

PRODUCING TRAVEL: TECHNOLOGIES OF ILLUSION, RISK AND VIRTUAL REALITY

Karen L. Wall, Red Deer College

Thematic and Analytical Approach

Commercial leisure entertainments offer the sense of freedom or escape as commodity. Varieties of travel experience offered in leisure contexts range from pre-cinematic mass spectatorship to the virtual reality apparatus of the present day. Fundamentally, the experience has transcendent mobility as its content, but is contingent in context on the power to control the conditions of the experience. The paper considers related tensions prevailing in social constructs of both real and virtual travel. Thematically, it is concerned with the privileged role of vision in the culture of both travel and of mass entertainment; the social construction of technologically-mediated journeys; and the relationship between risk, control and disaster. The analysis situates imaginative "dreamspaces" of leisure in specific socio-economic contexts, drawing parallels between the mass leisure of entertainment and travel a century ago and in the present day.

Based on contemporary accounts of leisure experience, the paper draws parallels between mass leisure and travel of the present and of modernity, considered here as the *fin de siècle* period of the Victorian era when technologies of mass communication and transportation were influencing daily life in significant areas, including the commodification of leisure. From the perspective of critical theory, the discussion approaches "the journey" as a commercial cultural product: a complex of patterns, operations, labour and artefacts. As such a product, real and virtual journeys reflect certain conditions of regulation and subjectivity which are typical of the social order of capitalism and consumer society (Kern 1983; Hall 1871; Williams 1971; Trachtenberg 1977).

The modern-era literature of both travel and urban entertainments typically reflect both a sense of dazzled wonder and an attempt to assemble these into some narrative of meaning, often moral lessons concerning both nature and technological progress. The postmodern recreationist, in contrast, is supposed to be accustomed to experience travel, like everyday life, as a series of multiple texts and games with no ultimate meaning. In both periods, however, participants in virtual reality experiences are at once preoccupied with the sensations of immersion in illusory travel and intrigued by the mechanics which produce the illusion (Lash and Urry 1994, 275-6; Featherstone 1995, 68, 77). In experiential terms, they are at once "lost" in the experience and at a critical distance from it. This alternating point of view, between the smooth aesthetics of the surface and the awareness of contingent conditions of its production, is brought into focus when there is some disruption in the balance—if the projector or canvas rollers break down in the virtual journey, or if the beautiful, luxurious ship sinks in the actual voyage. In terms of the wider social order, such a disaster disrupts the social consensus concerning everyday conditions as a "frameless narrative"—constraints that existed all along have again become consciously problematic. This occurred in the case of ocean liner wrecks as it does today in the case of air disasters. The "folklore manufactory" which processes and interprets the event attempts to reinstall faith in the prevailing order in the face of evidence of its failure (Coates and Morrison 1990, 165; Atwood 1991, 24.)

Historical Context: Visual Culture and Panoramic Perception

The paper takes as a point of departure the nineteenth-century panorama, a precursor of today's virtual reality environments. The panorama as popular entertainment offered a visual experience of vicarious travel. The sensation of projection into a landscape was created by a spatial complex of viewer, painting, and objects arranged so as to eliminate the awareness of frame or boundary. Other "engines of visualization" of the day created hyper-real spaces engendering "a dream-like exaltation [of] disembodied spirits" (Maynard 1991, 76; Batchen 1991, 5.) Beyond the confines of the leisure device, so-called "panoramic perception" also operated in everyday life, as when the velocity of transit transformed landscape through a moving window into a whirling montage of objects and scenery (Dumur 1965; Benjamin 1978; Schivelbusch 1986, 63). The dreamlike suspension from reality was the appeal of both urban entertainments and of actual travel on luxury vehicles such as ocean liners (Benjamin 1968, 221, Lowe 1982, Williams 1982; Barthes 1989, 81-84; Boddy 1896, 14. Turner 1974; Schivelbusch 1986; Bates 1858,48.)

Another version of this type of perception in other contexts has been termed the "panoptic" viewpoint, which relies on the association of social power with the visual control of objects, people and environment. This visual bias is, for instance, characteristic of what Urry calls the "tourist gaze", or the typical expectations, modes and objects of tourism (Urry 1990; Frisby and Featherstone 1997, 116; Robins 1996, 20; Crary 1991, 14; Foucault 1979; Macnaghten and Urry 1998). The sensation of temporary escape into dreamspaces is always contingent upon the social capacity for control over conditions of space and time. The appeal of the sensation, though, depends on the capacity for voluntary re-emergence into everyday life. In social terms, the loss of connection and control is less attractive when it is part of a complex of structural constraints. Here the discussion links traveller reports of detachment from a passing landscape back to the everyday urban world and the contemporary sense of decontextualization as alienation from a bureaucratic, rationalized social order.

With the development of commercial enterprise and mass leisure travel, adventure and risk were codified in insurance codes and operating standards (Nerlich). In a recent exploration of urban entertainment venues, Hannigan cites a "long-standing cultural contradiction...between the middle-class desire for experience and their parallel reluctance to take risks..." (Hannigan, 7.) What Nye calls "riskless risk" and Rojek the "recurrence of reassurance" is available in packages of adventure not otherwise attainable because of distance, cost and history (Nye 1981, Rojek 1993, 205, Beck 1991.) New entertainment complexes in our own day provide enclosing environments for recreation—a "seamless package" of "multisensory, immersive entertainment experience" (Mandel 1999; Blackwell 2000, 23; Schick 2001, 11; CP Aug 17 2000.)

The paper explores the socio-economic, gender and geographic aspects of access to these new technologies which operate not only in leisure but in work, education, military and social control applications. Leisure and recreation are constitutive and reflective of the wider culture; the culture industries produce not only the specific product (the destination or vacation) but also the socio-economic structure in which the experience has its origin. (Rojek 1995, Harvey 1989; Lefebvre 1991; Horkheimer & Adorno 1972.)

Material Disaster as a Hole in the Discursive Order

With reference to the *Titanic* and the World Trade Centre disasters, the paper inquires into the disruption of the frameless narrative—the transcendence of constraints—by the failure of ideological as well as material structures. The imagination of disaster takes different forms in different eras, usually focusing on the symbolic loss of the "world" itself—the biggest ship in the world, the tallest buildings, the nodes of global economic power. However, there is always the opportunity to investigate new potentials for action and social relations in the temporary period of derangement before we can project a reconstructed world. The popular culture of the era of ocean travel, for example, included not only hymns to progress and luxury, but a plethora of dramatic images of ruined ships, drowned women and ancient sunken cities, midway disaster rides and shipwreck tourism—cultural expression as psychic escape hatches from the velocity and seamlessness of history (Williams 1990 250; Auerbach 1982.) Whereas mainstream cultural response typically ritualizes disaster as a random, accidental evil, obscuring the recognition of underlying social causes, critical voices seize on the event to illuminate certain obscured realities and social conditions so that images of disaster can become a kind of discursive searchlight (Williams 1990, 1981; Coates and Morrison 1990, xvi.; Heyer 1995; Wolff 1993.)

However, the interruption of such a journey does not seriously disable the general trajectory of the economic order, despite the spectre of the "holiday with no tomorrow." The alienation from physical or geographical realities for consumers can make fatal catastrophe appear as unreal hypothesis (Virilio 1991, 61.) The sinking of the *Titanic*, like the destruction of the World Trade towers, was received with collective expressions of incredulity as the unthinkable became reality and reality appeared to mimic popular culture. A range of explanations for air crashes over the past few decades have concerned structural and policy failures—too many planes in the air, deregulatory compromises, negligence and human error—but the WTC crashes evoked cries of "evil" and destiny, as well as hubris and reminders of forces beyond human control, hubris and fate—much as did the *Titanic* sinking. Both disasters affected public perceptions of safety in travel, but the effects to the travel industry itself appear to be temporary (*The Economist*, July 7 2001.; CP Sept 19 2001; CP Oct 10 2001; Rothman 2001, FP2; *Aviation Daily*, 2001; deMont 2001, 32-3; CP Dec 27 2001).

Control, Risk and Staying in the Driver's Seat

Following September 11, increasing questions about the purpose and necessity of travel point to another interruption of the social construction of travel as choice and freedom, even in consumer terms. Fear of flying is inseparable from the culture of air travel, related by counsellors to "wanting to control something that can't be controlled." (deMont 2001, 32-3.) The relationship between this disaster and effects on the travel industry is examined and it is suggested that the media of *virtual* escape may also be to some extent changed in meaning and role. The paper considers simulation and mediated experience as potential replacements for actual experience, not only of travel but of social and environmental interaction, in times of increased risk and concurrent psychological and regulatory constraints (Beeby 1999; Camp 1999; *Macleans* 1996, 18-20 & 1994, 26-27; CP Jan 31 1995; *Vancouver Sun* 1996, A1, A10; Singer 1999; McCarthy 2001; Winner 2000, 62; Leiss 1990)

The leisure travel industry in the long term must continue to balance concepts of freedom or mobility with recognition of social or technical constraints. However, popular leisure technologies and experiences continue to privilege the sense of individual control and transcendence of realities. If the machines and destinations of the current "recreation revolution" are to be appropriately evaluated and critically understood, it will be important that society stay awake behind the wheel to define the priorities of leisure and recreation development in actual communities.

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- Karen L. Wall, *Recreation Administration, Red Deer College, Box 5005, Red Deer, Alberta T5N 4H4, Canada; Phone: (403) 342-3403; E-mail: karen.wall@rdc.ab.ca*

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