

Tourism in Shantytowns and Slums: A New “Contact Zone” in the Era of Globalization

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Abstract

Under the globalization effects, impoverished inhabitants of Third World cities and their environment became a new commodity to be consumed by the North. In this process the “periphery” is incorporated in the new economy as an exotic other with an array of by-products to be consumed as a fashionable commodified poverty. The symbols and signifiers of this phenomenon in the cases of “Villas miseria” in downtown Buenos Aires, ‘favelas’ overlooking Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg or Cape Town’s apartheid related townships will be analyzed in this paper.

Introduction

How about touring the ‘Villas miseria’ in downtown Buenos Aires, ‘favelas’ overlooking Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg or Cape Town’s apartheid related townships? Gazing out from the air-conditioned comfort of a minivan, visiting the home of a slum-dweller or having lunch while making conversation with local people? The voyeuristic curiosity of foreigners from the North about crowded shantytowns has been turned into ‘touristic capital’ by travel agencies that have begun to add these itineraries in their campaigns to promote Third World destinations. Under the effects of globalization, impoverished inhabitants of Third World cities and their environments have become new commodities to be consumed by the North, fashioned as an ‘exotic experience’¹ ‘that you cannot see in the States.’² In fact, in this process the ‘periphery’ is incorporated in the world economy as a new horizon of exploration, an exotic other with an array of by-products to be consumed as fashionable commodified poverty. In this presentation I will try to analyze the symbols and signifiers of this phenomenon.

Tourism considered both as a channel for organizing leisure time and as a cause and a consequence of globalization (Azarya, 2004:949-967) has accelerated international communications cutting across political and cultural boundaries, especially from the First to the so-called Third World. Although it must be stated that this ‘contact zone’³ constructed by tourism is characterized by asymmetric power relations between departure and arrival destinations (in an individual and societal sense) produced by historical power relations (in which colonial, imperial, developmental experiences and so on had contributed). Tourism, now inscribed in the global discourse of security and good governance promoted in the Third World by international agencies, such as the IMF and the World Bank for the achievement of *sustainable* development, is booming.⁴ The concomitant of globalization is acceleration, which means speed and the diversification of possibilities for capitalistic expansion of tourism. Looking for new attractions, new exotic places, tourism helped by globalization is opening

and creating new spaces to gaze (Urry, 1990), while at the same time preserving the 'safety and comfort' of industrialized centres. The result is a paradox where sameness and difference necessarily overlaps, a combination of the 'out of the ordinary' and 'home away from home.'⁵ In fact, that is the most important condition to open and conserve the attraction of a new spot for tourism, in other words, to make it competitive.

Shantytown tourism parodies the XIX century European *possession by exploration* (McClintock, 1990) travel narrative and experience, but with a difference; the "virgin lands" are not placed in pristine landscapes in the countryside. Instead, they are part of modern third world metropolises such as Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Cape Town or Johannesburg. Reconstructed by discourses of marketing strategies, they are placed inside out of the Third World city with other significant boundaries that guarantee their exoticism in an idiom that blends visual traces of deprivation and social chaos with narratives of survival.

"What's it about: seeing first hand our Brazil's most impoverished life in a culture of guns, drugs and lawlessness."⁶

"Although often desperately poverty stricken, townships are not only about crime and deprivation, you will witness a community spirit and be the recipient of hospitality like nowhere else! Comprising both informal, semi-formal and formal housing, the eclectic mix evident in the townships expresses a vibrancy and spirit somewhat lacking in the more urban areas."⁷

"Special tours are offered to these disadvantaged areas providing an opportunity to interact with the communities and be immersed in a rich culture of traditional values. Experience unique culinary trends, or duck into a smoky shabeen to enjoy the local brew and savour the sounds of township jass."⁸

"The idea (of Martín Roisi's *Tour Experience*) is not to show poverty, but the cultural richness that lies behind. Here, people organize, think alternatives and push ahead with good humor and solidarity."⁹

Directed at the first world tourism market, this discourse has to establish frontiers with local tourism in a narrative that renders the international exceptional and unique, and the visiting place 'remote' because it "is you who is discovering which is veiled to the nationals." For example, Marcelo Armstrong of *Favela Tours* states: "but the favelas are the only places in Rio that even the people of Rio don't know. They're not interested in the favelas. Even if they were, they're afraid to go" (cited by Luxner, 2000:4-5).

Poverty is once again rediscovered. In contradiction from the Victorian discourse of the 1870's depression that marked off the 'dangerous or ragged' from the ruling elites by constructing a *cordon sanitaire*, the tourism narratives of today make slums available by reconstructing the slum-dweller as a new kind of 'noble savage' (McClintock, 1990). S/he is defined by what he/she is not: a criminal. Hence s/he, irrespective of her/his socioeconomic and cultural identity should not be marked off as the earlier naturalized 'dangerous and ragged' underclass. Rather their dwelling place has to be visited as a part of the truly Third World urban reality. Moreover, a shantytown has values (semi-legal, informal, semi-formal) something close to nature (as opposed to orderly civilization). 'Disorder' within the order became attractive, exotic, different. But disorder needs some 'order' to be 'marketable.' In the case of slums, a sanitized cartography of poor life with a narrative addressing its "in-betweenness"—different but with the potential sameness--becomes dominant and predetermines the physical and psychological itinerary to be toured. Does the discourse stress modernity's idea of progress addressing successful stories—to calm anxieties? Consider

Armstrong one again, this time speaking of the baker Ronaldo Gomes da Silva, the richest man in Vila Canoas (a favela): “‘Unlike other people with money in the favelas,’ says Armstrong, ‘he didn’t make his money from drugs, crime or soccer, but from apple strudel’” (Luxner, 2000).

The omnipresent picture of economically deprived and politically neglected communities is presented with close-ups of individuals or communities attempting to improve their lives. These are the stops in the tour:

‘We will take you to a squatter camp where you will walk the dusty streets and see how happy the children are despite the poverty, visit a typical matchbox shack and an up-market house and find out how these people came to be where they are today.’¹⁰

Travel agencies and guidebook narratives, before or during the tour, operate as a meta-narrative that monitor the tourist’s gaze redefining the ways in which slum spaces and their subjects can relate to outside communities. Moreover, the narrative is constructed in conjunction with other narratives about the country or city in which slums are located. The favelas, for instance, are closely connected to romanticized “*escolas do Samba*” and the famous Brazilian carnival as their core foundation (‘Rio’s carnival cradle’ as it is announced on JeepTour’s website¹¹). It is also related to a particular naïve style of painting, exposed every Sunday in the Ipanema’s ‘Feria Hippie.’ South Africa’s township tours are organized around the themes of anti-apartheid struggle and post-apartheid ‘rainbow nation’. Tours of Argentina’s villas miserias stress the economic crisis (especially daily life after 2001 debt crisis) and the alternative culture born from survival strategies (expressed in a particular music, painting style, etc). Because safety is the ‘key word’ in the translation operated by the travel agent, his narrative must introduce the tourist to the ‘new rules’ that bring order to chaos:

Despite their bad reputation, nobody gets robbed,” insists the 32-year-old tour operator [Marcelo Armstrong]. “That’s because laws are enforced not by the police, but by the drug dealers, who don’t want any trouble. (Luxner, 2000)

In Rio, two large tour companies dominate the market. The company ‘Favela Tour’¹², has been in operation for almost 10 years, and now it takes close to 4500 clients a year on visits to Rocinha (one of Rio’s largest favelas) in a three-hour US\$ 20 (45 Brazilian reais) tour and Vila Canoas (a much smaller community). Company owner Marcelo Armstrong says that the international clientele is 65% from Europe and 20% from the United States. His clients come from all social and economic backgrounds, from young backpackers to older clients staying in five star hotels. The rival company, ‘Jeep Tours,’ also takes visitors to Rocinha (US\$30) in, as the name indicates, convertible jeeps, directed to a clientele more concerned with safety concerns. The cocktail of ‘romance and danger’ that both of them are promoting address the most fashionable tourism options of today: alternative tourism without direct contact, under close supervision and guidance of travel agency personnel, and direct contact tourism, *interactive tour* allowing verbal and bodily interaction with locals.

South Africa’s township tours oscillate, as Karin Barber suggests, between recovering an alternative history of apartheid and the anti-apartheid struggle (Witz et al., 2000), and packaging the poverty and marginality of slums as “another flavor in the pluralistic national banquet” (Barber, 2001). And as in favela’s travel narrative, reinterpreting local experience for external consumption. In post apartheid South Africa, memory has become a commodity for sale in package tours.

In Argentina ‘Villa’s tour’ is a new experience born after 2001-2 crisis. Spending 60 American dollars you can visit in a two-hour tour, Villa 20, a shantytown in downtown Buenos Aires. Martín Roisi’s Tour Experience¹³ is the only ‘company’ doing this business. ‘Villa’s tour’ must to be contextualized in the increased and extreme polarization of classes which started with Menem’s neoliberal policies and was aggravated by the December 2001 devaluation which took pensions, soared unemployment, shut up inflation and decimated industries—followed by Argentina’s default in repaying foreign debt.¹⁴ Paradoxically, Argentina, the model showcase for the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) economic prescriptions, fell suddenly in a deep crisis where middle classes—Argentina source of pride in front of other more social polarized Latin American countries—have been worst hit. “The proportion of the Argentinean population living below the poverty line increased to 57 percent in May 2002, compared to 24 percent four years earlier, and 27 percent live below the indigence line, more than double the number compared to 2001.”¹⁵

‘Villa’s tour’ is modeled on favela tour and by mimesis adapted to the Argentinean situation. It grew together with related ‘poor chic’¹⁶ trends to be consumed by the Argentinean upper class and visiting foreigners. ‘Villas miseria’ culture is appropriated by some Villa’s external entrepreneurs who fragment Villas’ identity taking some elements, reshaping it and producing an expensive and class-distinguishing commodity. Buenos Aires fashion brand ‘Ay Not Dead’ (Gorodischer, 2005) inaugurated this year its new t-shirts collection: ‘ropa villera’ (Villa’s clothes) alluding to, in their own words, a ‘cumbiero-villero imaginary’ (referring to Villa’s popular music, a version of Colombia’s Cumbia). Of course, it is an *imaginary* imagined by Javier Barilaro, ‘Ay Not Dead’ designer, who uses in his designs a ‘light version’ of Villa’s lifestyle represented by ‘tropical Cumbia-villera’ that sounds in radios and is performed every Saturday night at Villa’s dance meetings and was widely popularized by Argentina’s media. In choosing ‘tropical’ Cumbia, Barilaro erases the ‘other side’ of Villa’s life, which becomes more and more blurred, exorcising any sense of guilty in the consumers and producing what Halnon defines as ‘rational consumption of poverty.’ In Barilaro’s words:

“I made t-shirts with Cumbia-girls, tropical images, tigers and jungle.”

And, conscientious of his creative powers, he asserts:

“You see these colors, this aesthetics and says ‘es re-villero’ (is very villero).”

Tropical Cumbia Design¹⁷



The concept ‘villero’ defines who is constructing ‘Villa Miseria’s life. Of course, is not someone from inside because ‘villero’ replicates all the racist imagery shared by Argentinean middle and upper class of the under-class: the ‘negro villero’ (villa’s nigger) who can be whiter than a member of the upper or middle class but always a ‘negro de alma’ (nigger at heart). ‘Villero’ is characterized by particularly bad tastes: violent colours, coarse speaking style, sticky music, etc. more identified with tropical scenario. Barilaro designs

reflect both the European imagery of the tropics and the Argentinians' image of themselves as 'Europeans': hot colours, jungle, voluptuous women, anything reminiscent of everyday life at Villa 20 and with a price only affordable for upper class Argentineans or foreigners doing 'Villa's tours'. Villa's dwellers cannot buy t-shirts that apparently are representing them. Probably, they are not even aware of these faddy products only displayed in Buenos Aires fashion galleries. Villa representation is 'sanitized' and rendered as 'chic commodity' through a process—from design to display and sale—which is acted out away from the slum and does not include 'villeros.'

'Poor Chic' is a Global phenomenon with some of its commodities being consumed in the First World: favela's gangs jeans—selling for 200 dollars—, 'Favela Chic'-a Paris night club specialized in slum's cuisine, and soon may be 'Villas t-shirts'.

Conclusion

Mimicry of a reality-show where "producers design the format of the show, as well as control the outcome of some of them," reality tourism is opening new performing spaces for First World tourists. As in the case of reality TV we can be suspicious about how 'real' reality-tourism is. The travel agency as TV producers writes a script choosing what aspect of the slum and slum-dwellers 'can' be edited, who will be heroes and who villains. The resulting drama become a commodity and in order to keep its attractiveness it has to be re-enacted carefully, paying attention to the global discourse of safety and comfort and, when necessary, changing the designed scenarios, events, settings and actors. Every time it must show 'treasures amidst the trash' (Ashwell & Costin, 1996). Halnon calls this phenomenon 'objectification' (Halnon, 2002:504). In other words, the act of "reducing a complex and multi-faceted human being to a single part or function" and of controlling it. You can control in the process fears and anxieties produced by the asymmetrical relation represented by poverty that you are conscious of and pervades the encounter with the poor other through a process cushioned by the travel agency itinerary and narrative that stress pleasure and joy. The mechanism, says Halnon is to render the discourse by its opposite: "poverty becomes wealth, despair becomes fun, localization is transformed into travel" (2002:504).

Finally, one should not forget that some exceptional pilot projects have their itineraries, narratives and interactions decided by slum-dwellers. A minority in front of a powerful tourism industry and not encouraged by tourist boards, projects such as Western Cape Actions Tours are making a difference. WECAT is a non-profit organization run by former soldiers of Umkhonto We Sizwe, or MK, the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), who fought against the old apartheid regime of South Africa. During the tour they give an account of the history of the city melding local, national and personal narratives in an exercise of addressing and interrogating official narratives of apartheid and post apartheid.

Notes

- ¹ See far example in Exotic Tours Website, the page designed for Favela Rocinha Tourism Workshop. <http://www.favelatourismworkshop.com/#>
- ² Jeff Stinson, American engineer touring Rio's favelas, quoted in "Las favelas de Río, insólita atracción para los turistas," *Weekly Latin American News Report*, <http://www.hacer.org/index.php>

- ³ ‘Contact zone’ defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt, 1992).
- ⁴ ‘In South America, Argentina, which is still profiting from the adjustments of prices after the 2002 devaluation, reported an 11% increase in the first two quarters of 2004 following an already very positive 2003. Arrivals climbed also strongly in Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Paraguay and Ecuador. ... In Sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa consolidated the increases of the same period of the previous year (10%), in spite of the less favourable exchange rate. *WTO World Tourism Barometer*. 2(3), 9-10.
- ⁵ A place where you have the food and drink that you like, news from home daily available, telephone and internet access, hot showers and baths, etc... and, of course, ‘absolutely safe.’
http://www.fl.ulaval.ca/celat/histoire.memoire/histoire/cape1/rassool_witz.htm
- ⁶ *Pilot Destination Guide*
http://www.pilotguides.com/destination_guide/south_america/brazil/rio_favelas.php
http://www.thebishops court.com/cape_activities/township_tours.php
<http://www.cape-town.org/directory.asp?McatId=49>
- ⁸ “La idea no es mostrar la pobreza, sino toda la riqueza cultural que hay detrás. Acá la gente se organiza, piensa alternativas y sale adelante con humor y solidaridad” Martín Roisi of ‘*Experience Tour*’, *Clarín*, 25/05/2005. Available at
<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2005/05/28/laciudad/h-06215.htm>
- ⁹ “Soweto Township Tour”, *Enchante. Exclusive Tours and Excursions*
<http://www.enchante.co.za/soweto.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.jeeptour.com.br/sobre.htm>
- ¹¹ <http://www.favelatour.com.br>
- ¹² Tour Experience offer not only Villa tour, also you can choose ‘Trava Tour?’—a guided visit to Buenos Aires’s travesti world—or ‘Cumbia Tour’ (see below)
<http://www.tourexperience.com.ar/>
- ¹³ “The Argentinean economy contracted dramatically following the events of December 2001, with GDP falling by a record 16 percent in the first quarter of 2002, manufacturing output by almost 20 percent during the same period, and industrial production in general by some 17 percent during the first seven months of 2002. The currency collapsed to about one quarter of its original value, and inflation has spiralled. Unemployment has soared to some 23 percent of the workforce, with a further 22 percent underemployed. Public services have disintegrated, schools have closed, and state pensions and public sector workers’ salaries have gone unpaid.” In *Crisis States Research Centre Website*, <http://www.crisisstates.com/associated/CAW/background.htm>
- ¹⁴ *Idem*.
- ¹⁵ “Poor Chic refers to an array of fads and fashions in popular culture that make recreational or stylish—and often expensive-‘fun’ of poverty, or traditional symbols of working class and underclass statuses” (Halnon, 2002:501).
- ¹⁶ Image from *Tourexperience*’s Cumbia Tour website <http://www.tourexperience.com.ar/>

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