En Route: *The Highway Tour as Altered Reality*

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JAMAICA KINCAID, IN *A Small Place* describes an event that occurred in Antigua. When a Princess of England once visited, roads were paved, and every building en route was renovated. The place-experience became a manipulated sequence, negating the 'real' Antigua - that of drought and overwhelming poverty. Kincaid speaks of this tourist experience as one of visual obliteration. She writes:

> ... you needn't let that slightly funny feeling you from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday (Kincaid, 1988, p 10).

The Princess's experience was pre-packaged to maintain the vacationer's sense of relaxation. The encounter falsifies reality to appease travellers who fuel local coffers. The selected view is presented - creating a stage set along the tourist route (McCannell 1999, p 92, 100). This parallels the contemporary city, which Sorkin says creates a: ... happy regulated vision of pleasure ... by stripping troubled urbanity of its sting, of the presence of the poor, of crime, of dirt, of work (Sorkin, 1992, p xv).

As in Disney, the goal is the creation of a "comforting, non-threatening environment - one which is carefully controlled" (Findley, 1992, pp 69-70).

Soothing, through conjuring up a palatable theme, is a popular approach to the tour. Theme highways are one permutation. The advent of car tourism opened up a new facet of sight-seeing - it:

> ... enhanced the possibilities for tourism and touristic destinations still further. It was only through the utilization of new transportation possibilities, for example, that an entire region, New England, began to emerge as a vast "theme park" during the last decades of the nineteenth century (Harwood, 2002, p 55).

It presents a form of touring that not only organises the events along a particular linear path and idea, but distances the observer in a safe zone through the view of the car window (Figure 1). Sorkin comments on this phenomenon:

> The view through the framing window of the passing car animates the town-scape, cinemitizing the city (Sorkin, 1992, pp 217-218).

The tourist gaze replicates an alienated existential model - appropriate to our cyber-society. But how valid is the concept of 'the tour' as viewed through a car window - where places move fast, and the earth is visually flattened? (Wilson, 1992, pp 33-34.)

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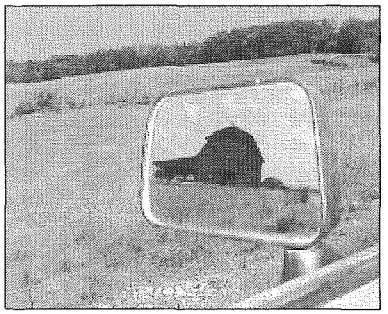

Figure 1: The framed view. Photo by Andrew Walter.

Two forms of the theme highway reign supreme: the highway-as-theme-connector, and simply, the highway-as-theme. In the former, one disembarks from the automobile at choice locations, in the later this is not a requisite of the manipulated experience.

Some themed destinations are more substantive then others. Lippard noted that some "placeless" places are so in need of tourism that "straw-attractions are created" (1999, pp x-xi). Boorstein (1961) and Greenwood (1989) agree on the artificiality of that experience in general, with Boorstein stating that they "offer an elaborately contrived indirect experience, an artificial product to be consumed ..." (Boorstein, 1961, p 99). Greenwood equates "theming" to packaged fast food (Greenwood, 1989, pp 171-185 and Hall, 1994, p 179). Urry (1990, p x) stresses that almost anything can be turned into a tourist attraction.

The motivating force? Economics. Successful theming, or 'branding' an identity onto a series of seemingly disparate events can have the benefits of economic gain - creating "a cultural production that almost magically generates capital" (McCannell, 1999, p 28). It can work through the shopping mall formula of "adjacent attraction" (Sennett, 1976, pp 144-145).

The development of the US 441 Heritage Trail was based solely on the desire of business owners along the trail to garner tourist dollars. The Heritage Trail stretches north-south through the middle of Georgia. It is the spine that connects all three ecological regions of Georgia. Unlike other theme highways, this one was not created because of a common concept, but was a route in search of a theme. 'Branding' became an important goal.

First, a graphic identity was created which evoked an earlier era of car travel, capitalising on the optimism of 1950's postcards that tout major scenic and cultural attractions. Additionally, the unique identities of the regions were assessed, and a sequence of themes was proposed. Travelling south, one encounters - in order - an art centre, a craft and music centre, an antiques and history centre, a farmers' market, an agricultural centre, an agri-forestry centre, and a rivers and wetlands centre. The Piedmont offers the most historic identity, and the proposed centre emphasises this, while the Southern Coastal Plain centre highlights the emphasis on agricultural production with a giant farmers' market. Unified by the graphic 'brand' of signage, maps and other tourist materials, the highway itself provides a recognisable, marketable identity.

This solution, while demonstrating the problematic aspect of cultural obliteration through oversimplification, offers possibilities as well. One is the use of multi-nodal themes connected by a singular route. It highlights the State's diversity, attracting a variety of tourist groups - while increasing the awareness of some of the other themes that may not be sought, but will surely be found.

An example of highway as theme can be found at US Highway 93, which runs through the Flathead Indian Reservation in Western Montana, and was designed by Jones & Jones Architects and Landscape Architects. This new, cutting-edge work employs a different philosophy - one akin to a deep ecological approach to highway theme tourism. This trend has been observed in the general tourist industry by Nash, who states:

> Alternative development, that is, development which tends to put a little less emphasis on economic productivity as compared with social and environmental goals, has been thought of in various ways, and labels such as 'soft', 'green', 'participatory', 'humane', 'non-exploitive', 'small' and 'responsible' have been used to refer to it. Increasingly, one hears the word 'sustainability' used as a kind of shorthand way of referring to such alternatives (1996, pp 121–122).

Thus, the theme tour can go beyond 'the view' or 'the performance', and offer instead, true environmental and cultural repair. The US Highway 93 project offers this promise. Running through the Flathead Indian Reservation in Western Montana, the project resulted from sensitive negotiations with the Salish, Kootenai and Pend d'Oreille tribes that inhabit this area. In their promotional literature, Jones & Jones refer to maintaining a "Spirit of Place", and describe the road itself as a visitor. They recognise the importance of respect – for the people, the place, and all other living things which flow through it. So as not to interrupt the paths of animals, people, and waters, great care was taken in designing wildlife corridors and other cross routes. US Highway 93 is not only "less bad" (as William McDonough would say), but offers a positive vision for repair and nurture. The habitats have been restored along the corridor, native plants reintroduced, wetlands restored and cultural understanding promoted. The project offers a glimpse into the native peoples of the land. To reinforce the commitment to these communities, signage is written in Kootenai, Salish and English, with a logo of a coyote, the hero of these tribes.

Theming and branding, while frequently criticised, are not necessarily all bad. They can oversimplify and deny the truth, or they can truly educate and even heal and restore. These two examples show different approaches to roadway themes. Each reveals certain problematic elements – but offers lessons for future touristic ventures en route.

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