



## **BOOK REVIEW:**

*The Ethics of Sightseeing*, by Dean MacCannell,  
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011,  
271 pages.

ISBN 978-0-520-25783-2.

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Dean MacCannell would probably be the first to deny it but he is undoubtedly one of the founding authorities on the study of tourism as a social phenomenon. His first book, *The Tourist, A New Theory of the Leisure Class* was both formative and influential in tourism studies and remains today, together with John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze*, one of the most important contributions in the field. This book explored the nature of tourism as a response to the alienating conditions of modernity, a quest for authenticity that is doomed to fail. It also dealt persuasively with the structured phases of attraction formation and the semiotics of attraction in tourism encounters. After such a significant contribution one might be forgiven for wondering what else MacCannell would have to say apart from occasional wrangles with his critics. This new book, however, is something very profound.

With so many books on tourism and seemingly more every year the serious student, academic researcher and reflective practitioner has no shortage of insights

and cases to illuminate his or her thought-world. But the very proliferation of advanced texts in our field at once implies a need to classify and categorize them, to put them into some sort of order or perspective so as to understand the nature and value of each successive contribution. However, to place the work of Dean MacCannell in this burgeoning canon is a task that is both superficially simple and at the same time fraught with hidden complexity.

To start with the superficial, his latest book, *The Ethics of Sight-Seeing*, merely confirms his place in the small pantheon of social scientists who have made tourism the object of their studies, and his place, I hasten to add, is unarguably somewhere near the top. For four decades now MacCannell has occupied a massively influential position in tourism thinking and writing, with only Urry, Bruner and Graburn coming close to matching his originality and insight. And this is where the complexity begins, both in relating MacCannell's work to the mainstream and in addressing the contribution made by this new book. Here we see him thinking and rethinking, developing and re-contextualising, updating and revisiting. So amongst the novelty and freshness of approach he also deals with some familiar territory, notably authenticity, a topic that has suffused tourism and particularly cultural tourism since he introduced it as the fugitive object of the modern tourist and as the basis for the symbolic ordering of touristic space.

His notion of staged authenticity with its hint of mendacity paradoxically tainting its central role in satisfying the touristic urge to find something real in a world of artifice has a new register now that the techniques and pervasiveness of display have all but removed the Goffmanesque back regions and replaced them with routine performativities. We expect as tourists to be gulled, and as consumers we almost expect verities to be replaced by appearances, as evidenced in the power of celebrity (p. 24-25). But here we encounter once again MacCannell's complexity. In discussing tourism we find him addressing changes in wider society and, in particular, its visual realisations. And yet he refutes any suggestion that the book is sociological, anthropological or even concerned with cultural studies. His method is 'Nonsystematic naturalistic observation combined with scholarship' (p.x). He even (to some extent) abjures his previous concern with tourism. Indeed, it is the sightseer

specifically (spelled out in capital letters), rather than the tourist that preoccupies MacCannell here.

Sightseeing, that oddly tautological activity at the core of tourism is for MacCannell is part of its essence and all that is left when everything else is stripped away, 'sightseeing involves the whole person, mind and body, being and existence. It is about the person's connection, or lack of connection, to nature, heritage, other human beings, and especially, their own psyches' (p.42). This appears as a basis for drawing the fundamentals of an ethical concern for sightseeing and its implications are profound, especially since sightseeing in its touristic context is inextricably linked with pleasure. This immediately raises the Aristotlean question of the extent to which the pleasurable can also be good, and the possibility of knowing 'the good' as a basis for knowing what is ethical. The questions raised for tourism are fundamental, if frequently ignored elsewhere: 'Does my presence in this strange land help or harm the people or the natural systems I encounter here? Are they joyful about my presence, indifferent, or hostile? Do they seek cynically to manipulate me?' (p.66). What, in short, is the good of tourism? Such questions provide the motive force behind MacCannell's search for the ethics of sightseeing, his penetrating critique of the postmodern condition and his search for a moral ordering and sensibility in tourism that hitherto has been confined to issues such as its negative cultural and environmental impacts, eco-tourism and sustainability. MacCannell makes it plain: Ethical tourists take responsibility for understanding their own pleasure and what, if any, 'good' it serves (p.53).

This is a significant book, a thought-bombarding, testing challenge of a book. Its scope is enormous, its scholarship is deep and ubiquitous. It abjures simple assumption and refutes the commonplace, and to answer the question I posed at the beginning of this review, it stands apart from its object in way that only the most penetrating analysis can achieve. Not only does it address the ethics of sightseeing, it addresses the assumptions and theoretical foundations of all of us who have sought to understand the intellectual essentials of our field. I can only give a fleeting flavour of the book here and I find difficulty in doing it justice. I started reading it from the beginning but gave up and read it as a collection of essays in no particular order,

which indeed the author permits, whilst advising us that his argument is better served if the chapters are read in sequence. That, ultimately, is in the power of the reader not the read, but my advice is simple, that any serious student of tourism (or sightseeing) should not deny themselves the insights this book provides. MacCannell may distance his work from sociology or anthropology, but for me this book is unique in its contribution, to the moral philosophy of tourism.

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