

SURVIVOR THAILAND: A CASE STUDY IN TELEVISION TRAVEL IMAGERY
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While I am talking, a tape of clips from television will play in the background. You can learn as much from these images as from my talk, so feel free to watch or listen or do both. The first set of images come from the movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio, *THE BEACH*, drawn from a novel by the same name by Alex Gardiner. That novel, written in 1996, was a satire on the search for a pristine Thai beach which then was supposed to be hidden from other travelers, so it could be protected from crass mass tourism developers.

The filming of *THE BEACH* caused serious environmental damage and caused mass protests in Thailand, leading DiCaprio to declare himself an environmentalist in order to save his reputation and box office receipts. You will then see scenes from *SURVIVOR THAILAND* showing the beach where the group slept, their scanty food, competitions, rewards such as feasts, loved ones brought in and then competing by eating insects.

This year, mindful of the protests following the filming of *THE BEACH*, *SURVIVOR*'s contract laid out what the competitors' could gather to eat, and made them pledge not to damage the environment. You'll see no plentiful fishing as in *THE BEACH* and certainly no killing a pig as in a past *SURVIVOR* episode. Then you will see shots from *WILD ON THAILAND*, showing the same elephant ride seen in *SURVIVOR*, a Full Moon Party at Koh Phangan, also seen in DiCaprio's film, and *WILD ON*'s cast swimming at the location of *THE BEACH*, now visited by many tourists by boat.

The desire to visit untouched, rugged, and pristine is socially constructed. Our travel imaginary contains a desire for the pre-modern that derives from 19th century romanticism. The Romantic gaze seeks out beauty and sublime. Wandering alone in scenic nature, one also finds one self. My transcendent Olympian viewing and my meditative state stabilize and center my subjectivity. In its contemporary manifestation in what John Urry calls "the tourist gaze," my primacy on this kind of viewing means that when I come to a scenic spot to take a photo, I do not want other tourists in the frame, or workers.

Such an olympian gaze is detached and possessive, as if in long shot, and demonstrates the viewer's lack of responsibility, voyeurism. And travel has a liminal aspect separating us from the mundane and the ordinary, that lets us gaze at social things with more with interest and curiosity, including getting pleasure from doing everyday things such as swimming, shopping, or eating against an exotic backdrop.

Clearly the clip's images of *THE BEACH*, *SURVIVOR THAILAND*, and *WILD ON THAILAND* play with the tourist gaze for the television viewer. In that sense, the television shows contribute to the tourist apparatus regulating spectacle that affect all of us as we actually travel: on site, we may pay to see the spectacle, vendors sell things near the spectacle, we buy reproductions of the spectacle, or use guide books to tell us about the spectacle. Ironically such picturesque sites with their desired views are often interchangeable, both on TV and in real life. In this case, we could go here or could go there to find the perfect beach.

The apparent plenitude of a spectacular natural location comes from emptying it of historical meaning. Travelers, and probably also film and TV viewers, seek to visually consume nature as if it were a world without limits, constraints, or consequence. We want there to be an enduring, innocent place.

Mary Louise Pratt, in *IMPERIAL EYES*, wrote about the origins and implications of this attitude, tracing it to early European explorers, colonizers, and travelers to South America. Codifying another society or as they would put it, a new land, these European travelers presumed they were viewing an eternal present where the indigenous people's actions were typical, repetitive, and habitual. The travelers drew pictures and kept notebooks in order to create an interpretation, often in the name of science or reportage for those back home.

"Where, one asks," Pratt writes, "was everybody? The landscape is written as uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistoricized, unoccupied even by the travelers themselves." Pratt's descriptions of these 19th century travel writings sounds uncannily like travel shows and the use of global imagery in advertising on television. She writes, "it is the task of the advance scout for capitalist 'improvement' to encode what they encounter as 'unimproved' and ... as 'disponible,' available for improvement. "

SURVIVOR THAILAND's logo is "Outwit, outlast, outplay." The castaways are compete with each other for a million dollars. They demonstrate the competencies needed by the post Fordian, transnational capital, which relies on strategic communications, spur of the moment planning, psychological and physical mobility, evaluating shifts in the opportunity, acting fast, creating new values as needed, tearing down and building up, and above all flexibility in terms of thinking and action.

In addition, since the show, has a large youth audience, the survivors' interactions seem a lot like roommate trouble, that is, young apartment sharers need to learn society's rules of game, how to evaluate and deal with others, and how to make do with scanty resources. Furthermore, viewers see the competitors have an adventure that they may envy; it's sensual, memorable, improvisational, collaborative, and identity shaping.

As much as *SURVIVOR* offers pleasure of vicarious experience, even more it offers fantasies and anticipations. I myself enjoy its gratification, of schadenfreude, seeing betrayals, transgressions and punishments--glad the kid brother got it and not me. Again, for a youth audience, I think schadenfreude offers a pleasurable displacement, related to sibling or roommate conflicts and workplace rivalry.

As the clips show, TV dishes up an intertextual presentation of Thai beaches, with television imagery then being exploited in local travel marketing. I would ask, "Does seeing a place on TV or at the movies make us want to go there? It certainly shapes our vision about certain regions, as did the movie *THE BEACH*, and earlier Garland's novel, which led to a large influx of tourism to these areas of Thailand.

In fact, in keeping with its pitch to a youth market, *SURVIVOR* draws on motifs from two kinds of tourism, both appealing largely to people in their twenties, that is, backpacker tourism and adventure tourism. Similar to the competitors in *SURVIVOR*, who do not interact with local people, backpacker tourists, who call themselves travelers to distinguish themselves from mass market tourists, do not have a great deal of interaction with local people. They often travel to areas where they do not know the language and interact primarily with other travelers, with whom they share the lore of the road and perhaps find interesting and datable friends. However, even escape paths are culturally coded.

The traveler is an individualist, gaining cultural capital while on the road. Travel brochures in Thailand and some of the Thai press encourage local service providers to treat the backpacker well because "he" may be an executive later on in life. The backpacker wants to experience a certain kind of immediacy and presence that is often hard to find in tourism, and may get a sense of competence out of garnering pleasure at a low cost. In that sense, the backpacker, traveling on a budget, is a canny shopper, feeling alive from the pleasures purchased at a bargain and then moving on. The backpacker assumes there's always a better, purer place or experience to get to, one unsullied by hordes of the vulgar mass.

In a drastic way, SURVIVOR emphasizes something that stands out as novel for most travelers, that is, travel's physical aspects. Travel is one of our tools for extending our physical capacities and experiences, and perhaps this is why film and tv use so much travel imagery, its appeal to the sense. Travel immerses us in new soundscapes, tactile sensations, and flavors.

As travelers, we gain license for new kinds of viewing, often with an unaccustomed mobility of vision, so that we often framing panoramas through car windows or more explicitly with a camera lens. Existentially, we move through crowded places or vast spaces with a heightened awareness of being there as an eyewitness. It means something to me and to others to say, "I was there." Or "I saw something strange or exotic." In fact, the whole leisure-scape offered to the tourist's senses is shaped by distinction, ideology, and the roles we want to perform. Connoisseurship lets me enhance my status, expand my outlook on life, let go of boundaries, or just have fun.

In this light, with SURVIVOR's emphasis on the participants' performance and interaction in an arduous environment, and on the show's production values that linger over the potential sensory impact inherent in every episode, the show draws heavily on the motifs of another kind of travel that appeals to the twenty-somethings--adventure travel.

Some of the characteristics of adventure travel are these: The person intensely engages with the physical demands of place, seeking risk, novelty, and sensory intensity. The adventure traveler feels most alive when coping with physical needs or facing difficulty. Adventurers seek a way to test the self, using terms like "limit," "endpoint," or "edge" experience. In some ways, physical risk becomes an ontological challenge one addresses to oneself, with tests often involving drugs, transgressing cultural limits, disruptions, and coping with contingency and the unexpected. If one feels as purely in the body as possible, that would make the experience so saturated, so bombarded with stimuli, that the person can no longer be reflexive.

People who choose adventure tourism pick a special milieu that invites them to do certain type of things--mountain climbing, white water rafting, or dancing all night for three days at a rave. In this way, adventure tourism's appeal lies in its contrast to 9-5 office life or, for women, to caretaking and domesticity. The adverse aspects of this kind of travel are moments of confusion and culture shock, the need for rest periods in which one comes back to ordinariness and daily life, and coping with emergencies and illnesses. Of course, the fact that leisure in most countries is regulated by social sanction and law, means that many adventure tourists go to poor countries to let off steam. Once in those poor countries, the adventure travelers' and the backpackers' needs are catered to, vulgar as they might be.

For example, the Phuket Island tourism web site advertises now PaddleAsia Survivor tours: You can get a Tarutao paddle trip for swimming and exploring, or a special SURVIVOR trip to eat wild plants and learn about medicinal plants, but not have to rely on these for your meal. In the Full Moon Parties in Phangan Island in Thailand, about 10,000 young people, mostly from Europe, fly in each month for a beach party rave. Here the primary activities are drinking and dancing, and probably also sex, but interestingly with each other and not the sex tourism that Thailand is so infamous for.

If I'm skeptical about the value of these young people's travel preferences, let me point out that often such travelers spend more money that goes to local people than any other kinds of travelers do. Backpackers in Thailand, for example, eat in roadside stalls, use public transportation, and travel cheaply, using local hostels, for about 1-2 months. And in an age of conservative values in the United States, I encourage all young people to put on their backpack and hit the road. It's just that there is no road outside the tourist apparatus for them to hit.

Finally, to generalize about travel and television, television as a whole, but especially in terms of its travel imagery, is like the tourist bubble that the tourist apparatus builds up around the person traveling. Aesthetized place images, niche marketing, advertising's use of the global landscape, and travel shows construction smooth over contradictions in the potential travel experience. Television travel presents all locations within a graspable framework, previously conceptualized for us.

Televisual flow renders all the places of the world up together, homogenizing it for us as we turn on the TV set for the evening. Comforting images and clichés domesticate global problems and histories both in fiction and non-fiction shows. As we watch television, we gain a consoling momentary ability to classify place in a reduced way, which is fine because we may also have a desire to control the world as it comes to our attention and thus not to really know.

TV decontextualizes and recombines images of place in shifting layers, combined in pastiche. Everywhere's a stage, with a resulting lack of concreteness in reference to locale or place, beyond semantic configurations that are already socially established in their readings: a dark alley, a pristine beach, a city's major landmarks of a city. TV's presentation of worldwide places has little vision of conflict except in the places that are designated as war zones, dangerous, and bad. In ads, we often see images of the globe, sunsets, the world's children and religions, and sun and sand and beach--all decontextualized.

Imagery, narrative set ups, casting, editing, and narrative ellipsis provide shifting combinatory arrangements of the international and the exotic as fantasies for targeted audiences, usually by presenting some kind of vicarious experience built up out of ideologically redundant elements. In this way, US television produces the world and the globe according to what John Urry calls banal globalism.

The public sphere gets translated into televisual narrative backdrop, so that now politicians can depend on television to circulate a small range of connotations to which they will merely add some "spin." Television production practices, especially in going to other countries to tape shows, are like ordinary travel. Travelers, reporters, and television crews all claim the right to move through other people's spaces; they are demarcated as others and their voices will not be heard, or if they are, will be denied complexity. In this

way, TV contributes to an international imaginary as it continually reformulates, redefines, and relocates "other" and "we" as a way of approaching and understanding the world.

Even when television is not dealing with travel per se it is visually saturated with images connoting "world-wide," "far reaching," "far away," "global politics," and "exotic places and adventures." Needless to say, the connotations borne by references to place are overdetermined and redundant. Travel media, including television and the Internet, is now a if not the major discourse providing knowledge about the world. At the same time that television marks out the world, and in a strange way encourages the aesthetic sensibilities of the traveler, it, like other corporate and state discourses around place, regulates our knowledge and desire about place, globality, planet, movement, location.