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Allegorical Gardens: Tourism Liturgy and the Making of Tropical Insularity

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Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that modern mass tourism to tropical shores and islands has long developed its own liturgies playfully recreating the philosophical principals and institutions organising the late modernist being in the world and integrating destinations within a global tourism system. I will stress that on the level of tourism production, tropical destinations have been strategically produced as globally largely interchangeable settings made up of sights and itineraries allegorically embodying the modernist and late modernist ideas, conceptions and institutions of truth, innocence, beauty, diversity, time, and progress. From an ethno-historical perspective, I will suggest that the integration of tropical tourism destinations within global tourism systems re-actualize the classical role of gardens within the widened scales of social life in the contemporary world. From a tourism perspective, tropical tourism destinations can be seen as bounded spaces concentrating, articulating and festively celebrating a set of essential symbolic elements underlying the modernist philosophy. At the same time, as a result of the long established contact, participation and continuing relation between tourism institutions, tourists and tropical destinations, the latter have often adopted the semantics of the gardener role and developed tourism cultures within a globally integrated tourism system. In this sense, tropical destinations have often quite explicitly self-fashioned themselves as the gardens/gardeners of one of the major moral and aesthetic resource bases of late modernity. To approach interrelated issues of cultural production, personal and public liturgy and ritual performance, intersubjective distance, enchantment, and participation underlying this theoretical proposal, I will use data collected through extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the tropical island of La Reunion, Indian Ocean (1995-2001, 2005, 2006) as well as research on international relations within the wider field of tourism policy (2005-2006).

Allegorical gardens

The overarching aim of this paper is an anthropological and contemporary history study of one of the most persistent and dominant types of aesthetic model within human history: the garden. As a particular form of built environment and material culture, the garden is not a European invention, but first appeared in East Asia about 6000 BC. Since then, it was progressively adopted by Persian, Egyptian, Hellenic, Roman, European and North-American societies (Berque 1995). In Europe, the first gardens, early Romanic gardens built within the walls of abbeys, appear during the 9th century. Through a symmetric four-part pattern arranged around a central fountain they were often said to symbolise the source and four rivers of Eden. The much later French gardens are based on a similar symmetrical pattern. However, in a daring symbolic act, the powerful (e.g. the king of France) has substituted the metaphorical central fountain of Eden by his own residence. The king has become god, with

absolute power, materially symbolised by indefinite straight lines originating form the absolute's residence. The symbolised absolutism of the French garden was metaphorically challenged by the new format of landscape garden in England and Germany. Breaking with the notion of straight lines and symmetry, these new garden types metaphorically challenged the idea of absolute power. They rhetorically emancipated humanity from the absolute reigns of gods or god-like kings, which seems directly articulating the social and political emancipation of the land nobility in England and Germany. Freed from the arbitrary will of gods and monarchs, humans were to become the gardeners of their own destinies. This new worldview was carefully staged in English and German landscape gardens, creating a 'nature better than God's creation' (Goethe), arranged as *tableaux vivants* based on fantasy models of North-Italian, German, or Oriental nature and architecture. More recently, a particular vision of the 'countryside' has led to the re-landscaping of green urban belts and newly urbanised rural areas.

Despite the variety of historical and cultural contexts in which gardens have emerged throughout Asia, the Middle East and Europe, the formal principles underlying the production of these gardens remain quasi-constant. Gardens are always circumscribed spaces allowing to cultivate allegories of life and being (Roger 1997). Gardens are hence both manifestations and mediators of the gardeners' vision of social and cosmic existence and order. Through the arrangement and concentration of often highly metaphorical elements in the garden space, gardens are political in that they direct the garden visitor's gaze and make visible and emotionally intelligible a particular vision of the world. The allegorical materiality of gardens can therefore be studied as a text formulating how we should think about the world, but also as a playground for militant gardeners to test new ideas, to articulate resistance and to dummy-run revolutions. As a social space, gardens hence allow to reflect and connect to the principal symbolic elements of social existence and to recreate connections and associations with the world.

In the contemporary context, new forms of the garden continue to emerge and I shall argue in this paper that the production of tropical island tourism destinations is based, to a large extent, on the formal principals of the garden. International cultural policy organisations, tourism operators, tourists, developers, and political stakeholders at various scales all seem to agree that certain islands and other spaces situated far away from the Western centres 'retain' some form of 'cultural or natural authenticity' and hence need to be 'preserved'. In light of MacCannell's earlier thesis (1976), 'authenticity' seems to remain a central theme underlying tourism and cultural policy related to tourism development. From this point, I will argue, entire territories become bound and defined by a Western imaginary of the garden and are integrated to the global economy as 'gardens at the end of the world'.

Tourism liturgy

Liturgy has been defined as the corpus of religious texts, contents and public celebrations conducted in accordance with a prescribed form controlled by the institution and authority of a church. I suggest that travel and tourism has long produced its own texts and 'ceremonial' procedures; knowledge systems related to particular places, prescriptions of individual behaviour, protocols of what to do when and how, dress codes and time-space arrangements defining the temporality of tourism practice. It has produced its own forms of liturgy. This idea clearly contests

conceptions of tourism and leisure as spaces of 'freedom' or 'liberty', where people deliberate themselves or escape from codes and norms prescribing behaviour within their non-touristic time-spaces (cf. Enzensberger, 1964; Dumazedier, 1972). Since the Grand Tour by young aristocrats from mainly Northern and Central European countries, routes of travel and sites to be visited have been highly prescribed. Statistics by the WTO and national tourism authorities significantly show that tourism flows today are concentrated only in certain areas of the world, and within these areas only around certain sites. Even the most 'alienated' tourists searching for 'unspoiled' territories ('adventurers', 'ethnographers', etc.) usually follow similar spatial models and often find them-selves accommodated in similar eco-camps, back-packer sites or other 'remote' places, usually doing similar things (Cohen 2004).

The common - and hence defining - moment of these different tourist types is their journey through a world of otherness. They eat other food, they encounter other weather, other landscapes, other people, other languages, and other worlds. Usually, this confrontation to otherness involves a test for the self, with a translation process of the other in terms and terminologies of the self taking place (Geertz, 1973). In this sense, the journey through otherness enables various tourists to rethink, allegorically, and recreate their own reality and relations to the world (Bruner 2004). In this sense, tourism has been theorised as a form of contemporary ritual, a 'third space' in which people festively celebrate their being in the world, connect to and recreate the basic symbolic elements and institutions ordering their existence (MacCannell 1976). In van Gennep's terms, tourism has been seen as the liminal phase of a larger ritual, which actually begins before the departure and only ends after the reintegration of tourists in their normal environments (Turner & Turner, 1978). In this sense, tourism has been theorised as a 'sacred journey' (Graburn 1989) enabling people to ritually enact and perform ideas and myths that add meaning to their everyday lives. From this point, tourist sites have been seen as 'liminal playgrounds' (Selänniemi, 2003) enabling tourists to metaphorically engage with ideas of beauty, innocence, purity, time and progress. The approach to locate such ideas in a geographically situated space in the peripheries of the Western world seems to root back at least to 200 AD. It was then that the biblical writing adopted the idea of a Garden of Eden, a bounded space of primordial innocence and beauty, which was thought to exist a geographically located paradise (Delumeau 1992). While the progressive geographical discoveries of world made the physical reality of such a garden less probable, the idea of Eden as an earthly place strongly remained in the Western collective imaginary. Until today, much travel appears to be motivated by the theme of searching its traces, of places that were 'close' by and which hence may have preserved some of its original aspects. Tourism texts continue to reproduce the biblical tropes of paradise lost: the presence in tropical areas of the biblical parrot, of the 'delicious fruit', of 'eternal spring', of 'abundant' 'untamed' 'nature', etc.

During fieldwork in La Reunion, Indian Ocean, I have systematically followed tourists and smaller tourism groups during their journey, staying with them in hotels and accompanying them while on the beach, at the bar or on excursion. From these observations, I have tried to understand the dialectic between tourism texts and the personal experience by these tourists. Observing the conversations that unfolded in specific types of sites has allowed schematising different types of themes or topics that the encounter or experience of these sites had induced. Accordingly, the visit of 'multi-cultural' and 'colourful' harbour town frequently induced conversations on

social melange, multicultural harmony and problems the tourists faced back home with foreigners. Visits to the 'mountainous inside' of the island with its, typically, 'autochthon populations' and 'untamed nature' recurrently stimulated reflections on the 'purity', 'innocent' and 'timeless spirituality' of a 'lost condition of harmony with nature'. Visits of colonial sites, urban centres and areas of poverty, frequently induced reflections on the 'good' and 'bad' of social progress in general, and in the tourists' home environment in particular. The largely ritualised cocktail, drink or joint at the beach in the early evening, while gazing at the sun disappearing behind the horizon, often closed this typical day programme with reflections on time, on 'how good we live', 'on how beautiful life is after all' and on 'how great it is to be here'.

Much has been written about the 'authenticity' of tourist sites; whether it is important or nor, whether it *exists* at all or not, whether it implies an academic question or not (cf. Cohen, 1988; Wang, 1999, Bruner 2004). According to MacCannell (1976), the touristic quest for 'authenticity' is motivated by the alienations and differentiations brought about by modernity. For him, tourism is a ritual embedded within the ideological structure of modernity. Through their highly metaphorical nature, destinations and sites allow tourists to connect to and ritually recreate values and moral principles of modernity. While western philosophy has conceived modernity merely in terms of materiality, human progress and social alienation, MacCannell's tourist quest for 'authenticity' can been seen as a rationalisation and resemanticisation of the initially biblical ideas of initial purity, innocence, beauty and lightness.

The tourists I observed rarely ever asked questions about the 'authenticity' of whatever site or story. 'Authenticity', as an *etic* notion, however seems pertinent to describe the touristic emotion of personal encounter and connection with different sites or people. In this sense, authenticity is not about a positive property of an object, but about the phenomenological nature of a personal *in situ* experience enabling to connect to the world, to reflect upon the world and to reaffirm *reasons* for being in the world. In this sense, the phenomenological level of tourism experience is connected to the structural level of tourism production. Tourism experience unfolds within the constrains of a political economy of space and image shaping destinations in accordance to the liturgical needs of tourism. Destinations, itineraries and sites are configured in ways that 'bring to life' and allow to engage with a particular mythology[1]. In the next section, I wish to further study the modalities of this political economy, from the angle of political institutions working in the wider field of tourism.

Making gardens

With the European imperialism and colonisation of the world, the imagery of the garden and its various embodiments, seems to have continued its journey to spaces and societies 'without' gardens (Berque, 1994, 1995). Since the 18th century, European naturalists have travelled to the 'new' continents and territories to document the natural world. Equally involved in the colonial project, the new discipline of ethnography has aimed to study 'other cultures' throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Both naturalists and ethnographers can be seen at the basis of the establishment of often sophisticated natural history museums situated in the European capitals, but also in the social and political centres of colonial life.

[1] Of course, many other things happen when tourists do tourism and these things usually escape the authority of tourism planners. For instance many Western tourists engage with dogs, cats and other animals met in the street, and then tell stories about there own dogs or cats.

At the same time, selected sites situated in the 'colonies' came to symbolise and embody both imperialistic and romanticising anti-conquest narratives of 'human' evolution and the European discovery of the world. In a way, the architectural remnants of 'past civilisations' in the Mediterranean, but also in East Asia and South-America became sites to embody the European idea of a humanity going towards ideals of refinement, perfection, and the domination of the natural. In many ways, they became allegorical territories enabling to test and situate European models of 'high culture', but also of class and gender, and thus to order a socially and spatially differentiated humanity within a unified worldview (Said 1978). Consequently, 'cultural diversity' often appears to have been conceptualised 'horizontally', through the mobilisation of a highly hierarchical model of European society and class division applied on 'other' civilisations. For instance, the 'noble savage' figure emerging from Rousseau's romanticism was mobilised as an idealised double for many European nobles. In this sense, the 'other' was poetically, artistically and touristically celebrated as a metaphoric double of the self, alienated only by an orientalist or otherwise 'exotic' disguise. The other was textualised and translated in terms and terminologies used to make sense of the self (Geertz 1973). At the same time, European class, but also gender models equally seemed to have been mobilised to create and justify hierarchies between different 'cultures' in the world, using different tropes to situate a 'male' and 'noble' Europe at the top of a global humanity.

If the world seems to have been signified through social-culturally relevant class and gender analogies, another type of human-geographical formulation clearly centred around a European genealogy of scientific discovery, artistic writing, humanistic reform and militaristic memory. As a consequence, in the early 20th century, the world was made visible to a European audience through a complex set of sites and routes enabling the celebration and re-enactment of European visions and forms of knowledge of the world. These sites and routes were often symbolically and spatially disconnected from their immediate social environments. They were spatially defined and circumscribed and usually rather connected within wider touristic routes, then with the social context of the populations living in and around such places. The principles underlying the imaginary of the garden hence seemed to be in place.

After the first waves of decolonisation, an international institution, UNESCO, was founded in 1945, partly to preserve cultural sites and art objects situated then often beyond the power and control of the old colonial empires. The UNESCO charter (1945) clearly defines its claim for 'universal' authority to preserve sites, promote education, and create conditions for lasting peace. The first major project of UNESCO consisted in the relocation of an ancient temple in Egypt, threatened by the construction of a dam. In the following years, architectural remnants of other 'high cultures' were preserved. In 1972, UNESCO initiated a legally binding international convention regarding the preservation of cultural and natural heritage with 'universal value'. The newly founded World Heritage Centre was to oversee the management of a list of sites threatened by modernisation and change processes and help to preserve their historic, aesthetic, artistic, cultural and / or natural integrity. Other conventions and declarations followed adapting the spirit of UNESCO's policy to changing historic contexts and ideologies (UNESCO 2001, 2003). While UNESCO seems to have taken control over the 'contents' of sites, the newly created World Tourism Organisation (WTO) appears to have invested the role of managing the formal aspects

of tourism infrastructures, site access and their economic exploitation[2]. On one hand, tourism development was used as a tool for economic development, and the WTO in collaboration with national governments and major international donor agencies including the World Bank developed tourism master plans for developing countries since the 1960s. On the other hand, this organisation negotiated major international conventions allowing both people and capital to flow across borders, enabling tourists to safely access sites and tourism operators to invest into international tourism infrastructures.

These processes and the national, regional and local public policies they have induced can be seen in continuity with an underlying imaginary of the garden. In this sense, the garden has become - or has motivated - a 'world polity' format manifested through 'a set of cultural rules or scripts specifying how institutions around the world should deal with common problems' (Lechner & Boli, 2000: 51). Beyond the rhetoric of ethics, humanist philosophy, tour operator PR, sustainable development and spatial planning, tourism sites in many ways appear to be thought of and protected as quasi religious sites of the Western world. The proclaimed 'universality' of heritage here implies a certain arrogance, if not ethnocentrism by those who define their criteria and legitimate the modalities of selection and formulation. One could go as far as to see international institutions like UNESCO or the WTO as neo-colonial tools perpetuating the hegemonic policy of former colonial powers and the church into new forms of global 'cultural' governance. In this light, the global tourism system appears marked by a latent moral – or at least semantic – ambivalence. On one hand, international public policy makers, academics and many of the global tour operators stress the need for sustainable development of touristic resources, the implication of 'local communities' and the social-economic integration of tourism sites, while, on the other hand, the global tourism industry has put into place a hyper capitalistic, aggressive and profit oriented economic system. In this context, the production of 'peaceful local communities', of beach resorts or pristine natural spaces, of idealised human oasis situated somehow outside the capitalist logic of the tourists' 'own' society, seem to manifest a new form of transnational society; a society with its own forms of political economy, authority and division of social roles; a society in which the production of particular types of 'gardens' has become an specific social task[3].

Gardening as participation and identity self-fashioning

International tourism has often been theorised through the dichotomy of the host and the guest and spaces of intersubjectivity between them. Yet, it appears naïve to believe two somehow homogenous entities – 'strangers' and 'locals' – oppose each other in the tourism field. Indeed, the 'locals' accommodating the 'strangers' are often 'strangers' themselves (Smith, 1976) or have lived or regularly live abroad (Tsartas, 1992). On the other side, the 'strangers' in many cases are originally 'locals' visiting

[2] This division of 'tasks' is possibly best illustrated by the WTO's *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* bringing together all major conventions regarding ways to produce and exchange tourism products and services.

[3] Yet, in a world defined by multi-polar and often contradictory dynamisms, I suggest it is important not to explain the complexity of social dynamics by an overarching conspiracy theory or ideological master plan. The 'making' of gardens may be seen as a dominant pattern at the scale of international cultural policy relations. It is however not the only one. International cultural policy lobbies are neither unified in their approach, nor in their goals. Other policy aspects and issues including geopolitical considerations, market ideologies, nationalist agendas, ethnic minority politics, etc. are connected and intertwined with tourism and heritage preservation agendas.

friends or family members, or connecting sometimes to the local in terms of an imaginary space of personal or social ancestorship (Meethan, 2004). Also, the touristic space of intersubjectivity is usually complex and heterogenous with a multitude of parallel and often competing networks, actors and alliances and different levels of public control, action and inter-actor friction. Opposing 'locals' to 'tourists' hence seems an overly partial and reductive approach, poorly comprehending the complexity of tourism.

If global polity formats underpin many national, regional or local public action plans, they are necessarily translated in the terms and modalities of the cultural and social contexts at these levels. They are object of agency. In this sense, the imaginary of the garden *a priori* underpinning to a certain degree international conventions for the protection and preservation of tourism sites, becomes *something* different when translated and contextualised in terms of public cultures and localised public bodies. Staging spaces allowing tourists to fulfil their 'rituals', *de facto* staging the liturgical and symbolic elements and spatiality constitutive of the garden, may become a primary economic resource of multiple and competing systems of political economy.

At a transnational level, it may become a personal, but also a collective social role within an internationalised system of producing tourism spaces. Furthermore, the accommodation of tourists, the guarding of 'traditions', the preservation of 'old stones' can become a social role and task of tourism destinations within a globally integrated society; a role and task in many ways analogous to the liturgical and spiritual role of priests, monks, witch doctors or other 'holy' people who in various forms of society are separated from the profane crowds. Within the catholic church for instance, there seems little public discussion regarding ways priests organise their intimate time-spaces and manage the boundaries with their 'communities'. Maybe, we don't want to know (because precisely priests are - or used to be - 'sacred') and contemplate ourselves in dirty jokes (which in a way reaffirm the sacred-profane boundary). Anyway, I think the idea of such an analogy can open fruitful reconsiderations of different types of tourism and the 'spiritual' role of hosts; in particular types of tourism where direct social encounters are part of the practice and exchange ('ecotourism', 'sex tourism', 'cultural tourism', 'spiritual tourism', etc.).

At the local level of 'destinations', accommodating tourists, guarding traditions or preserving old stones can become a means of participation in largely internationalised exchange systems. As a means allowing social participation, the creation of wealth and the definition of identity boundaries and stories, traditions or old stones 'exchanged' with tourists can become an important identifier and reference point bearing socially contextualised formulations of ethnicity, territoriality, and cultural identity. As such, such 'resources' can frequently be manipulated to serve the symbolic purposes of various official or informal political and social authorities. Touristic audiences, too interested in or too occupied by their own discourses and performances, usually ignore the subtle economics of making visible particular signs and occurring others, of formulating touristic resources in ways that symbolically 'feed' localised political debates or struggles for personal, class, ethnic, or institutional recognition. Using the garden as a format to participate in the transnational economics of tourism may be prescribed by the liturgical demand of tourists and international institutions like UNESCO. How to fill it with meaning - which signs to mobilise, which discourse, etc. – however allows 'hosts' a large degree of agency and political freedom. In this sense, 'local colour' (Cohen) becomes a space of creativity and subtle, but contextually often efficient political provocation and manipulation.

Conclusion

The idea of this paper was to study the model of the garden in relation to the cultural productions of tourism in tropical islands. Despite, or beyond, the rhetoric of economics, ethics, utopia, or sustainability, the garden seems to systematically reappear as a model 'sub-consciously' ordering and legitimating action and consequent social and spatial productions in the tourism realm. Mobilised by internationally acting institutions, initially the church, then the colonial powers and international cultural institutions like UNESCO, the model of the garden allows to situate highly circumscribed spaces outside of the spaces of everyday life; spaces that through their selection of sites bring to life particular myths of the 'modern' being in the world. Through international conventions, these spaces are made touristically accessible; geographical boundaries are made transgressable, allowing tourists to connect to and reflectively recreate such myths. Seen from the perspective of political economy, such spaces become resources with a largely polysemic underpinning. 'Sacred' resources for tourists in a wider sense, they may be economic and symbolic resources for particular countries, enabling them to participate in a wider world. At the same time, this participation reconstitutes and refashions the 'local' as a symbolic entity. Consequently, certain regions of the world, or certain people identified with particular sites, may become 'holy places' or 'holy men', mediators or gardeners of the touristic pilgrimage process.

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