TOURIST SIGHTS AS SEMIOTIC SIGNS:
A critical commentary


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Urry (2002) argues that ‘the organizing sense within the typical tourist experience is visual’, and the tourist ‘gaze is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs’ (pp 3, 146). Urry cites the linguist Culler (1981), who argues ‘All over the world, tourists are engaged in semiotic projects, reading cities, landscapes, and cultures as sign systems’ (p 128). Thus, for both authors, sights constituting signs appear to be a fairly common phenomenon. Their sight-as-sign idea actually derives from MacCannell (1976).

Contemporary tourism studies owe many debts to MacCannell, including his concepts of sights as signs, authenticity and tourism as pilgrimage. Whereas the last two concepts are linked in MacCannell’s analysis, he does not link them to the first concept; in fact, sights as signs and authenticity seem incompatible since the former is apparently an anti-essentialist concept, the latter an essentialist one. We argue that MacCannell’s sight-as-sign concept is valuable but his formulation of it is faulty; once this is corrected, it becomes linked to the concept of tourism as pilgrimage; and thus linked, it is complementary to instead of incompatible with the concept of authenticity. The sight-as-sign cases examined by MacCannell are special (all possessing pilgrimage value), hence we conclude that, contra Urry and Culler, whether or not other sights constitute signs can be established only with careful substantiation.

First, a terminological note: semiotics refers to philosopher Charles Peirce’s theory which stipulates a triadic relationship between sign, designatum and interpretant. On the other hand, linguist Ferdinand Saussure coined the term semiology for his theory which specifies a dyadic relationship between signifier and signified. Despite some commonalities, the two theories are different, for example, Saussure, but not Peirce, methodologically abstracts from extra-linguistic referents (see Noth 1990 on Peirce’s and
Saussure’s theories). In postmodernist theory, the reference is usually to Saussure, but the term semiotics is often used. I follow this conventionalized usage.

Saussure argues that the relationship between signifier (e.g. the word or sound ‘cat’) and signified (the idea or concept of cat) is entirely arbitrary, i.e. that a particular word/sound should signify a particular concept is due not to anything intrinsic about the word/sound, but purely a matter of convention. Within the sign system, a particular word/sound signifies what it signifies solely because it is different from other words/sounds. Hence, meaning derives from difference, instead of essence (something intrinsic to the signifier). This view, known as anti-essentialism, constitutes a core postmodernist theoretical position (Barker 2003, p 435).

In suggesting that ‘tourist attractions are signs’, MacCannell equates tourist sight to signified and what he calls marker to signifier. He defines marker as ‘any information about a sight’, including name, picture, plan or map, and information ‘found in travel books, museum guides [etc.]’. Thus, the signifier (marker) signifies (explains) the signified (what the sight is). MacCannell argues how ‘a specific sight is hardly worth seeing but the information associated with it [i.e. the marker] makes a visit worthwhile anyway’. As illustrations, he refers, inter alia, to the exhibition of a moon rock; the Bonnie and Clyde shootout spot (‘As a sight, it amounts to no more than a patch of wild grass’); a tree in Paris struck by the bullet of an attempted assassination on a Russian Czar; places where historical battles occurred. In these cases, it is the marker (the information about the sight) ‘that is the object of touristic interest’ (above quotes and references are respectively from MacCannell, 1976, pp. 109, 110, 113, 114, 128-30). This argument is reiterated, and MacCannell’s examples cited, by Culler (1981, passim) and Urry (2002, p. 13).

MacCannell’s conceptualization of marker as signifier seems problematic. Firstly, signifier simply signifies a concept, it does not provide any information or talk about it. The marker is in many cases (e.g. in travel writing) more like discourse than anything else. It is remarkable that Culler, a Saussure scholar, misses this point in taking up MacCannell’s argument. He refers to as markers such discourses as the ‘symbolic encrustations [i.e. ideas, folklores, etc.] with which a culture has surrounded the sight’ that mediate a tourist’s experience of the sight, and an authority’s certification of the authenticity of a tourist object (Culler, 1981, pp. 136-7).
In the above examples, MacCannell is right to say that the sight itself is not the real object of touristic interest, but is that object the marker? It seems not. For instance, in the case of the site of a historical battle, the object of tourist interest is likely to be the \textit{actual historical event} instead of the information about that event. Tourists’ visit to the sight can indeed be conceptualized in semiotic terms. The signifier is constituted by the sight itself, not information about the historical event occurring at that particular place. The signified is the actual historical event. The information tells tourists something about the signifier and the signified, but it is neither one nor the other. Tourists come not for any intrinsic essence of the sight \textit{as a sight} (which might be ‘no more than a patch of wild grass’), as MacCannell correctly points out, but because it signifies the historical event. Why would a particular historical battle attract tourists? Hypothetically, let us say this battle helped found the nation, thus many domestic tourists come probably as a form of secular nationalistic pilgrimage.

The case of the moon rock is similar. The signifier is the moon rock itself, not its marker. The signified is likely to be, firstly, the event of (not information about) America’s (for some nationalistic American tourists) or humankind’s (for other tourists) landing on the moon; and secondly (respectively for the just-mentioned two categories of tourists), America’s technological greatness or humankind’s technological achievements. Tourists are attracted not so much by the rock itself, but by what it signifies.

It is surprising that MacCannell, who sees (some) modern tourism as analogous to pilgrimage, does not make this connection in the above cases. Pretes (2003) provides an analysis along this line of sights such as Mount Rushmore National Memorial to (at least some) domestic American tourists. The sight is a monumental sculpture of four American presidents, intended to represent the nation’s founding (Washington), preservation (Jefferson), continental expansion (Lincoln), and imperial expansion (Roosevelt). As an engineering feat, the sight is intrinsically attractive. However, there is more to the sight than that. In Pretes’ words, ‘Mount Rushmore is clearly a shrine and repository of signification, but what exactly does it signify? … in the intentions of its creators and sponsors, Mount Rushmore signifies \textit{American Values} and the \textit{American Way} … It becomes … an object of pilgrimage … the historian [Gilbert] Fite noted, “The one who views this monument sees more than four stone faces. He sees and feels independence, freedom … and other qualities which have characterized America’” (pp 133-4). In short, the sight has great pilgrimage value for many American tourists.
As noted, a signifier signifies what it signifies purely by arbitrary convention, not due to any intrinsic essence. Thus, MacCannell’s argument appears to be an anti-essentialist argument. Is MacCannell’s conceptualization of sights as signs then incompatible with his concept of authenticity, since authenticity is an essentialist concept (e.g. Giza’s pyramids are authentic for their intrinsic property of being built 4,500 years ago)? Take the case of the moon rock, as said, its quality as a rock is not what attracts tourists, however, it must nonetheless be authentic, otherwise tourists would be upset. Hence, whereas one aspect of its essence (as a rock) is unimportant, another aspect (as a genuine moon rock) is because it is what enables the rock to act as signifier. This also applies to the other cases examined by MacCannell. Hence, MacCannell’s conceptualization of certain sights as signs is not incompatible with but complementary to his concept of authenticity, because it is the authenticity of these sights that enables them to act as signifiers for tourists visiting them in an act of pilgrimage.

The sight-as-sign cases used by MacCannell are special (all having pilgrimage value) and carefully substantiated in detail. In contrast, many sights (or tourist objects in general) obviously attract and are enjoyed by tourists for their intrinsic essence. Scenery comes immediately to mind; so do tourist objects such as local food; sun, sand and beach; cultural performances. Are there other sights that constitute signs? That is certainly possible. However, any such argument needs to be carefully substantiated individually, just as MacCannell does with his cases. Culler’s and Urry’s claim of sign status for sights in a general way (see quotes at the beginning), based upon straightforward generalization from MacCannell, unfortunately falls short in this regard.

References