Book review of *Literature & Aesthetics, the Journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics, volume 22 (1), June 2012: Literature, aesthetics, travel*. Editor: Alex Norman

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This is a most interesting compilation of articles that combine tourism and literature or tourism and pilgrimage for spiritual or religious reasons to search how literature and pilgrimage provide more meaningful and deeper understanding of travel. Pilgrimage or travel to sacred sites would be an important field of study since it is not limited to religious sites. The editor underlines it is a diverse collection that can stimulate working and reading outside traditional disciplinary boundaries and that offers variegated examples of practice and challenges to traditional concepts and interpretations. Only careful reading reveals the wealth of ideas as they must be capture before moving to the next article: there is no salvation from repetition as each author engages with a different set of theoretical tools. The editor notes that an “experience oriented analysis” would help develop better knowledge of tourism than “an activity oriented one” (Norman, p. iii), idea taken up by Kujawa as a core inner aesthetic contemplation (a new interesting extension for critical tourism studies), yet most critical tourism studies have long pointed to the fact that tourism is experience-based and that activities are pursued to enhance the embodied emotional experience lived in the destination(s) visited.

Nine of the articles focus on spiritual journeys. There is still no agreement as to how and where religion and tourism meet, except that the field has received too little consideration (Strausberg 2011, Cusack 2012). This publication, together with Shackley’s *Managing Sacred Sites* (2001), Dewsbury & Cloke’s 2009 article on spiritual landscapes, Volume 5 of the *Journal of Tourism Consumption and practice* (2013) and various sessions on tourism and sacred spaces at the 2014 RGS-IBG conference, attempts to fill this gap. It seems difficult for tourism and religion to merge as, according to some of the authors, tourists seem to demonstrate little true faith in spite of what appears to be a sincere search for spiritual uplifting (Norman, Howard, Kahl). They practice ‘allegoric pilgrimages’ befitting modern existential and essentially secular realities. For other authors, such journeys are a sub-type of tourism, often characterized, unfortunately, by the same type of negative behaviours by both tourists and entrepreneurs.

These tourists seek to bring about an inner transformation by visiting often remote ‘exotic’ centres of spirituality (in Tibet and India, especially). Many believe that they have been transformed positively but very few renounce their Western lifestyles: they hardly abandon the original trajectory of their lives. They promptly return to their home and work routines after a few weeks or at most a few months overseas. Some sometimes return to those ‘spiritual’ destinations because they “want to believe that some place sacred exists” (Howard, p. 142), exteriorizing spiritual values. They travel, the reader discovers, to experience embodied contact, to sense, smell, encounter face to face ‘others’ imbued with sacredness, which should enable them to unlock a true understanding of the world. The value of these journeys for the tourists, however, is revealed in the narrations upon their return home of those who performed the journeys rather than in spiritual development: “they need to be recounted ... for a better appreciation” (Shinde, p. 90), as already explained by social critics of tourism.
Lockwood indicates that the social atomization of the culture of consumption may be the culprit whereby “religion and spirituality have become commodities” (p. 110). For Fenton Keane, “the tourist entraps nature in its status as commodity” (p. 183). Most tourism studies scholars would agree that it is “a cynical product of capitalism” (p. 129) and of how western society supports and encourages consumerism. However, there is little theoretical discussion of the issue by any of the authors, beyond stating it. The discussion remains centred on the degree of spirituality on offer and on constructing one’s spiritual self, which adds little to the knowledge about tourism as a social consumerist practice available from critical tourism studies. Often, references to tourism studies are to publications in the 1970s!

Religious travel, presented by Eddy, Shinde (on how such travel can be denatured by the mode of travel chosen) and Frost and Laing, and pilgrimage by Fenton Keane (though not religious), involves some ‘total immersion’ in the spiritual practice by visiting retreat sites or shrines that do not always require international travel or ‘exotic’ appeal. The purpose is an individualized inward personal practice rather than an encounter with ‘spiritually endowed others’, resulting in some truer and longer lasting spiritual enlightenment. Fenton Keane confirms that the pilgrim’s task is to “shift the sedimentary layers of the everyday to recover the jewel of life” (p. 177) by “abandoning the worlds of the known” (p. 181) to fully embrace the spirit of the world. The accent in all of these articles on spirituality or religion and travel is on interpretations of spirituality rather than on travel. They still contribute to an extended understanding of tourism motivations.

Four of the articles explore more directly tourism though discussion in those cases is based on literary perspectives. Robinson introduces the recent turn to emotions in tourism studies through Stendhal and describes “the re-configurative process of tourists’ … adventure of the self” (p. 4), to conclude that tourism and the tourist are complex, hardly a new thought (see Wall & Mathieson 2006). The author engages with the role of tourism in generating emotions in tourists whose everyday negative emotions tend to resist the pleasurable ones the encounter suggests. Mathews discusses how the attractiveness of South America is constructed in the imaginary of tourists as a place for risky adventure, supported by recent tourism publications. Two of the articles survey non-western perspectives through Korean (Lee) and Song dynasty Chinese (Wang) travel literature, expanding knowledge of travel. Reading this collection leads to an appreciation of other scholars’ perspective on the meaning of travel and tourism and can in some instances stimulate an increase in the knowledge of what characterizes tourism. It matters that we engage as scholars with a wide variety of perspectives, especially that we do more with those of the global south. Scholars in spiritual and religious studies, however, are those who will gain most from this collection.

References


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