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969) to Joseph Beuys's *Bog Action* (1971) to Sophie Calle's *Suite Vénitienne* (1983) to Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Great Wall Walk* (1988) to Martha Rosler's *Rites of Passage* (1997). The list goes on. One of the concerns of the course will be to investigate what is signaled by changes that have occurred since the 1960s.

Canadian Content: This is a so-called "Canadian" course and Canadian content will crop up throughout in what I hope are peculiar and productive ways. Let me give an example of what I mean. Two American writers we will read in the seminar are Dean MacCannell

and Allan Sekula. It may therefore matter to us (if not to others) that Dean MacCannell began research in British Columbia for his study on tourism and mass culture, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, first published in 1976 and still in print. To gather material for the book, he traveled from Vancouver to Baja California, across the United States, and then through Europe to Istanbul. It is possible that MacCannell began his ethnographic odyssey in British Columbia because he considered it to be, in his own words, on "the periphery." Writing from an American point of view, he may have deliberately chosen Vancouver over Seattle, the outside over the inside, as his starting point. Canada conducts an asymmetrical relationship with the United States, Sekula remarks in his book *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes*, in which "Canada is typically neither here nor there" for Americans, and "the United States is both here and there" for Canadians. Sekula probes such asymmetries in his work.

Theoretical Biases: Over the past 25 years, *The Tourist* has become a classic study on the institutionalization of global travel and tourism. The book employs a combination of anthropological reporting and theoretical speculation to formulate ideas about travel and sightseeing in the present age of mass spectacle. Its success derives in part from its provocative mix of detailed analysis and sweeping generalization. At the level of detail MacCannell quotes a 1969 Canadian government report on tourism, for example, which complains that "Canada's swinging modern character [is] being obscured at home and abroad" by the country's reputation as a "land of ice and snow, Mounties, Eskimos and not much else." The clichés, the report argues, are "irritating to Canadians and hardy as a weed"; they need to be corrected. Moving from example to conclusion, MacCannell predicts they will be. The growth of modern mass tourism will complexify the image of Canada as home to Mounties and Rose Marie and make it more comprehensive, just as a similar realignment of outside consciousness to inside consciousness will occur in other countries of the world subject to the pressures of tourism. The accuracy of MacCannell's prediction is debatable, but its fearlessness is one of the reasons for the book's ongoing attraction among readers sympathetic to the tradition of the grand narrative. That same fearlessness also accounts for the book's cautious reception by readers working from a post-structuralist perspective, who are critical of the certainties so confidently expressed in it. Truth is not a stable item for the post-structuralist, and is rarely considered to be universal.

In the course we will read more texts on photography/travel written from post-structuralist standpoint than from a structuralist one. This does mean that we should necessarily be uncritical of the former and dismissive of the latter, and MacCannell's book is a case in point. Beginning in the 1950s, he argues, "the dominant activity shaping world culture was the movement of institutional capital and tourists to remote regions, and the preparation of the periphery for their arrival." If the formulation seems slightly overdetermined - it makes no allowance for the impact of the Cold War on "world culture," for example - it also seems largely right. The continuing onslaught of global corporatization, along with the spread of mass tourism, does nothing to diminish the persuasiveness of the claim. What mediating role, we should want to ask, does photography play in all this? Does photography help to extend the reach of global capital and mass travel or does it have the capacity to complexify their reach? Is it, perhaps, a

matter of both? And how should we think critically about self-reflexive photo-based work compared with unself-reflexive (i.e., utilitarian) photographic work?