



Journal of Religion & Society

The Kripke Center

Volume 2 (2000)

Dean MacCannell. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. Third Edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Pp. xxix + 231. \$12.95 (Paper).

[1] *The Tourist*, recently reissued in its third edition with a new epilogue and a foreword by Lucy R. Lippard, has become something of a minor classic of sociological literature. Yet, although it draws heavily on the sociology of religion and suggests intriguing implications for religious studies, it has received very little attention among scholars of religion. Despite some obvious limitations, due in part to its dated methodology (the first edition appeared in 1976), MacCannell's book raises questions about modernity, postmodernity, and subjective experience that remain compelling even today for the academic study of religion.

[2] MacCannell's work seeks to provide "a new kind of ethnographic report on *modern* society" by studying tourists as a means of "gaining access to the process by which modernity, modernization, modern *culture* was establishing its empire on a global basis" (xv). The impetus for such a bold undertaking came from a comment made by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1968: "It was not possible, he said, to do an ethnography of modernity" (1). MacCannell refutes this assertion with the contention that his study of tourists "may also serve as an introduction to the structural analysis of modern society" (3). He first embraced a structural interpretation of modern society when he noticed that his early interpretations corresponded with those of Émile Durkheim in studies of primitive religion. This led MacCannell to conclude "that tourist attractions are precisely analogous to the religious symbolism of primitive peoples" (2). Thus, a perceived parallel with primitive religions authorizes the ethnography of modernity.

[3] In his structural formulation, MacCannell poses two notions of the term "tourist," and both have implications for scholars of religion. On the one hand, "tourist" designates "actual tourists: sightseers, mainly middle-class, who are at this moment deployed throughout the entire world in search of experience" (1). This image of the "sightseer in search of experience" links tourists to a long discourse on experience carried on among modern, mostly Protestant, religious people. MacCannell's sociological perspective neglects the historical dimensions of this discourse, nor does he reflect on his own place in the

discussion. But if we regard the question of experience, especially the criteria for "authentic" experience, as a religious question, then MacCannell's work demands that we regard the tourist as another participant in this religious discourse.

[4] MacCannell's other use of the term "tourist" emphasizes what he calls its "metasociological sense" as a model for "modern-man-in-general" (1). In other words, the tourist serves for MacCannell as the ideal type "modern" in contrast to the ideal type "primitives" in Durkheim's and Lévi-Strauss's work. But MacCannell wants to bridge the differences between modern and primitive; just as many scholars of religion have assumed an innate "religious impulse" of "primitive peoples," a similar assumption posits an equivalent impulse that motivates modern peoples in their search for authentic experience. In fact, MacCannell argues that the *dialectics of authenticity* to a certain extent define modernity. An anxiety over the inauthenticity of the modern condition drives modern subjects to go in search of the authentic and the real elsewhere. The modern concern and pervasive nostalgia for authenticity and "naturalness" are, according to MacCannell, "components of the conquering spirit of modernity—the grounds of its unifying consciousness" (3). Consequently, the desire for experiencing authenticity motivates what MacCannell calls "touristic consciousness" (101); tourists, then, go in search of an authenticity believed to be absent in their everyday modern lives.

[5] But this quest involves more than an individual's experience of authenticity; at stake, in MacCannell's estimation, is modern consciousness itself. He regards the practice of sightseeing as "*a ritual performed to the differentiations of society.*" "Sightseeing," he goes on to explain, "is a kind of collective striving for a transcendence of the modern totality, a way of attempting to overcome the discontinuity of modernity, of incorporating its fragments into unified experience" (13). In MacCannell's view, the effort is doomed to failure in the tension between the modern construction of totalities and the simultaneous celebration of differentiations. Yet, his structuralist predisposition leads MacCannell to emphasize the priority of the totality over the celebration of differentiations. In his discussion of tourist attractions, for instance, he equates the function of public places with that of "the sacred text that still serves as the moral base of traditional society. That is, public places contain the representations of good and evil that apply universally to modern man in general" (39-40). Moreover, tourist attractions, according to MacCannell, "have a moral claim on the tourist and, at the same time, they tend toward universality, incorporating natural, social, historical and cultural domains in a single representation made possible by the tour" (45).

[6] MacCannell's emphasis on the universal totality remains consistent with his presuppositions about the deep structures of modern society and his assumptions about a radical separation between modern and traditional or modern and primitive. These notions in some ways may seem untenable to scholars today in light of postmodern and poststructural critiques that have emerged in the more than two decades since *The Tourist* first appeared (MacCannell argues with his postmodern critics in the "Introduction to the 1989 Edition" which is included in this new edition). Yet MacCannell's work urges us to take tourists seriously as modern subjects (or as *postmodern* subjects, if we prefer). In doing so, he opens up the opportunity to explore relationships between modernity and religion, for instance in the moral claims that social practices make on modern subjects, in the rituals performed as strategies to ameliorate social fragmentation, in the cultural attempts to find

authentic experience beyond the alienating superficialities of everyday life. The structuralist assumptions may seem somewhat dated, but MacCannell's book deserves its status as a classic in the sociology of tourism. The questions it raises make it a useful text in the sociology of religion as well. The opportunity is ours to take up these questions; the answers we suggest will determine the book's ultimate importance for the academic study of religion.

Reviewed by Thomas S. Bremer, Princeton University