HOW FAR WILL YOU GO?

Travel and travel media work together in a circular, redundant and reinforcing way. On a trip, I take pictures or collect postcards, and also have a prerecorded version of that place in my mind. When I go to a place I remember movies which depicted the same spot, and tourist clichés inflect the images I collect so that objects in my pictures function metonymically as signs for what I expected or wanted from a famous place. On the road, vistas and broad landscapes have been signposted for me by state and commercial planners so I can stop and gaze at scenic views. And by their very appellation, these *scenic views* indicate a fullness and completion that depends on my distance, lack of responsibility, and voyeurism. Pictures become a way of organizing the travel experience. Before a trip, I seek out images of a place and want the experiences they promise; after the trip, my snapshots lead to conversations about where I went. Mike Crang calls this relation between picture taking and travel, future-perfect picture taking since we travel with an eye to the photo album and the pleasure of conversations to come. In this way, taking pictures during travel gives us an infantile pleasure of omnipotence, power, and control.

As someone studying travel media, I need to know how places construct themselves as objects of the tourist gaze and then appear that way in travel documentaries or on the Internet. Furthermore, I need to study the relation of marketing to our patterns of cultural consumption, especially to our taking pictures and reading about travel as if from an Olympian,

detached spectatorial position. Today I want to talk about how travel and travel media, and possibly also much of television and the Internet writ large, provide us with an infantile heaven of freedom in offering us a world seemingly without limits, constraints, or consequence. We seek that experience to escape the demands of necessity, especially the demands imposed by work and daily routine.

To understand how and why we constantly use the cultural products around us to reproduce an infantile heaven of freedom, I turn her to the work of psychoanalysts Michael and Enid Balint who in the fifties wrote on the pleasures of funfairs, in a book called *Thrills and Regressions* with an analysis that can be applied to travel, both physical travel and its representations. There is a three act drama in travel which entails exposing oneself to a "safe" threat and consequent fear, mastering it, and returning unharmed to safety. Such a trajectory, often repeated, relies on our having a concept of home, a matrix -- in the maternal sense -- to which we can return. Psychoanalytically speaking, in the womb and in our earliest days, we experienced a merging with our surround. It gave us pleasurable feelings from warmth, rhythmic moving, taste, smell, and close body contact. We grasped at it and thought it was the same as self. Later, and this is the general thesis of object-relations psychoanalysis, we were inevitably frustrated, especially in being fed or held, and so we came to know others as separate from ourselves. As Susan Isaacs put it, the origin of fantasy and of our mental lives is frustration. According to the Balints, our early anxieties about

not being nurtured or fed, about losing our balance or being dropped, and about getting perplexed in our orientation to the world led us to form one of two basic attitudes toward the expanses outside ourselves. We could develop the strategy of clinging to reliable, nurturing objects and fear empty spaces. Or we could become instumentalists, finding tools to negotiate space in a spirit of adventure.

As an adult, the instrumentalist is seen in TV travel shows like SURVIVOR. She relies on no one for long, but mostly on her own resources. Culturally this type was more traditionally defined as a man, the explorer, adventurer, or gentleman traveler. He seemed adaptable and clear sighted about the world, and in its empty spaces he discovered a plenitude similar to that of the original matrix. However, a person like that could over-idealize his tools, insisting they be totally under his control. The Balints say this kind of approach demands possessing the utmost skill to negotiate threatening objects, so the instrumentalist “must submit his performance to incessant, exacting reality testing, and to searching self criticism.” In a panoptic way, he needs to view the whole space to spot unfriendly or uncaring objects appearing out of nowhere, and furthermore he assumes these objects may shift, may be helpers or adversaries and may suddenly change from one to the other. The instrumentalist may regularly drop the old for the new, since freedom matters more than being loved. So this hypothetical fellow, the instrumentalist, often has a hard time building long-term, intimate relationships. He may even be a seducer because he

sees winning over others as a challenge to his skill. And myths all over the world have promised this kind of hero that he will marry the fair maiden after his quest, that he will return to the matrix when he must come back home, down to earth.

In contrast, the clinger's world, according to the Balints, "consists of objects, separated by horrid empty spaces. He lives from object to object, cutting his sojourns in empty spaces as short as possible. Fear is provoked by leaving the objects and allayed by rejoining them." In thrill rides, which the Balints wrote about, this strategy usually entails clutching, pressing one's whole body against a firm and safe object. The clinger feels let down if alone, and has a constant need to be in touch with familiar people, ideas, beliefs, and accustomed ways. In terms of traveling, freedom may be too much for clingers, making them feel insure or clumsy, inhibited, ineffective. They feel limited both by fear and by not enough skill. The Balints ruefully thought this appellation might apply mostly to women, although we can also read into it conservative politics or, in contrast, legitimate social fears about leaving one's own milieu, as Blacks have felt about segregated spaces in the Deep South or in large cities in the north in the United States.

The tourism industry and travel professionals understand these two very primitive tendencies or attitudes in travelers confronting the world. And the corporate structuring of travel sites on the Internet and travel programming on television cater to both tendencies at once, with varying mixes of appeal to clingers and to instrumentalists, often to both at the same time.

I am interested in this kind of object-relations psychoanalytic theory because I think it tells use something about how people travel, how they prepare for travel, and how they incorporate the outside world into their matrix back home both. This kind of theory might also have wider implications about Internet and TV use.

To take a case study, I will look today at three points of production of travel media: The Travel Channel, Pilot Productions, and the Lonely Planet web site and its links. The Travel Channel used to be more adventurous, but now the livelier programs about travel appear on other venues, especially PBS, the Cooking Channel, and the Discovery Channel. The more adventuresome programs obviously appeal to or depict the instrumentalist traveler who has to tools to turn the world into an unlimited prospect of friendly expanses. Some of the programs I liked on the Travel Channel when it was good were *Lonely Planet*, especially with Justine Shapiro. She is the hardy and adventuresome backpacker, dependent on phrase book as the only linguistic tool available to her, may find some datable person who speaks some English, and has a great trip through a lot of hard work. *American Journey* showed culinary archeologist Nick Paine doing research in Louisiana on Cajun food and at the show's end eating alligator and gumbo with a Cajun family by lantern light. *Great Writers Great Cities* showed us mystery writers presenting the unknown face of major capitals. And on other networks, the Food Channel in particular has always featured ethnic cooking and the depiction of famous chefs cooking in their

restaurants around world.

What makes a travel TV program good? One key element is that the presenter or explorer have a great personality and spunky character and show a lively interest in meeting local people, and sharing their mores and festivities. Less successful presenters, especially on *Lonely Planet*, just followed the guide books. Viewers interested in instrumentalist depictions want to see how the traveler presenter finds economical accommodation and transport and the doing of the trip, with explanations of food, exertion, and local shopping. For the cinematographer and director, travel television offers an occasion to present an interesting mise-en-scene with details of the social milieu, especially of ordinary people’s social life, perhaps drawing from the cinema verite tradition to show the unpredictable aspects of place at a given moment and people’s visual aspects seemingly revealing their personalities.

Interestingly, and this relates to my thesis about basic needs when confronting empty spaces, there is always wrapping up that occurs in the travel show. And this same kind of wrapping up occurs in any how-to show on television: home remodeling, cooking, sewing and crafts, or even shrink shows. Megan Mullen in a talk, “The Rise and Fall of Cable Narrowcasting,” describes what she called the “new” narrowcasting which creates interest groups out of a target audience that seems to have disposable income. It creates a feeling of community pre-established by marketing. It also creates a sense of personal empowerment in that the shows let us fantasize that we could actually take on a

large project. The shows feed acquisitive desire. In this way, the overall structure of the travel show, or any how-to show, appeals to the needs of the clinger. The show itself is the friendly object that reassures us that the potentially chaotic spaces outside are under our control while the things the people do in the show give us a sense of our instrumentality, of being able to use skills and tools to make the world around us a great place to be.

Interestingly, travel media, including the Travel Channel, have turned more to the Internet than to television for their creative endeavors, as have the original makers of the Lonely Planet show, Pilot Productions. And what all these groups are doing is imitating the mother of travel web sites, the Lonely Planet site. Let me show you some of these sites, their historical shifts, and their appeal to the primitive instincts of clinging and instrumentality.

Lonely Planet site. Travel Channel site. Pilot Productions site. [transparencies]

Too often our own identity needs lead us to recuperate and colonize the site of the other by incorporating it into a categorical framework that is familiar and useful to us. As I prepare for a trip, I negotiate my forthcoming approach to a place using the techniques of both the clinger and the instrumentalist. I appropriate information for myself as part of my own project in my own space and time. If I am going to travel, I seek to efficiently fulfill my most urgent needs, especially for lodging and meals [show transparencies about accommodations].

Because the pre-planning aspect of planning for travel offers the opportunity for niche marketing, I can find many commercial interpreters to help me with this task: information brokers, Internet portals, and tour guide books, to name a few. I need to decide what of this information is relevant. I also use the Internet and e-mail to assess risk and reduce uncertainty and unease, especially about potential health problems. Consumer culture shapes the mediated approach to leisure, and users have to negotiate their path through mostly pre-defined pathways.

The problem with this mediated experience of travel is that the world becomes a museum with places and metonymic representations of customs on display across many media forms; in this predigested material, too much is left unexamined and unhistoricized. The travel industry internationally has become almost exclusively centered on travelers, known as the guests, who now have little contact with local people, except to see them as service workers or their fabricated, picturesque presentation as a marketable commodity. Tours, like many programs on the Travel Channel, offer the security of pure cliché. In contrat, those who reject the cliché -- the explorers, drifters, and backpackers -- don't, in fact, escape travel's "imperial eyes." [to use Mary Louise Pratt's words] Backpacker tourists may live within host community, put money directly into it, and interact with the locals. But these tourists, instrumentalists free to look for adventure, may still see as exotic in one setting the very poor whom they would see as invisible, uninteresting, or threatening back home. Furthermore, backpackers may be on a

romantic search for authenticity, the untouched, the native, the unchanged, and the pristine.

Such nostalgia is fraught with danger. First of all, visual “history” is highly mediated for travelers since most tourist destinations and tourist professionals understand that they must arrange landscapes and exhibitions for visitors in a way that defines and manages history. Secondly, if the romantic tourist misses the way things were, it means she misses how they were before imperialism or consumer capitalism changed the landscape, often brutally. The search for the authentic and the pastoral means turning back the hands of time. And that is why I ask of all of us travelers, “How far will you go?”