Representations of Western Tourism in Cinema:
Fantasies, Expectations and Inequalities

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"We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies."

There was an extended silence. The man in the booth sold postcards and slides.

"Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be a part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism."

Another silence ensued.

"They are taking pictures of taking pictures," he said.

– Don DeLillo, *White Noise*.

The idea of tourism has always been central to cinema; from the earliest days of the "around the world" silent film, the medium has offered a completely new way for people to see and experience other parts of the world, places we would likely otherwise never experience ourselves. It is the unique mobility of film – its ability to circulate around the world, as well as the mobility of the image itself – which ensures a virtual sense of travel and tourism in a thrilling way. At once, the cinema allows us to access actual locations in the world which may remain physically inaccessible to us, as it also by necessity of the idea of 'capturing' a moving image (a deliberate process of framing, selection and presentation) presents an essentially virtual image of actual locations. In the political economy of cultural display, "virtualities, even in the presence of actualities, show what otherwise cannot be seen. Tourists travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett qtd. in Dicks, 4). Essentially, the virtual nature of cinematic images enhances our expectations and fantasies of actual places. Cinematic representations of travel not only increase our desire to visit exotic and far away locations, but reinforce a certain image of these places in our minds. It is this very exact representation of a place which we desire and

expect to encounter, experience, and consume for ourselves.

The dominating images of the world that Hollywood, and Western cinema more generally, set forward reflect most cohesively an exoticized fantasy projection of the non-Western

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world that is at once enticing as it is filled with danger and trauma for the traveler who deviates from a conventional path of exploration. In a world that is markedly growing increasingly uncomfortable with American dominance, and where the Western traveler is seized by paranoia and expectations of danger and hostility, cinematic representations of journeys to lush, foreign lands offer a safe way to experience the world. To borrow Anne Friedberg's concept of the "mobilized virtual gaze," we can now sit safely back in our seats and engage in cultural "window shopping" without going anywhere or subjecting ourselves to the potential perils of travel. Many contemporary films which deal with the Westerner traveling to the less developed world project a fantasy of self-discovery and "authentic" experience for the traveler, as well as an inevitable confrontation with extreme danger upon seeking this unconventional encounter.

The exoticized gaze of the Western traveler thus implies a subsequent fear of the non-Western world.[1] Released in the decade preceding the post-9/11 climate of Western paranoia, Danny Boyle's *The Beach* (2000) and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1991) are, on the surface, strikingly different kinds of films in their production processes and aims: *The Beach*, a US-UK Hollywood co-production filmed on location in Thailand, and *The Sheltering Sky*, directed by one of art cinema's contemporary auteurs, an abstracted narrative filmed on location in the Sahara Desert of Niger. Despite the obvious narrative similarities that the films share – countercultural Americans who venture into foreign terrain and whom there are forced to encounter themselves – they also share uncannily similar core thematic issues where a dichotomy is broken down between the 'traveler' and the 'tourist.' Essentially, these films engage with the countercultural notion of an 'authentic' lifestyle of travel as being superior to the commercially exploitative, and the intellectually shallow industry of tourism. It this ideology that almost any film dealing with American tourists in the non-Western world (running the scale from Hollywood to art cinema), sets forward, and which reflects the overarching romanticized gaze through which the West views the rest of the world. It is an endlessly contradictory lens through which the traveler's desires and experiences are ideologically reflected in such films: Americans venture to the less

developed world to experience these worlds 'authentically,' yet fail to really engage with local culture, instead meeting extreme danger and trauma; cinematographic fetishisation of beautiful foreign landscapes further enhance viewers' desires to travel to these locations, while their narratives' "message" ultimately delivers a strange warning about deviating from the well-trodden road of conventional tourism.

In addition to the highly conflicted attitudes towards Western tourism that these films project, the problematic production processes of the films themselves directly correlate to the increasingly Western-centric, virtualized image of the world as an all-encompassing travelogue. Hollywood productions which (in the case of *The Beach*, quite infamously) engage in actual physical impact upon the world, altering landscapes and cityscapes to suit the productions' needs, further confuse our ability to distinguish an 'actual' location from a 'virtual' place. In a world where tourism and cinema work hand in hand, many film productions continue to increase the amount of locations that are rendered accessible, desirable and visitable. We can view the way that Hollywood (and perhaps Western cinema in a general sense) deals with travel as directly reflective of the way that American and the Western world tend to view the rest of the world as the site of its conflicted fantasy projections. Cinematic representations of travel beyond the safety zone of the West project an image of a world which is at once alluring and hostile, which manages to 'enlighten' Western travelers before it ultimately reinforces the relevance of Western values, and ultimately portray the 'rest of the world' as a place that is open to exploitation for the pleasure and benefit of the West.

Tourism: A Historically Inequitable Industry

The World Tourist Organization defines tourism as: "the activities of a person traveling to a place outside his or her usual

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[1] This contradictory perspective on travel to the less-developed world as at once enticing and terrifying is most recently exemplified in Alejandro Iñàrritu's *Babel* (2006) which certainly reflects the post-9/11 cultural climate of terror paranoia, as even wealthy Americans going the "safe route" on a Western tour bus in Morocco are subject to an unfortunate, accidental shooting incident.

environment for less than a specified period of time and whose main purpose of travel is other than the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited…" (World Tourism Organization 1991 qtd. in Dicks 48). By definition, tourism necessarily includes some kind of distance or removal from the ordinary activity of the location being visited: tourism includes the promise and expectations of an *experience*.

Key to this exploration is tourism as a historically conflicted and unequal industry. We can see tourism as at once extremely exploitative to regions of the world, resulting in drug trafficking and prostitution in certain areas. At the same time, we cannot deny the essential role that tourism plays in many economies (especially in many tropical, less-developed nations), which actually thrive on their tourism industry. The greatest inequity of tourism is that it is a necessarily unequal industry that exists essentially *for* the residents of those developed nations of the world, who can actually afford the luxury of travel. International travel is an expensive venture, and Western tourists who are able to fund the plane ticket reap the benefits of visiting less developed nations of the world, where the Western dollar goes a long way. Travel and tourism is essentially a *privilege* of, with little exception, the Western world:

If tourism is about 'getting away from it all', it is clear that not everyone is able to get away, and that not everyone is getting away from the same 'it.' Evidently, the 45 most highly developed countries in the world account for three-quarters of international tourism departures […] This fact gives the spectacular growth in tourism a marked asymmetry, since by and large it is Europeans, North Americans, Australasians and the Japanese – the minority world who are taking trips into the cultural mosaic of the less developed nations – the majority world (48).

Particularly relevant to a juxtaposition of tourism to the Global Hollywood industry is the fact that it is a minority population that is dominating the world's majority population. The "Third World" and less developed nations for very clear and practical

economic reasons do not have the same privilege to travel First World nations: where the Westerner's dollar will go far abroad, the currency of a less-developed nation would barely register in the West. The Western world is afforded a great mobility that the rest of the world simply cannot obtain. As well, economic and class divisions have been routed in tourism

that the Western world (particularly America here) views the less developed world as a place that can teach the traveler something about himself. In some ways these films attempt to critique the West's exploitation of other nations through tourism, yet ultimately they remain grounded in the historical implications of travel and inequality. While on the surface, both of these

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since its rise in popularity in America: at the turn of the 20th century it was a further exclusive industry open only to society's upper crust (37). Today, it is fair to say that international travel is at the least, a middle class privilege.

Thus, the films which I have chosen to explore here, in regards to their representations of tourism, by necessity centre around white, (at least) middle class American tourists who travel to less developed regions of the world. While it is easy to view Hollywood's representations of American tourists who journey to the East as a quite limited perspective, in this sense, these narratives must necessarily be Western-centric and the touristic experience channeled through this particular Western gaze.[2] It is foremost and nearly exclusively the Westerner who journeys into the developing world. The split that the *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* are instead concerned with is the dichotomy between 'kinds' of travelers: specifically, the *traveler* versus the *tourist*. I will return to this idea later, but what is relevant for now are the films' fascination with and countercultural regard for the 'authentic' travel experience. In both of these films the romanticized ideal of travel outside the Western world as an experience of self-discovery and adventure is explicitly opposed to the cheaply exploitative and 'safe' route of conventional tourism. It is in this light

film's travelers are searching for something outside their comfort zone, eventually the journey as far away from the Western world as possible becomes a retreat into the self.

First, I would like to briefly consider the global impact of cinema on tourism, and what it is capable of as an industry. Photography has often been linked to a promise of 'artistic authenticity,' as the invention of photography and cinema resulted in a certain freeing and mobilisation of the world. Walter Benjamin argued:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling (Benjamin 1973, qtd. in Dicks, 19).

Central to my focus here is the idea that cinema opened up to us the possibility to travel without going anywhere, as well as the promise of *adventure*. Not only can we see the world through film, but we also experience a kind of thrill through watching travel images – an adventure and thrill that relies on the moving image. The visceral experience of the world through cinema cannot quite be met by reading about or looking at still images of a location. It is particularly the thrill-seeking desire that cinema both creates and satiates that I want to focus on.

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[2] A film about a non-Westerner touring the West would be highly improbable, yet an intriguing premise; perhaps this rupture most recently exemplified in Larry Charles and Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006).

We can see the very beginnings of cinema, even one to two minute shorts, as being highly focused around this new opportunity to see and project the world. Tom Gunning has explored the travel genre as "one of the most popular and developed" forms of

IMAX experience today. The sense of flying and motion that IMAX cinema projects upon larger-than-life screens, is largely what attracts patrons. We go to see these films for that sense of adventure impossible in the real world, where we can feel like world

jumping, hang-gliding, parachuting, and skiing; as well as theme park rides such as roller coasters. Very often, Hollywood films are similarly concerned with portraying travel to exotic lands as rife with excitement, danger, and ultimately an active, 'hands on' experience.

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early cinema (Clarke, 214), the unique ability of motion pictures to essentially represent movement, combined with the rapid mobile camera, presenting travel on screen as a thrilling attraction for the earliest film-going audiences. An early film such as *The Georgetown Loop* (Colorado 1903) is a notable case of a film that not only managed in a few minutes to capture the treacherous, rugged mountain-scape of Colorado, but to do so in an exhilarating, action-packed way that carried the audience along on a fast-paced, jaunty, elevated train ride, while also capitalizing on possibilities for tourism promotion. The film is simply three minutes of footage from a camera anchored to the top of one of the train-carts, resulting in an exhilarating ride. The Georgetown Loop was, significantly, a railroad created as Colorado's first tourist attraction; not the most practical route, running double the length of the distance between the adjoined towns, but certainly the most exciting route. Much akin to a roller-coaster ride, the Loop provided visitors with an adventurous and scenic route (Colorado Historical Society**).** Perhaps we can then consider this one of the earliest "tourist films", as it clearly did quite a lot to mobilize the image of this attraction around the US and the world. But perhaps more relevant here is the fact that the film introduced an exciting cinematic experience for viewers around the world, who did not actually have to go anywhere to experience this thrill. The 'flying' sensation that such a film simulates for the viewer is like a primitive version of the

explorers while sitting back in our seats. In David B. Clarke's essay "From Flatland to Vernacular Relativity", the author explores the early days of the "stationary trip" (228) through Hale's tours, in which "life-size moving images were projected onto a screen at the front of a mocked-up train, using rear projection to hide the projector from view. Mechanisms swayed the carriage and provided sounds of a moving train" (227). From the very origin of cinema, tourism and film went hand in hand in a natural kind of way: not only allowing us to see parts of the world, but to experience them in a thrilling way. Thus the expectation of excitement is associated with virtual images of tourism and travel.

Virtual Thrill-seeking

It is essentially from the sensations that cinema affords us that we can derive thrill-seeking touristic desires. Yet, the movement and adventure of cinema is not easily replicated when our feet are actually on the ground, even walking through these locations ourselves. The camera creates a distanced and defined way of viewing and experiencing the world, and the thrill-seeking that comes into play in many tourist's expectations can perhaps be tied back to such virtual representations. Any hands-on experiences where we can experience similar thrills must be quite deliberately sought after (and come with a price, both literal monetary expenses, as well as physical danger): 'extreme sports' such as bungee-

A film like *The Beach* certainly exploits this desire to experience travel in a thrill-seeking way through Richard (Leonardo DiCaprio), its male protagonist, who pronounces the moment he steps off the plane that he is looking for adventure, something entirely different. His journey across Thailand, from Bangkok to its extreme outskirts, is an appropriately daring adventure. Perhaps the way that he and his two French traveling companions must 'plunge' off of a high cliff into a lagoon below, before they can encounter the paradisiacal beach, is directly correlative to this fantasy of the active adventure. They journey across the country by train, ferry, then smaller boats, until finally they must cast most of their belongings aside to swim a couple miles to reach the island. Richard and his friends' willingness to 'give up' their possessions correlates with the idealized notion of the anti-materialistic, Western life-traveler who is merely weighed down by luggage and other tangible ties to home.

Over the course of the film, Richard partakes in 'extreme' and comically exaggerated activities like drinking snake's blood and killing a shark in the ocean with just a knife. Though *The Beach*'s view of Southeast Asian travel is quite problematic, and it is never quite clear whether or not it is taking a somewhat reflexive stance towards its protagonists' adventures, the film is not without its redeeming elements. For instance, there is the relevant insight that Richard views his travel experience much like playing a video game (and oddly enough he manages to obtain a GameBoy while on the remote island commune, directly contradicting any notion that this group of life-travelers have actually given up the commodities and comforts of home): even while experiencing something, we try to channel our experiences into a coherent narrative which would afford us with the clear direction and accomplishment of playing a video game. At one point in the film, isolated

in the woods, Richard descends into 'Heart of Darkness' mode and pictures himself inside a video game, chasing down his enemies, winning points for his achievements. The entirety of the film's plot coincides with the sense of purpose a video game gives us, which is so lacking in reality: within the first ten or so minutes of the film, Richard receives a map to a paradisiacal, isolated beach. Thus he gains a clear 'mission' to accomplish and a sense of purpose, something that is really only experienced in video games and narrative representations of adventurous travel, so far from the wandering aimlessness we may experience on even the most well-planned getaway.

Our familiarity with the narrative structures of Hollywood films themselves (with the standard expectations of accomplishments, turning points, and closure) could be said to influence our perception of the world and our lives. When it comes to travel, we relate a Hollywood sense of structure to our journeys, forming similar expectations of self-discovery and authenticity to the protagonists of films like *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky*. The irony is that Richard's journey (despite the veneer of purpose in his map and mission) is quite aimless and floundering, embedded in the same desire to retreat from the world that we also see (albeit more explicitly) in *The Sheltering Sky*. Travel for the protagonists of both films is an *escape route*, yet there is no real sense of *what* they are escaping from, other than a vague desire to live a more authentic and free lifestyle. In *The Beach*, the commune of Westerners on the deserted island in Thailand is essentially a *retreat* from civilization, a way for its citizens to remove themselves and to have as little impact on the world as possible, as well as to smoke as much free hashish as they can. The film's conclusion is intriguing in the sense that it attempts to erase the many traumatic things that have happened along the way and Richard's direct responsibility for those events, as well as to try to distract from the thought that he hasn't really gained much positivity or self-knowledge from this experience at all. The film's 'happy ending' features Richard receiving through email, significantly, a photograph Francoise

(Viriginie Ledoyen) had taken of the (nearly all white) beach commune, jumping joyously into the air. The photo is captioned "parallel universe" and the film ends with Richard musing that all that matters in life is finding a place where you belong, even if it's temporary — isn't that kind of temporary satisfaction the ideal of travel?

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Cameras – Capturing but Missing the Moment

It is significant that in many of these tourist/traveler films, we see protagonists using and standing behind cameras. The impact of standing behind a camera and seeing the world is a curious one, as it distinctly *alters* our perceptions of reality. A central part of tourism seems to be the consumption of images, the preoccupation with seeing and capturing the world through a camera lens:

[Tourists] know the rituals, how we are supposed to behave, and where we are expected to point our camera, if we want to capture the 'true essence' of the 'authentic' scene before us. And yet, in holding a camera to our eye, we also effect a sense of distance, ostensibly removing ourselves from our surroundings. It is as if we can glimpse - for a fleeting moment - a world somehow made strange by the very act of observation.(Dicks, xi).

The strangeness and distance towards our surroundings created by the act of standing behind the camera is very similar to the distance we effectively experience when, as travelers, our expectations of the world are shaped by virtualities such as cinematic representations of various familiar (and unfamiliar) locals. This preoccupation with capturing the authenticity or essence of a place essentially *distances* us from that place.

The very beginning of *The Sheltering Sky* reflects the touristic obsession with photographing a

destination in order to 'capture' it, before ever really seeing or understanding it. After the small rowboat carrying three American travelers – husband and wife Port and Kit (John Malkovich, Debra Winger), and their friend Tunner – mysteriously arrives in Africa, Tunner (Campbell Scott as the 'tourist' of the trio) immediately takes a photograph with the young African boys who help them with their luggage on the dock. Though cameras are not a prominently featured subject after this moment, this observation of the tendency of tourists to photograph a place before even experiencing it is an apt one: this initial image will essentially prove to be a false impression of what becomes a disastrous trip. This opening sequence relates to the film's prominent theme of 'missing' an experience while one is experiencing it. Throughout *The Sheltering Sky*, Kit and Port seem to keep "missing each other": though they travel together, they sleep in separate beds, and one is always asleep while the other is awake. Occasionally they find themselves separated from each other by great distances, as well as they each take turns being unfaithful. Finally, Kit and Port manage to spend some time together, taking a bike ride into the desert. "I miss this" Port says to Kit while they ride together; a curious, but not unusual, sentiment considering they are experiencing the moment in the present. Bertolucci is certainly concerned here with the idea of missing out on experiences while they happen, this scene in particular reflecting the ways in which we tend to channel our experiences in the present as if already looking back on them as memories or photographs. How often on a vacation do we think about capturing the sights and places in front of us in order to later show off to others, to tell a good story? Kit and Port's scene together goes further to show how the two awkwardly

romanticize this moment between them in the desert. As Port brings Kit to a high cliff from which they can only see endless desert below, they are drippingly ecstatic, and make love while Port rambles on about how here the sky is protecting them. Ultimately and national park location – now completely empty and beautiful. Citing Benjamin, Bella Dicks explores the way in which camera close-ups and detailed shots do not only "'make more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear'; rather, they

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what *The Sheltering Sky* is concerned with is the fleeting nature of such experiences, just as the mysterious old man narrates at the end of the film: life often seems limitless, and time seems inexhaustible, yet how many more times will we actually do something or go to a place in our lifetimes? Taking a picture becomes a way to freeze time eternally, even if the image of reality created is different from what we actually experienced at the time.

Finally *The Beach* toys with the idea of the 'disposable camera,' and perhaps kind of disposable memories – disposable in the same sense that Richard seems to fleet from one cheap thrill to another, always ready to move on (and naturally, forget) in pursuit of something more exotic and enticing. Francoise (Richard's French love interest), who previously photographs the night sky and stars, must leave her manual camera behind as the group has to plunge into the water just to get to the beach. Once on the beach she obtains a disposable camera (where she takes the group photo that Richard receives at the end): it is ironic then that this 'disposable image' is the one that ends up framing the end of the film, and leaving Richard as well as the viewer with a completely different impression of the commune than the wild deterioration and destruction we previously observed. But quite notably, the film doesn't end here – a credits sequence intercuts with gorgeous images of the beach

restructure the subject's relation with reality itself" (Dicks, 20). These final images appeal most directly to our touristic senses, and as will be explored more in detail later on, emphasize a desire to go and see for ourselves – a strange mixed message in that the appeal of the beach in the film was that it was completely isolated from tourists.

Tourist and Traveler Fantasies, Expectations, and Countercultural Ideologies

One of the striking similarities of *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* is their preoccupation with the 'authentic' experience of being a traveler, as opposed to being a tourist. From the very start, each film has its characters overtly state that they are somehow outside of the mainstream. As Richard arrives in his hostel in Bangkok, he speaks of his fellow adventure-seeking travelers with a degree of contempt: "The only downer is, everyone's got the same idea. We all travel thousands of miles just to watch TV and check in to somewhere with all the comforts of home, and you gotta ask yourself, what is the point of that?" Richard defines himself as a lone traveler who is seeking something different and expresses his disdain throughout the film for going the conventional, touristy route. The dichotomy between tourist and traveler is made more explicit from the first moments of *The*

Sheltering Sky as Kit and Port speak to Tunner about their undecided plans to stay in Africa for "a year or two":

Tunner: We're probably the first tourists they've had since the war.
Kit: Tunner, we're not tourists. We're travelers.
Tunner: Oh. What's the difference?
Port: A tourist is someone who thinks about going home the moment they arrive, Tunner.
Kit: Whereas a traveler might not come back at all.
Tunner: You mean I'm a tourist.
Kit: Yes, Tunner. And I'm half and half.

So ultimately, tourism is associated with a conventional, safe way of experiencing a foreign land — as if the attachment to home makes a person weak, and unable to 'truly' experience something of depth through travel. Being a traveler essentially describes a lifestyle choice and a flexibility to stay somewhere for a long time if it seems fit. In *The Beach*, though the beach commune collapses at least within a few months of Richard's arrival, he is prepared to live there for "a year or two" as well.

Another striking connection between each film's central trio of travelers, is the way that we know essentially nothing about these characters' pasts: they are 'romantic' figures who arrive out of nowhere, with no attachments to society, family, or the past. Once again, we do not know what they are trying to escape, only that they desire to. The first lines Richard speaks in *The Beach* are: "My name is Richard. So what else do you need to know? Stuff about my family, or where I'm from? None of that matters. Not once you cross the ocean and cut yourself loose, looking for something more beautiful, something more exciting and yes, I admit, something more dangerous." In *The Sheltering Sky* when Port is asked what his travel plans are, he responds "My only plan is, I have no plan." All we know about these people are that they are American, their plans are open and undefined, and that they are 'artists' with a countercultural, bohemian stance towards life and convention.

It is no coincidence that the central protagonists of both *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* are essentially (at the least) middle class, bohemian/countercultural types: the aim or promise of self-discovery upon travel is

essentially a desire/expectation which is strongly linked to a countercultural stance on the world. Essentially, we can link this desire to travel freely and not to adhere to the conventions of Western society's touristic norms to a countercultural way of thinking (and thus the ideals of *The Beach*, a Hollywood production, which criticizes tourism at the same time as it promotes exploitative travel, are quite conflicted). Certainly, all of those who travel may not identify with bohemian ideals, but it is a fair estimate that those who are traveling into the non-Western world are certainly likely to have inclinations to at least temporarily depart from the mainstream. Those who identify themselves as, or aspire to become 'life travelers' are Westerners with an illusion that their ventures outward into the world are a successful way to escape conformity and the dullness of their ordinary, 'oppressive' lives in the Western world. Considering the gap previously explored between the Western world and the less developed world's exclusion from the privilege of tourism, the problematic issues of this Western 'oppression' are rendered clear, as well as the ultimate folly of expecting to be liberated upon encountering the East. It is in this way that we can see the inherent self-deception of the countercultural traveler who thinks that traveling to Asia will make him more "free". In *The Rebel Sell*, author Joseph Heath critiques this fantasy projection of the West onto the non-Western world:

Westerners have been using Third World countries as a backdrop for their own personal voyages of self-discovery for decades. The temptation to do so flows quite naturally from the countercultural idea. If our own culture is a system of total manipulation and control, perhaps the best way to shake ourselves free from the illusion is to immerse ourselves in some other culture—preferably one that is as radically distinct from our own as possible.

Thus the countercultural critique has always been tempted by exoticism—uncritical romanticization of that which is most different. One can indulge in the exotic through travel, to places like India and Central America [...] In every case, the goal is the same: to throw off the chains of technocratic modernity and to achieve the revolution in consciousness that will allow us all to live a more authentic life (Heath, 252-53).

Essentially the protagonists of both *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* embody this idea of seeking escape from the 'shackles' of their middle-class existences back in the US. Yet it is a notably aimless, drifting search, and there is no 'coherent vision' of

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authenticity and freedom ultimately represented in these films. Essentially, the protagonists of the films remain attached in some ways to their old lives and certain comforts of home. Their encounters are highly traumatic, resulting in sickness, violence, murder, and death; ultimately they must return back to their homelands at the end. The trauma encountered in an exotic world, as well as the inevitable exile, seem to be mainstays of films that portray American travel to the East.[3] This traumatic removal from these lands directly conflicts with the Western countercultural desire to escape. The culture does not meet 'authentic' travelers with open arms (if they even attempt to engage with the national culture at all), and they eventually find that they were better off where they came from.

Heath writes that whether a subject takes a journey outward into the exotic, or a journey into the self, "either way, escapism became a central preoccupation of the counterculture" (255). It becomes clear in both *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky*, that what starts as a journey to the outskirts, to find what is "off the beaten-trail" – increasingly further away from large, "tourist friendly" cities – eventually becomes an inward retreat for the protagonists. In *The Sheltering Sky*, the endlessly expansive Sahara desert itself becomes

a manifestation of the isolated retreat and self-reckoning the protagonists experience. Similarly in *The Beach*, Richard and his friends' journey pushes into farther less-traveled terrain, and finally to the isolated beach, where the commune of fellow nearly-all Western "travelers" becomes a kind of regressive retreat back to a different kind of society, albeit with all the same kinds of people.[4] The commune members seem to believe they have accomplished something revolutionary, but in their very retreat from the world, they are deluding themselves into believing they are leading lives of authenticity. The commune is not changing the world, but ultimately experiencing a life of leisure, casual sex, and drug use.

Even the attempted retreat from Western society and capitalism is contradictory and certainly unsuccessful in these films -- or, it can be argued, this retreat is impossible since it is the Westerner's wealth which has afforded them this very luxury of escape into the non-Western world. The commune society of *The Beach* and the increasingly fragmented trio of *The Sheltering Sky* all at some point desire and rely on the comforts of home. As Dicks writes: "What [tourists] are getting away from are societies which are disproportionately affluent, consumerist, technologized, centralized and regulated. This inevitably shapes the kind of escape that is sought" (Dicks 48-49). Just as much as the protagonists attempt to escape from these 'oppressive' ideals of Western consumer society, they ultimately come back to these

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[4] It is a telling detail that not one native of Thailand inhabits the beach, the only Thai people on the island are the hashish harvesters who guard the supply and mysteriously allow this select group to remain on the hidden beach.

same values. In a central scene of *The Beach*, Richard and Sal must go to the mainland to stock up on supplies for the commune: the requests that are put in show that in no way are the group surviving 'off the land,' requests ranging from batteries to toiletries.

Even more telling is their dependence on a rice supply, which proves their inability to feed themselves from fish and vegetation on what is a quite lush island landscape. In *The Sheltering Sky*, Tunner's smuggled bottles of champagne become the only way for Kit to survive train rides, as well as more generally the misery of the group's North African travel. Food and water essentially will be the cause of Port's illness and death by typhoid fever. The need for a doctor and proper hospital care is one thing that Port can't obtain in the outskirts of Niger, and despite the Foreign Legion's efforts to save him, he cannot survive, leaving Kit in a state of insane wandering.

Essentially it is this series of marked traumas encountered upon traveling in each film that stand in the most direct opposition to an exotic romanticization of travel. Port dies, Kit is left alone to become a Muslim man's concubine. Richard is sent to live alone in the forest for a few weeks and regresses to a primal state, has a direct hand in four fellow American tourists being shot dead by Thai druglords, and ultimately is responsible for the deterioration of the commune and leads the human raft in exile from the island back to the mainland. It is curious that these essentially negative portrayals of travel experiences are the final outcome of these films which deal with travelers' desires and expectations. *The Sheltering Sky* is certainly more critical and concerned with the fleeting nature of time and experience, but for *The Beach*, a Hollywood film, to

end so disastrously is worth further consideration. Though the brief ending with Richard at an internet café seems to quickly pass over the major damage which has been done, the attempt at a 'happy' summarizing of what Richard has learned is unsettling for

the viewer. Richard narrates as if he has learned something important, but if we evaluate the film, we may arrive at the conclusion that Richard's attempts at authentic, adventurous travel was excessively misguided, selfish, and disastrous for most of those he crossed paths with. The values of "home" and the West are reinforced in the film as Richard comes to the conclusion that one must always return to where one came from. Despite Richard's affirmations that he learned something, the overall "message" of the film seems to be that following the more-traveled path of tourism is the safe way to be. Or perhaps the key to understanding *The Beach*'s highly conflicted messages is once again in the gorgeous, travelogue-style images of Thailand's Maya Bay which end the film. It is these images which we are left with and remember, as if the film can't decide whether or not it wants to critique a traveler's impulses and desires, or to actually promote tourism.

Cinema's Global Impact: Tourism and Production

It is likely that *The Beach*'s conflicted representation of tourism on film, which at once critiques the 'herd mentality' of must-see tourist locations, actually increased the influx of tourism to Phi Phi Islands National Park (on Maya Bay of Thailand) with its fetishistic cinematography of beautiful, exotic landscapes. Certainly this should be viewed as a great irony, considering that in the film this same

beach is constructed as a hidden, sacred paradise where only select people may tread. Indeed, the film's actual ending with these final images of the island — now empty, now appearing even more beautiful and pristine than before — perhaps was a specific inclusion on Fox's part in their deal with Thailand's government to help promote tourism.

Despite *The Sheltering Sky*'s more abstract approach to the landscape, the marketing taglines for the film itself reflect a distinct attempt to attract viewers through the promise of lush scenery: "sensual and erotic," "every fantasy is brought to light." Though possibly not a film that makes a viewer want to run out and travel the Sahara, one cannot deny the gorgeous desert cinematography and experience pleasure from a virtual engagement in travel through the film's treacherous land and cityscapes. Further, despite being on an opposite pole from the production process of *The Beach* (in terms of its Hollywood production, and controversial case of damaging the national park), *The Sheltering Sky's* production also required a significant reconstruction of the landscape. Camels had to be imported for filming, and a fort was built in the middle of the Sahara. Never before had Niger seen such a production take place (*The Sheltering Sky*). In this way we can look at Bertolucci's film in a new light: an art film, which still had to capitalize on its exotic images to sell itself, and a production which altered, at least temporarily, the landscape of the Sahara Desert.

When we consider the way that transnational productions themselves impact the environments where they locate themselves, as well as creating increased desires to visit these places through their manipulated images and landscapes, it raises all kinds of questions of just what is a real 'natural' environment or city anymore. *The Beach* is a particularly famous and controversial case in this respect. Toby Miller's *Global Hollywood 2* focuses on the increasing ways that production is being outsourced in an exploitative manner to Third World and less developed nations (for the same reason that tourists go to less developed nations: because simply put, their money can go a long way). In the case of Thailand: "at 2002 rates in

U.S. dollars, here is one example of a budget calculated for production in the U.S. versus Thailand that covers labour, equipment hire and fees. It helps to explain why low-budget U.S. features are increasingly locating there" (Miller , 167). Once again, we can tie global tourism to the Hollywood industry: the desires of Westerners are put to the center, and they are able to take advantage of less developed nations' weaker economies for their own pursuit of pleasure and adventure.

Paradoxically, the lawsuit that Thailand's government filed against Fox is an exemplary case of striking back against Hollywood's careless domination. Environmental activists in Thailand protested the "arrogant despoliation" they observed take place as Fox produced *The Beach* in Maya Bay, part of Phi Phi Islands National Park:

Natural scenery was bulldozed in late 1998 because it did not fit the fantasy of a tropical idyll, sand dunes were relocated, flora rearranged and a 'new' strip of coconut palms planted. The producers paid off the government with a donation to the Royal Forestry Department and a campaign with the Tourism Authority of Thailand to twin the film as a promotion for the country. Meanwhile, director Boyle claimed the film was 'raising environmental consciousness' among a local population that was allegedly 'behind' US levels of 'awareness'—typical Hollywood arrogance, and especially idiotic when there was no US legislation capable of handling the environmental scandal, which was dealt with in overseas litigation where proper laws and precedents existed, via the Environmental Act (Justice for Maya Bay International Alliance; 2000; Ghosh, 2003; Flanigan, 2002: 84). (Miller , 167)

Despite Thailand's strike against Hollywood, ultimately we see the nation caving into the pressures and economic advantages that supporting Hollywood productions can afford: Miller writes that Thailand formed a Film Commission in 2003 to *encourage* the NICL, rather than to prevent natural despoliation. Furthermore, it announced tax levies on foreign actors, as well as intentions of becoming "Asia's filmmaking hub via joint ventures" (Miller 167).

Perhaps we should see Fox's bulldozing of Thailand's beaches as a metaphor for the way that Hollywood tramples heavily upon the world, no doubt responsible for a great global ecological footprint. Certainly *The Beach* is not the only case of a production which caused damage to the physical environment, but it is fascinating that a film so overtly concerned with a certain kind of critique of tourism and exploitation, expressing disgust at the way that tourists abuse Southeast Asian nations, not only reaped physical damage upon a national park itself, but actually used

"Perhaps we should see Fox's bulldozing of Thailand's beaches as a metaphor for the way that Hollywood tramples heavily upon the world..."

tourism promotion as a way to get the production out of trouble. An influx of tourism to a natural area subsequently results in more physical damage. The cycle of contradictions in purpose and point of view of a Hollywood production seems endless here.

It is also notable that the remote and pristine beach essentially was not good enough on its own for the film to proceed: once again the idea of the virtual nature of cinema is complicated. Not only is the cinematography of the landscape fetishised and presents the viewer with an image that can't be replicated in real experience, but the "natural landscape" of the film is actually no longer natural, leaving us with the question of what places in the world we can actually consider "natural." Are there really any places which haven't been made virtual in some way?

Essentially, through representations of travel and tourism in cinema we can more clearly see the way that Hollywood and the West's touristic gaze views the rest of the world as a kind of virtual playground to be experienced, conquered, consumed, captured, and which should also teach the traveler something about him or herself. And it is a world that is becoming increasingly virtual as Westerners leave their mark. Perhaps the traumas encountered by tourists/travelers in films such as *The Beach* and *The Sheltering Sky* which transplant American tourists in the non-Western world, must be viewed as an acknowledgement of the gap between two very distinct worlds — the mobile minority, and the immobile majority. Or perhaps the idea of the 'traumatic encounter abroad' comes as a fear that one day the rest of the world will strike back against Western dominance (certainly a foreshadowing fear, that since 9/11 has multiplied infinitely). One thing is certain: in a world which is becoming increasingly uncertain and uncomfortable with American dominance, these films become a way to sit back and travel in a way that allows us to see the world in ways in which we never possibly could otherwise, as well as they ultimately suggest that perhaps the smartest and safest way to travel is through this very virtual experience of the world.

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