BUDGET TRAVEL IN SOUTH ASIA: SEARCHING FOR THE REAL

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades extended budget travel (BT) has become a significant way for large numbers of people from the West to experience the world outside of their national borders. Once considered a fringe activity, BT has seen its cultural and social acceptance rise and it is today attracting more people from more walks of life than ever before. Further attesting to its popularity is the wide assortment of ancillary industries and medias that nurture and support it. This thesis will examine how BT is used as a means to satisfy the desires of people in the West for a ‘realness’ which is no longer found in their alienated, post-modern, post-industrial home societies, and how BTravelers use the markers of realness found in the BT experience to construct their own identities. I will conclude, however, that BT is itself, due to its very form and the conditions that produce it, a commodified experience that, rather than being a liberation from the alienated life, is itself an alienated form of action that reproduces and extends the same conditions that at its core it aims to transcend.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

David Scott Kauffman is a native of Manlius, New York. He received his B.A. in History from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. According to his calculations he has logged in over 250,000 miles of air travel over the past several years and has spent time living and working in such places as Mumbai, Seattle, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Ann Arbor, Tokyo, and Ithaca. Besides English he is capable in speaking Hindi and French, and knows several words in several other languages. Currently he is pursuing a career in journalism and he hopes to end up in the northernmost tip of Wisconsin.

For Sonam and Joanna

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BT – budget travel

BTraveler – budget traveler

I: Introduction

If there was a single message that encapsulated the desires of a person to set off around the planet on a budget travel experience, it might sound something like this:

> The world is a big, fascinating place, and if you're so inclined, you can see it on your own. What's more, you don't have to spend a fortune to do it. Often, if you travel on local buses and trains, stay in pensions and eat in mom-and-pop restaurants, you will learn more about the world and its people than if you traveled on tourist coaches, stayed in familiar Western chains and ate in hotel restaurants … You just might return home a changed person.
>
> -Jim Benning, "Lonely Planet Tour Books Changed World of Travel"

It really is, as Benning says, a message that has launched a million journeys.

Over the past two decades extended budget travel (BT) has become a significant way for large numbers of people from the West to experience the world outside of their national borders. Once considered a fringe activity, BT has seen its cultural and social acceptance rise and it is today attracting more people from more walks of life than ever before. Further attesting to its popularity is the wide assortment of ancillary industries and medias that nurture and support it. This thesis will examine how BT is used as a means to satisfy the desires of people in the West for a 'realness' which is no longer found in their alienated, post-modern, post-industrial home societies, and how BTravelers use the markers of realness found in the BT experience to construct their own identities. I will conclude, however, that BT is itself, due to its very form and the conditions that produce it, a commodified experience that, rather than being a liberation from the alienated life, is itself an alienated form of action that reproduces and extends the same conditions that at its core it aims to transcend.

The causes and conditions that lead any given Budget Traveler (BTraveler) to their actual moment of departure are complex, varied, and often masked by superficial explanations. Since BT exists as a mass phenomena, though, it is important to examine and analyze the ideologies and desires that are producing it, sustaining it, and fueling

its growth. BT (from here forward it must be kept in mind that I will specifically be using BT in India as my case study, but that all conclusions reached are, for the most part, applicable to BT as a global phenomenon) is packaged, presented, imagined, narrated, and acted out as a unified and successful way to fulfill the desires and needs that Spectacular society (as theorized by Guy Debord in The Society of the Spectacle (1994)) by its very nature leaves unfulfilled through structural absence, direct or indirect repression, and/or the purposeful channeling of these desires towards its own ends (more exactly: production and consumption). Briefly, the Spectacle is "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images," a place and time where individuals are detached from the real, where "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord 1994: 12). BT therefore presents India as a place that, for a myriad of reasons, is either outside of, or not yet a part of, the Spectacular world, and the BT *method* as the effective way for the individual to transcend the alienated state and have a communion with the real.

It should not be construed by the critical nature of this paper that BT is necessarily a negative experience, or that it does not in fact liberate the individual from *certain* aspects of the Spectacular (temporarily, anyway). I believe that it is often extremely beneficial for all involved, and my primary motivation for writing this paper is based on my desire to examine and come to critical terms with an experience that has been such a large (and overwhelmingly positive) part of my own life and current worldview. It has allowed many people to see places they otherwise may not have seen, facilitated communication between peoples and cultures, and tourism is (for better and for worse) according to Smith, "the single largest peaceful movement of people across cultural boundaries in the history of the world," and its potential for both positive and negative impacts are enormous (qtd. in Phipps 1999: 74).

I have personally logged in over the past seven years close to a quarter million miles of informal fieldwork in the area of BT. I have been up, down, and all around the BT circuits in S. Asia (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka), the Middle East (Israel, Egypt, Jordan) and S. E. Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia) over multiple trips for extended periods of time. My first trip was when I was 20 years old and my latest excursion, at age 27, was for five months in India. I have come into contact with hundreds, if not thousands of B-travelers and have heard equal numbers of narratives. My selection of representative passages and texts for the BT experience should be seen in light of both my actual immersion in the scene over the years, as well as the accompanying compulsive (and I believe rather thorough) reading and surveying of all forms of media and literature related to BT.

Indeed there *is* a certain degree of truth in BT's claims of realness, at least compared to daily life in Spectacular society. This is not to say that India itself is actually any more or less a Spectacular society, or that its residents are any better or worse off because of it. That is beyond the scope of the current essay. It would be most accurate to say that BT is a *problematic* activity that is deserving of examination and reflection for two main reasons: 1) so that through analysis we can better understand the extent to which decisions and desires are motivated both by and for the Spectacle; and 2) so that we can learn from both the successes and the limitations of the experience in order to approach resistance to the Spectacular Society in new ways.

This paper will begin by examining both the academic as well as general literature on the topic, then move into a description, definition, and overview of the phenomenon of BT. From there, the notion of Spectacular society will be examined, its voids demonstrated along with the desires they create, and how the BT meta-narrative positions itself as a way to fill them. I will then proceed to identify the markers of realness that are ascribed to the BT experience and demonstrate how they

are incorporated into the narrative identity of the BTraveler. Finally, I will conclude based upon this examination that BT is a fully embedded part of Spectacular society, and as such it is structurally incapable of delivering upon its embedded claims.

II: Sources and Background

Tourism itself has been a subject of critical interest for quite a long while, but only in the past few years has BT attracted a more general attention among theorists and researchers. The literature in this emerging area of study is as sparse as it is insightful. The most influential general theory of tourism cited by those studying BT is MacCannell's work Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class (1976). He presents theories of leisure and travel that must necessarily resonate strongly through any current discussion and his writing on authenticity and alienation have provided many with starting points for their academic analysis. His main thrust is that the alienation of the modern world causes people to desire 'authentic' experiences, and that the degree to which one desires the touristic experience is directly related to the degree of their alienation. The tourist is fundamentally, according to MacCannell, a consumer of authenticity.

One attempt at a comprehensive work in this area is Nupur Gogia's master's thesis "Investigating the Traveling Condition: The Lonely Planet Guide to the Subaltern" (2002). The thesis frames the discussion in terms of colonialism, and makes the argument that certain guidebooks have continued to reproduce the neo-colonial discourse and that BT's present interactions with the local, and the way that the 'tourist gaze' operates and narrates, is in her eyes an emulation of eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial narratives (Gogia 2002: 2). While there is no doubt truth in her theses, Gogia tends to over-estimate the importance and impact that BT has upon the global South, giving it more cultural, social, and economic power as a

phenomenon than it deserves.[1] While BT *is* a significant activity and certainly does have impacts upon the places it visits, the question is: who is it *most* significant for? The answer, it seems, is for the Western BTravelers themselves, for whom the experience is employed for and imagined by.

Perhaps the first person to write convincingly about the current phase of BT was Riley (1988) in her examination of the road culture that BTravelers create. She was researching BT at the beginning of its current form, catching the beginning of a wave, as it were, that has since grown to much larger proportions. She attempts to describe the 'kind' of person who takes up BT through participant observation and formal interviews. She finds that the average BTraveler occupies a space in-between the polar categories of 'hero' and 'deviant' that had previously been used to describe those who undertook long-term travel throughout the ages, and her main argument is that BTravelers achieve 'status' among themselves by experiencing hardship and non-traditional touristic experiences. While some of her arguments are most useful when describing the specific group she was analyzing (BTravelers who spent at least one year abroad), in general her ideas continue to hold across the spectrum.

A semiotic analysis of the Lonely Planet India guidebook was undertaken by Bhattacharyya (1997) and she presents many insights into how the structure and visual/textual fabric of the guide book itself can mediate the travel experience.

There are many researchers who have focused upon BTraveler narratives. Noy (2004) analyzes the narratives of returned Israeli BTravelers as they recount the profound self-changes that occurred during their trip. He finds that the twin themes of 'authenticity' and 'adventure' make up the major components of the narratives, and he concludes that the act of telling and listening to narratives is one of the key

[1] Even a series of simple questions can help illuminate this issue: Which Western entity has had more of an economic impact on India: the World Bank or BT? Which has had more of a social impact on India: mobile phones or BT? Which is more important to the Indian economy: industry or BT?

components of identity construction. Sorenson (2003) attempts an ethnography of the BT 'scene' in order to better define the phenomenon. His findings stress how BT has both grown and fragmented over the decades. Desforges (2000) discusses tourism consumption and identity construction in a more generalized way, while covering a variety of tourism forms. Phipps (1999) and Elsrud (1998 and 2001) show the links between danger and values of realness, again using narratives and interviews, and how perceptions of risk and adventure are of extreme importance to many tourists.

Since BT is an experience that is constantly being communicated, both through media and personal interactions, it must have a certain universal language. It is necessary to examine how this meta- (or grand) narrative of BT is constructed, because, as Elsrud puts it:

> The acts and tales of travel, like the symbols used in language, require a common meaning in order to be understood. They would say nothing (or something completely different from the expression) to the actor or the spectator, had they not been products of commonly shared manuscripts. These manuscripts, or rather "grand narratives of traveling", work as systems of beliefs which unite people in some sort of common understanding about reality. They structure and define knowledge through their success in making real what is really biased (Elsrud 2001: 600).

The BT meta-narrative is communicated via both written and oral media, and many argue that the most important way that BTravelers produce and reproduce the meta-narrative is through listening to others' travel narratives and through the act of telling their own (Sorensen 2003; Noy 2004; Elsrud 2001; Phipps 1999; Riley 1988). For, by telling their narrative, the BTravelers are not only making sense of and ordering their own experience, they are also impelling their audience to frame their thoughts within the same construct (Noy 2004: 94). Thus, most of the research that has been conducted on BT has rightly given the personal narrative a favored position over mass-medium texts. This is not to say that the written texts are not important. They are a part of the circular process that creates the meta-narrative – both shaping how people

frame their experience and then reflecting it back to them – and they *do* accurately reflect the thrusts of the meta-narrative.

The written core of the BT meta-narrative is found in the texts, guides, and web-sites that are designed for the B-travelers themselves: they drum up interest, facilitate the experience, and provide outlets for the returned, current, or prospective B-traveler to both relate and relate to the BT experience. These are frequently produced by former or current B-Travelers and their themes fall into three general categories:

a) the travel guide to a specific region or nation: designed to be taken on the trip, it usually contains suggested itineraries, lists of attractions, guides to local goods and services, and restaurant, hotel, and transportation information, along with brief historical and cultural introductions;
b) BT ideology: a combination of 'why BT' and 'how-to BT', usually presenting philosophical reasons for BT, often they also include specific guidance in planning and preparation for the trip; and
c) travel narratives: they provide entertaining stories of life 'on the road,' the lessons learned, personal anecdotes, and other reflections on the travel experience.

Arguably the most influential and popular publisher in the BT universe is the Lonely Planet Corporation (LP). They have over 50 million travel related books in print with over 1,500 different titles and editions, and it is they more than any other single entity that have set the tone for the entire phenomenon. Their most recent India (2003) guidebook, now in its tenth edition, is as comprehensive as it is popular: weighing in at 1088 pages it has remained one of their top 5 selling books for decades. While there are distinctions between LP guidebooks and those of the other major publishers in the BT market (Rough Guide, Let's Go, Footprint), there is a remarkable

similarity in the styles, suggested itineraries, descriptions, and even structure of the books that all point to a desire to emulate the LP guides, which, when all is said and done, are *the* books that most BT's turn to for advice, information, and travel support both before and during their trip. As journalist Ron Gluckman writes:

> LP has become the ultimate brand of independent travel, stamped upon diving and walking guides, phrasebooks, travel literature, atlases and, soon, new lines on healthy travel, food and restaurants … More than any other guide, especially in Asia, they [B-travelers] depend on Lonely Planet to tell them where to go, what to eat and, almost to the penny, what to pay (Gluckman 1999).

It exerts such a visible influence throughout the BT universe that anyone who has spent any time at all traveling in Asia will have observed it. Along with guidebooks, how-to guides, narrative collections, and in even novels, LP also maintains a web site that acts as a portal for the BTraveler, with forums, advice, and other travel information that, through marketing tie-ins with popular web search engines, receives millions of hits per day. Their 'Thorn Tree' bulletin board (where travelers both on the road and at home can post their questions, advice, reviews, impressions, stories, etc.) receives over 35,000 postings per month (Benning 2003).

The genre of BT ideology is perhaps best represented by Rolf Potts' book Vagabonding: An Uncommon Guide to the Art of Long Term World Travel (2003), which is just the latest in what is a long line of similar writings such as Vagabonding in Europe and North Africa by Ed Buryn (1973), The World Awaits: How to Travel Far and Well by Paul Otteson (2001, 3rd ed), First Time Around the World by Doug Lansky (2003), Globetrotter Dogma: 100 Canons for Escaping the Rat Race and Exploring the World by Bruce Northam (2002), and World Stompers: A Global Travel Manifesto by Brad Olsen (2001, 5th ed). Not one to be left out of any travel category, Lonely Planet has dozens of entries, among them: Read This First: Asia and India (1999); The Gap Year Book (2003); and Travelers Tips (2003), which are all designed

to funnel the prospective traveler into the LP family of travel products from even before they conceptualize their trip.

Reading Potts' Vagabonding gives one the feeling that the entire BT meta-narrative has been sampled, condensed, and crystallized into a single book. Potts declares that long term travel should not be seen as an escape "but as an adventure and a passion – a way of overcoming your fears and living life to the fullest … Vagabonding is about looking for adventure in normal life, and normal life within adventure … it's a personal act that demands only realignment of the self" (Potts 2003: ix, 6, 13). The perfect way to be a vagabond, in this new twist on an old word, is to accumulate enough capital for a long-haul global trip, take leave of society whenever you like, and maintain and build upon your privilege by gathering experiences that will allow you to re-integrate yourself into the economic system at will. To be a vagabond, Potts' manifesto declares, is to be temporarily liberated from the schedules, routines, and responsibilities of the labor system, but also fully able to take advantage of all the perks that come with it (Potts 2003: 5).

Narrative literature is the final major genre of BT writing (and travel writing in general). This category has grown to represent almost every facet of the travel experience. There is even one publisher, Traveler's Tales, that *only* publishes travel narratives. Set amid the various exotic backgrounds of the world, these narratives unfold as a way of highlighting the profound ways that the travelers connect both with the world and with themselves through their travel experience.

Background

The terms 'budget traveler' (B-Traveler) and 'budget travel (BT)[1] require a certain degree of definition and qualification. In this thesis it is most helpful to think of them as a way of representing a phenomena that encompasses a somewhat heterogeneous group of people who participate in a range of activities, and who have varied desires and expectations for their experience. That the label does have such a large sweep is lately a cause of concern for some. Uriely et al. argue in their article that BT is a *form* of tourism rather than a different *type* of tourism. They have a valid point when they claim that BT may have fractionalized and heterogenized to the point that the label is far too general to have any real meaning (Uriely et al. 2002: 521-3). Nevertheless, it is currently the most effective way of describing what is happening, and both Riley and Sorensen prefer this label as it was the one most often used by the travelers themselves (Riley 1988: 316-7, Sorensen 2003: 848).

There are certain unifying factors that differentiate the B-Traveler as a distinct sub-group of global tourists. The first thing to understand, as Riley states, is that the label 'BTraveler' can be somewhat misleading and is:

> not intended to imply a traveler of socio-economic background of limited financial resources. It refers to people desirous of extending their travels beyond the cyclical [and fixed] holiday and, hence, the necessity of living on a budget (Riley 1988: 317).

In his ethnography of B-Travelers, Sorenson posits that the most basic commonality is that of having a flexible, multi-destination itinerary, along with a clear, self imposed choice of being 'on leave' from society (Sorensen 2003: 852). Also usually included is the vague idea extended travel time, though the length of time that

[1] The label is meant to encompasses what others have at different times used different terms for. It should be seen as a meta-category that includes: long haul traveler, traveler, budget traveler, and backpacker.

the B-Traveler spends away from his home country varies greatly. Generally it is an excursion that lasts anywhere from several months to several years.[1]

Further differentiation of the B-Traveler from other types of tourists occurs in the style of travel, with a preference for budget accommodations, use of local public transportation systems, a desire for a higher level of interaction with locals, an emphasis on nomadism, and a stress on self reliance (Gogia 2002: 21). Generally, BT is purposefully structured very loosely, does not have a completely fixed itinerary, and the traveler has the flexibility to connect and disconnect from people and places at will.

Many of these features can be seen as being a response to 'mass tourism', or package tourism, whose experience is generally guided by travel agents, fixed itineraries, chartered transportation (buses, taxis, air flights), mid-range to luxury hotels, Western amenities, guided tours of places of interest, and limited interactions with local people outside of a service capacity. The label 'B-Traveler' should not be construed as fixed either because a person may slip in or out of the BT zone at different times during their trip. Examples of this include students who may live and study at a foreign university then spend time traveling, a person with local friends or family whom they visit and reside with while in certain cities, on occasion taking a guided tour, or when a B-Traveler decides to 'splurge' and upgrade their accommodation/transportation for a fixed time.

For reasons that will be discussed later, the preferred destinations of the BTraveler are within certain nations that are in what is often labeled the economic South (also Third World): regions such as South Asia, South East Asia, Mexico, Central and South America. This paper uses the destination of India as its main case

[1] Increasingly visible are Btravelers who work their trip into either their extended holiday time (4-6 weeks) or breaks from university (summer, winter, etc.) They choose to travel in BT style because of its perceived benefits. See: Sorensen (2003: 853).

study, both because that is where my most in-depth and prolonged experience lies and because a survey of academic analysis and travel literature on BT shows that India is very much portrayed and imagined as *the* archetypical BT experience (Elsrud 2001: 608).

Before beginning the theoretical discussion in earnest, certain things do need to be acknowledged and kept in mind, while others need to be acknowledged then pushed into the background. It would be a mistake to claim that the decision to partake in BT can be reduced to any one simple cause or the other, or that B-Travelers are necessarily unaware of the forces that are driving them. Among the infinite number and distribution of possible desires and causes involved in person deciding to set off on a extended BT trip, there are some that are commonly present and which, while genuine, I will argue are not at the root of the BT choice. These include: visiting family or friends, specific spiritual or academic pursuits in the destination countries, and what is perhaps the most basic and vague universal human impulse of all: the innate curiosity to see new places, meet new people, and have new experiences. It should also be prominently noted that behind the BT trip for many (even most) is a genuine desire for cross-cultural connection and sharing. Many people attempt to learn languages, meet local people, share ideas, and in general to make their trip as low-impact and culturally sensitive as possible. And, as emigration of South Asian people to the Western world has grown, so too has the number of travelers who have some connection to India before leaving home.

All said and done, as BT has become a more accessible and popular choice, its demographic make-up is probably far more heterogeneous than it has ever been. In the recent past the stereotypical image of the B-Traveler was that of a hippy, a fringe spiritual seeker, or other such social outcast who had chosen the life of a wanderer and drifter in order to escape the confines of western society and for whom travel was the

backdrop for a time spent indulging in drugs, sex, music, and mysticism.[1] Even a cursory look at the present BT scene in India reveals a very different picture.

Today's B-Travelers are still mostly from certain[2] wealthy, Western[3] nations and are mostly white,[4] but the hippy and drifter is long gone. Most B-Travelers seem to fall in the 22-27 year range, and increasingly this appears to be skewing towards the higher end as larger numbers of middle aged (27-40) and even older people have both the means and desire for the BT experience.[5] Most seem to be coming from the highly educated upper/upper-middle class strata of society and their travel experience is either a product of, or prelude to, a life of if not affluence than at least a relatively comfortable position within their home society. For most of these people the travel experience is an interlude, not an indefinite lifestyle. Though many may not have a 'fixed' date of return or firm plans (increasingly, many do have both) for reintegrating themselves into the educational or economic systems, it is more a question of 'when,' rather than 'if' (Sorensen 2003: 852).

As to the actual size and scope of BT, there is no comprehensive data available as countries only keep track of raw arrival and departure data for all persons on tourist visas. Immediately obvious is that there *are* a significant number of people from Western countries who are engaged in long-term budget-style travel throughout the third world. They are extremely visible and whole areas of cities and towns around the

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[1] There are innumerable popular culture references to this found in literature and film. The most stereotypical and notorious portrayal being the Indian film *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971). *Hideous Kinky* (1998) is a recommended film.

[2] Among articles I surveyed, along with personal experience, there is general agreement that BT to S. and SE Asia are predominantly from the following regions/nations: Western Europe in general, but especially the Northern nations (France, Germany, Netherlands, UK, and Scandinavia), Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada, and Israel.

[3] There is also a growing number of Japanese and Korean Btravelers in South Asia, accompanied by a growth of services designed to facilitate their experience (i.e. signs and menus in Japanese and Korean, and guesthouses that specifically cater to them).

[4] While not exclusively, BT is overwhelming made up of people who would be considered 'white.' Japanese and Koreans, while traveling in the Third World, achieve a status on par with 'white' people

[5] These age ranges are approximations, based upon the conclusions of Sorenson (2003: 852) and Riley (1988: 318) and my own observations.

world that fall on their main travel circuits have been converted or grown to offer the specific goods and services that B-Travelers consume.[1] Another obvious sign of its popularity is the constant, expansive growth of the BT guidebook business, in the volume of BT how-to and inspirational literature, of narratives and fiction, television programs and films. And, in mid-2004, the first airline specifically catering to the BT market, Backpackers Xpress, is scheduled to begin service from the UK to New Delhi, Bangkok, and Melbourne.[2]

Lastly there are the infrastructural changes that have made BT more accessible and more attractive than ever before: increased air service and lower fares,[3] highly unequal currency rates which give the BT purchasing power that they would not be capable of at home, facilitation of the visa process for western tourists, communication infrastructure that enables the BT to maintain their relationship with their home networks,[4] and the growing social acceptance and even marketability of BT experience.

III: The Society of the Spectacle

The starting point for my analysis of contemporary society is Guy Debord's work The Society of the Spectacle (1994). He describes the Spectacle as "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images," a place and time where individuals are detached from the real, where "all that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord 1994: 12). This general theoretical concept of

[1] BT 'ghettos' are found throughout South Asia, some prominent examples in India being: Delhi, Varanasi, Agra, Jodhpur, Udaipur, Jaipur, Pushkar, Jaisalmer, Dharamshala, Manali, Rishikesh, Gokarna, Hampi, Bodh Gaya, Vagator, Varkala, Anjuna, Colva, Cochin, etc…

[2] See their website at: http://www.backpackersxpress.com/ along with their links to media coverage.

[3] Air capacity and low fares are circular in that they cater to demand by increasing supply, but also by increasing supply (and lowering prices) they can create the demand.

[4] The dramatic increase in availability (and the decreased cost) of both telephone and internet access, which allows the traveler to remain more connected than ever before, with the ability to manage their bank accounts, read their home newspapers, send electronic job applications, and maintain communication with family and friends.

the Spectacle (though known by different names) is elaborated upon, expanded upon, changed, and integrated into the works of Debord (1991), in Baudrillard's (1994) concept of the simulacra, and in Hardt and Negri's (2000) concept of Empire.

Hardt and Negri explain that the Spectacle is:

> an integrated and diffuse apparatus of images and ideas that produces and regulates public discourse and opinion…only what appears exists, and the major media have something approaching a monopoly over what appears to the general population...and political participation is reduced to selecting among consumable images (Hardt and Negri 2000: 321).

The Spectacular world is one of *separation*, or alienation, of man from man, man from nature, and man from society. We are in, Debord claims, "the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence," and the main function of the Spectacle is "the concrete manufacture of alienation" (Debord 1994: 19, 23). When thinking of the Spectacle, however, both Hardt and Negri and Baudrillard caution against seeing the concept as a polar, binary affair that the terms may imply, with a *Spectacle* that is viewed by *Spectators*. Rather, it is more an ether that exists everywhere at all times, within the simulacra, within the relations of Empire, and is encoded within every aspect of human life (Baudrillard 1994: 30, 31, 41). In this new age of Empire, the Spectacle is everywhere and nowhere: there is no longer any *place* of power (Hardt and Negri 2000: xiii, 190).

Life within Spectacular society is perceived by many within it as being *un*-real, as relationships, labor, and experience exist within an ever increasingly mediated, regulated, commodified, and sterilized environment. The individual fails to see himself reflected in the world around him, either in the products of his labor or his leisure. Baudrillard has called this state of being the *hyperreal,* a kind of life where advertising and media has engulfed all human relations (Baudrillard 1994: 2, 88). This causes an uneasiness, an existential angst, a nostalgia, and desire for something

different, which is sometimes described and labeled as *alienation. Real* life, then, is that which will fill the voids created by the *unreal* or *hyperreal*. People desire (often subconsciously) to replace the Spectacular world which numbs the senses, routinizes life, and synchronizes human beings with the rhythms of technology and capital with the 'real' world that awakens the senses, replaces routinization with spontaneity and adventure, frees us from the regulation of technology, and removes the layers of mediation between human beings and the world.

If modern Western society *is* life within the Spectacle, and if the Spectacle serves to remove us from *real* life, then BT is fundamentally a search for The Real, and the BT representation of India (more specifically, the BT representation of *itself within India*) is a spatial and temporal manifestation of The Real. It is a place, we are told, where we too can, by following the two step process of: 1) physically removing, or 'unplugging', our mind and body from the Spectacular world, and 2) taking up the lifestyle and geography of BT, come to experience the real.

Tourism (and BT in particular), Phipps explains, "is the space where the fantasy of re-forging that connection between the self and the world still tenuously hangs on" (Phipps 1999: 79). As such, BT can be seen as the BTravelers attempt to escape the conditions imposed on them by their place within the *universal proletariat*, which Hardt and Negri define to include "all those whose labor is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction" (Hardt and Negri 52). Since by that definition almost everyone in Western society is included, Spectacular society is as Deleuze and Guattari once said, "an unprecedented subjugation: there are no longer even any masters, but only slaves commanding other slaves" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 254)[1]. Hence, while even though most BTravelers

[1] Further, on the notion that even the masters are slaves: "the bourgeois … [is] more utterly enslaved than the lowest of slaves, he is the first servant of the ravenous machine, the beast of reproduction of capital, internalization of the infinite debt" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 254).

are from the upper tiers of society, they are still subject to the same tyranny of the Spectacle over their lives.

Depending on their personality, socio-cultural milieu, and economic status, people have differing degrees of desire and freedom (whether structural or perceived) to take action. In the recent American past people have looked for the real, for adventure, in a myriad of different ways. Some of the most stereotypical ones that come to mind include joining the circus, freight hopping or hitchhiking across the country.[1] Similar desires are manifest in following musical bands on extended tours, the new-age and other spiritual retreat movements, large festivals such as Burning Man and Rainbow Gatherings (whose missions are specifically the creation of a non-spectacular, non-commodified space).

IV: Markers of Realness

In writing about the meaning that is to be found in BT, Potts gives the following maxim to the prospective traveler:

> There is just as much epiphany to be had wandering lost through the alleyways of Varanasi, enduring diarrhea on the Bangkok-to-Surat Thani mini-bus, or playing games with children in the Nazareth town square" (Potts 2003: 190).

In this quote Potts manages to both highlight the main markers of realness that exist within the BT meta-narrative and to also conveniently locate them within the dialectic of travel-as-identity-creation. The markers, it is implied, don't mean anything on their own. They acquire their meaning by giving the BTraveler 'epiphanies' as well as being in opposition to 'normal' life within the Spectacular world. With the markers

[1] BT can even be argued to be a bourgeois method of attaining some of the perceived realness of these activities, which are much less commodified and much less socially acceptable. Compare the description of hitchhikers given by Mukerji with that of Btravelers: "They do not enter strange places in the protective cover of a 'tour'; they face day to day problems in finding rides, food, and places to sleep. Because they are open to changes in their environment that can affect the style of travel, hitchhikers claim to have chosen a most adventurous and extraordinary way to see the world" (qtd. in Riley 1988: 321).

of realness there is a certain amount of blending, in that they are all very interrelated and interdependent. The general order that I will proceed in is: a) India as real, b) non-commodified relations as real, c) spontaneity and adventure as real, d) nearness to death, disease, and decay as real.

India as Real

The India of BT is almost always represented as overflowing with life and realness: filled with people, geographies, and events that can be neither be contained nor regulated. It is a place where one can move one's life from the commodified Spectacular world to one where life and energy are not commodified, are bursting into everyday life. The following quotes are taken from general introductory descriptions of what India *is*. They are overviews, designed both to introduce the subject to those who may not be familiar with it, as well as to reinforce the image in the minds of those who have already been. They are the most basic building blocks of the Indian BT meta-narrative:

> India is the best show on earth, the best bazaar of human experiences that can be visited in a lifetime. India dissolves ideas about what it means to be alive, and its people give new meaning to compassion, perseverance, ingenuity, and friendship. India—monsoon and marigold, dung and dust, colors and corpses, smoke and ash, snow and endless myth—is a cruel, unrelenting place of ineffable sweetness. Much like life itself."
>
> –Traveler's Tales: India, introduction (O'Reilly et al. 2004)

> India will sideswipe you with its size, clamour and diversity - but if you enjoy delving into convoluted cosmologies and thrive on sensual overload, then India is one of the most intricate and rewarding dramas unfolding on earth, and you'll quickly develop an abiding passion for it"
>
> –Lonely Planet Website, India main-page

> India is as spectacular and diverse as a Bollywood movie – colourful, exuberant, exciting, and loud…feast your eyes on the sights…tease your taste

> buds…" "India jostles your entire being…this country is not a place you merely 'see'; it's an assault on all the senses."
>
> –Lonely Planet India (Singh et al. 2003: back cover)

These quotes are typical of not only the way that India the place is imagined, but also the BTravelers' relationship to it. India is seen as a 'show,' a 'movie,' and just as Bollywood (or Hollywood for that matter) has been called an entertainment factory, so too the India of BT could be called a 'realness factory'. Looking closer, we see that India only exists in relation to the *you* that is experiencing it: It is a place that *you* will experience, that *you* will feast upon, that *you* will be rewarded by. These general introductions to the place of India are already stressing that India itself is but the foil against which *you* will be transformed: it is merely a place where the realness becomes a possibility, like a show even, that is designed for consumption by the BTraveler (Gogia 2002: 45).

Even though the BT circuit is mostly arranged around places that have some kind of cultural, historical, or natural significance, they are more like constellations to the BTraveler: while they give some structure to their itineraries and their daily schedules, they only form the backdrop of the BT experience. The 'real' is found by simply observing, interacting with, and wandering through the day to day Indian experience:[1]

In other words, the attraction of India is that the movie is not playing inside an air-conditioned theater, you don't need to buy a ticket, and you don't need to walk through the turnstile: the daily life of India *is* the movie. This is nothing short of a revelatory experience to the BTraveler, who is used to a life where the mundane is indeed *mundane*. In the Spectacular world the real "…has been destroyed by the onslaught of commercialization, commodification, and technocratization. Subsequently, culture [*realness*] can only be found in countries that have not been

[1] As will be elaborated upon later, it is only certain facets of Indian life and culture that are 'seen.' There are many others which must be ignored and are missing from BT literature and narratives.

exposed to or wholly embraced the above alterations" (Gogia 2002: 39, *also see* Phipps 1999: 79).

When one is experiencing 'real' life, it is implied, meaning and excitement are provided to you by the world. This could not be more different than 'normal' life, where the events that 'matter' are usually big and well defined (weddings, holidays, birthdays, sporting events, 'vacation', etc.). Much of BT's attraction is articulated in the notion that there is just as much, if not more, reward and realness to be found in life's *non-events:*

> Normal experiences (such as ordering food or taking a bus) will suddenly seem extraordinary and full of possibility. All the details of daily life that you ignored back home—the taste of a soft drink, the sound of a radio, the smell of the air—will suddenly seem rich and exotic (Potts 2003: 88).

Non-Commodified Events and Relationships

Spectacular society encourages, almost demands, its residents to spend their time and money on commercialized, moderated, well-defined, compartmentalized, and easily translatable activities. To spend days and months disengaged from the capitalist labor market, away from definable and finite leisure activity, and neither furthering your formal education nor career while spending days wandering around visiting historical sights or talking with acquaintances is, in America, to be *doing nothing*. Our culture does not place value on such non-structured, non-regulated, non-productive, and non-consumptive experiences for a very simple reason: they can be neither controlled nor reproduced nor packaged nor bought nor sold. *They cannot be commodified*, and as such they are closer to *real.*

Spectacular society, however, seeks to commodify *everything.* BT by its very needs to assign realness and positive value to the Indian BT experience must transform these 'free' events (wandering, gazing, sitting, etc, or the non-events that occur in-

between events, such as the bus ride between destinations, or the waiting room at the train station) into desirable commodities that can be first desired by, and then consumed by the alienated travelers. Further, they must be seen as activities that *only* hold their value in the context of a 'real' geography, such as India. The message of the BT is necessarily thus: *These activities are best not attempted at home; only when you travel thousands of miles to an exotic place and culture, a place that is not integrated into the spectacle, do they become meaningful and valuable.*

Obviously implicit in all of these distinctions is that there actually is a way to separate the real from the unreal, the commercial from the non-commercial: that there is indeed an *outside* from the spectacular world (Gogia 2002: 39). BT is as a whole invested in the possibility and reality of separation, both on a geographic level and on the level of daily interactions. *There are real places, India is one of them.* Further, *There are real interactions, and they are marked by being non-commercial.* But unfortunately, in this age, the Spectacle is "at once unified and diffuse in such a way that it is impossible to distinguish any inside from outside" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 188).

Though BT is forced by its very popularity to admit that the Spectacular has crept in, there isn't much examination as to why this is or to what extent. Rather, it only causes an increased vigilance in recognizing the 'fake' as opposed to the 'real'. Because of this BTravelers have developed, Phipps concludes, "a system of thought which could be characterized as extremist in its commitment to notions of authenticity and experience" (Phipps 1999: 75).

There is an almost unanimous disdain among BTravelers for relationships and experiences that are based on the transaction of money. The BTraveler is *not* in India to exchange their money for 'meaningful experiences,' because then their relationship to the place and its people would have been corrupted from the start: 'canned' and

mediated through the expectations of commodification. Even though it is money that makes it all possible, any relationship that is consciously based upon paying money signifies the Spectacle along with its power and its emptiness, for the Spectacle is "another facet of money, which is the abstract equivalent of all commodities" (Debord 32). The BTraveler yearns for *pure* relations, similar to what many in tourist studies and anthropology would label as 'authentic' (MacCannell 1976).

Thus, the BTraveler tends to separate local people into two distinct categories: middle-men who provide services for the tourist, and those who provide 'real' interaction and picturesque touristic interest (Bhattacharyya 383). Left out are the vast majority of Indian people who are simply going about their lives with no interest in, and no interest for, the tourist.[1] Even the geography itself is put into these polar categories. A reading of the LP India reveals an endless fascination with historical and cultural associations, and an almost complete absence of current social and political forces (except in warnings as to when such a situation may affect the travel plans of the tourist). Most cities and towns are discussed as if frozen in time, their only markers of importance are the level of attractions and services they provide to the BTraveler. So, it turns out that even in India, some places are more real than others. A visual representation of this can be seen in Olsen's map of India *(reproduced on the following page).*

While it is rather extreme, even compared with the LP, it captures much of the underlying sentiment of how India is imagined in the BT meta-narrative. The entire sub-continent is covered with the little symbols that so neatly encapsulate the general interests of a certain class of tourist. There is nothing between these symbols of 'killer temples,' 'holy cities,' 'cool hangout,' and 'trekking' but the empty space that

[1] Such as industrial, agricultural, and casual laborers, the middle class, white collar workers, and even the behind-the-scenes workers that cater to the BT: room sweepers, cooks, clothes washers, etc.

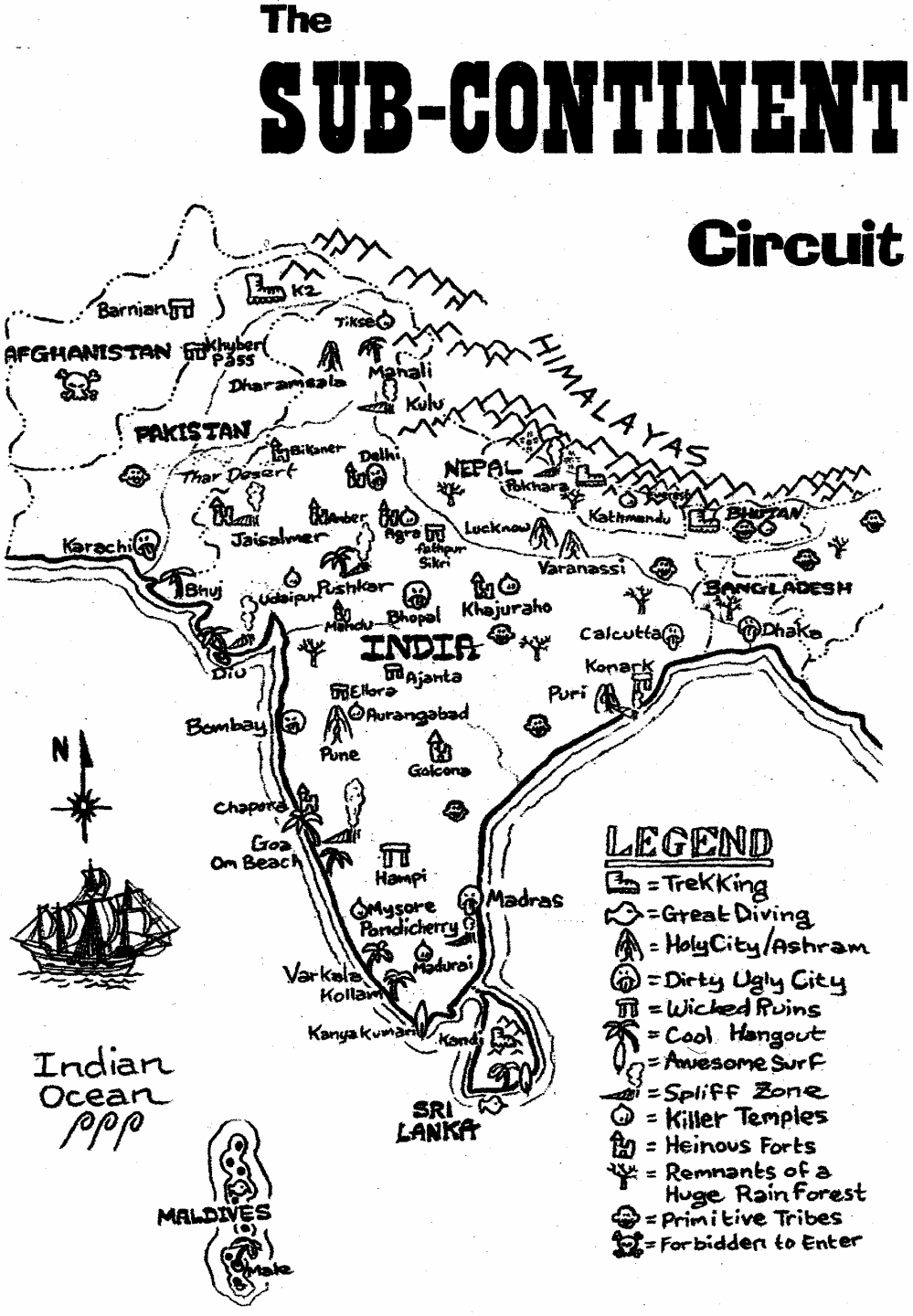

Figure 1: World Stomper's Map of India (Olsen 2002: 240)

signifies normal, daily existence. Also of note is the fact that almost all of the larger cities are uniformly dismissed with a frowning face and the label of 'dirty ugly city,' implying strongly that regardless of any other intrinsic value they may have to the tourist, overall they are unredeemable blights upon the touristic experience.

BTravelers lament upon the 'nastiness' that inevitably arises from locals who have constant commercial dealings with tourists, and it is "contrasted with the (idealized) good-heartedness of the natives" (Noy 86). This causes a separation in the mind of the BTraveler, making them almost schizophrenic in their relations: behaving one way towards people when a commercial interaction is involved and another when it is not.

Phipps sees this arising out of a common complaint that many BTravelers have of feeling like they never have contact with locals outside of commercial boundaries, and of an outright hostility that develops as it dawns on the BTravelers that *they themselves are being objectified* by the local population, seen as nothing more than a source of lucrative income by the local populations (Phipps 1999: 84).

Local people *know* that this is a part of the BT mindset, and one of the most common lines for opening an attempted sales pitch or scam is to tell the BTraveler first thing, "No money is involved. I do this for friendship only. I am not selling you anything. You don't need to buy anything: I am talking to you as a friend only…"[1] This often has the desired effect, which is of convincing the BTraveler to let down her guard, to believe that the interaction is genuine and therefore 'real'.

In this environment, then, the search for interactions and experiences that are not commodified is extreme and at times even desperate (Phipps 1999: 75). A good illustration of this can be drawn from a conversation I had with an Israeli BTraveler in her late 20's. It was related to me in the town of Fatehpur Sikri in October of 2003:

[1] This is a common occurrence that happens in the more aggressive tourist areas multiple times a day.

> *She was in tears because she had come to India to meet real people, and instead at every turn she met people whose main interest was in her money. Her latest let-down occurred when she told of a man she had met on the street who had invited her to his family's house for dinner. She joined them for dinner for a couple of nights, talking with the family, enjoying herself, and glad she was finally having her 'real' experience. Then, the night before our conversation, the man's wife had presented her with a hand-made dress as a gift. The man told her that it would be impolite to refuse the dress, so the Israeli woman reluctantly accepted it. Sure enough, on the way out the man began demanding that the only proper action for her would be to pay such and such an amount of money for the dress, and it became clear that this was the plan from the moment of their first encounter. She was shattered, and continued to speak of her now solidified belief that Indian people in general were not to be trusted and that authentic relationships were not possible.* [1]

So, while searching for the 'real' the BTraveler is actually conditioned, first by the inequality involved in most of their transactions (caused by the structures that allow them to travel in the first place) and then reinforced by the how-to literature and narratives, to assume a defensive, suspicious, and ultimately extreme frugality that, in the larger picture, leads to millions of people flying thousands of miles "to ever more distant lands untouched by the West, only to alight among poverty-stricken peasants and haggle over the cost of a $4 room" (Benning 2003).

A constant that cannot be failed to be noticed in the behavior and literature of BTravelers is an obsession over budget and costs. This can be observed in BTraveler conversations, which often revolve around discussions of prices: How much did you pay for that? How much *should* I pay for that? Is that a good price? (Sorensen 2003: 856, Phipps 1999: 84, Riley 1988: 320). When an exchange of money is involved, it is seen as almost a moral imperative to not pay even a tiny bit more money then they 'should' for anything. Involved in these kinds of exchanges is the market as a measure of authenticity, for "the struggle to only pay the 'local price' for a commodity or service can be seen as an achievement of the real" (Phipps 1999: 84). Not only that, but the price paid for a commodity is also "an important yardstick for measuring

[1] I have heard many variations of similar stories as well.

success and allows quantification to facilitate comparison of one's own experience with those of other travelers" (Riley 1988: 320). This can be found in the very fabric of guidebooks such as LP India, which is almost more a compendium of services offered, their exact prices, and the degree of servility with which they are offered, than anything else (Bhattacharyya 383-4). It is not a rare sight to hear a BTraveler arguing over a price with a person simply because the quote given or price charged does not match the LP printed price exactly. Where there is an implicitly commercial relationship, the BTraveler reproduces the spectacular relationship by fetishizing money and using the power that money, the ultimate Imperial arbiter, gives them in their interactions (Hardt and Negri 2000: 248, 345-6).

It is also more than this. The BTraveler has a vested interest in perceiving themselves, if not poor per se, than at least financially constrained. There are three main reasons for this: One is that long term travel necessarily involves a fixed (and constantly) diminishing amount of capital that will eventually be a limiting factor in the duration of the trip. Second, they need some way to justify their own oftentimes nasty behavior to themselves. And third, there is the implicit realness that is invested by the (mostly bourgeois class) BTravelers in either working class status or poverty status (Riley 1988: 321).

One often hears frustrated BTravelers trying vainly to explain to locals how, contrary to appearances, they are in fact *not* wealthy in their home countries, and how they should therefore not be viewed by the locals as being wealthy. What the BT fails to see is that the very act of *having arrived as a tourist* is an indicator of wealth. The fact is that an international air ticket most likely costs more than the yearly wages of most locals, and the trip is seen as a luxurious experience that is full of indulgences and indiscriminate spending.

It is almost daily that one sees a westerner engaged in spats with people over what in the end are very tiny amounts. Olson says it best when he talks about arguing with a bus conductor over paying an extra fare for his luggage (which is in many places a standard charge): “Now another buck-twenty is nothing to me, but I protested vehemently out of principal. *You can’t let hustlers like this take advantage of travelers*” (Olson 81).

There is a feeling that not falling victim to greedy locals is a matter of principal, since for the BTraveler to feel exploited is for them to realize (or admit) their objectified status as part of the tourism economy. It is like a duel, and it is ingrained in the very fabric of touristic relations. If the BTraveler is an object that supplies money, then so too the BTraveler begins to objectify the service provider so that their existence is limited to only being their capacity, willingness, and price at which they provide their services.

Unpredictability/Spontaneity: Time and Money

In BT, every excursion is imagined as being a potential adventure: One cannot count the number of narratives whose point of departure is the unexpected change of plan, the plan gone-wrong, or following a spontaneous whim that has far reaching and profound impact. “Simple trips to the market or the toilet can turn into adventures; simple conversations can lead to charming friendships” (Potts 88). These kinds of experiences are seen lurking around every corner in India, and the B-Traveler must embrace, envision, and ultimately even ‘expect the unexpected’ because “that is what often makes traveling in the sub-continent so frustratingly draining, yet also so inimitably inspirational” (Singh et al 17).

The very form of BT makes spontaneity a possibility because plans can be changed on a whim, and traveling becomes more relaxed without deadlines or

obligations to meet (Riley 1988: 327). BT in India, it is implied, is the polar opposite of the *canned* experience, with a pre-conceived set-up, trajectory, and end-point.[1]

Unpredictability and spontaneity together form what I will label as the *potential-for-adventure* factor. It is another marker of realness, and one that is often conspicuously absent from the Spectacular world. The potential-for-adventure factor is directly related to perceptions of *time* and *money.* Time in Spectacular society is managed, planned, routinized, and structured to an astonishing degree by the requirements of capital (Debord 1994: 13). There is only limited room for one to either contemplate or act in spontaneous or 'adventurous' ways when one does not have the *time* for them.

In a world where 'time is money,' a setback is a setback, a delay is a delay, and any deviation from the most efficient method of getting from point A to point B is a source of stress, frustration, anger, loss of profit, and eventually discipline. Ones life falls into cyclical patterns of work and leisure, with leisure being of a fixed duration and structured around the needs of work. Weekends, the annual vacation, or holiday breaks fall into this category. These events are, according to Graburn, eventually for most people nothing more than "repetitive, predictable, timed breaks that allow people 'recreation' and mark the progress of cyclical time" (Graburn 1983:12). On the macro level life courses are generally plotted (or socially expected to be plotted) against linear educational and career goals which require both internal and external conditioning (discipline) to avoid spontaneity. Hardt and Negri touch on this with their discussion of the youth rebellions in the 1960's and 1970's:

[1] For me the ultimate example of the 'canned' experience is an activity in America that is known as 'canned hunting.' The prospective hunters travel to a 'canned hunting' farm, where they pre-select the exact animals they will 'hunt,' and pay accordingly. They then set themselves up for the 'hunt,' the animal is released near them, and they kill it with their instrument of choice (usually either a gun or crossbow).

> The prospect of getting a job that guarantees regular and stable work for eight hours a day, fifty weeks a year, for an entire working life, the prospect of entering the normalized regime of the social factory … now appeared as a kind of death" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 273-4).

BTravelers often report that they needed to escape a life where they found that their life course felt fixed and repetitive, and both Sorensen and Riley find that the majority of BTravelers in their studies quit their jobs so that they could travel, not the other way around (deciding to travel after quitting or losing a job).[1] Elsrud, through his fieldwork interviewing BTravelers,[2] supports this, revealing the BT trip to be a journey towards

> an individualized time-space in which the traveler regains control of her own time and movement. It is argued that this control, sensed as freedom, opens up both mind and body to a complexity of different time experiences that vary depending on context and speed of movement. Thus, the long-term journey into different and diversified cultures constitutes a move away from clock time and other structuring devices into a space and time where the traveler is, to a certain extent, left alone to do her own structuring; the backpacker is both living and creating her own time (Elsrud 1998: 308).

BT is without a doubt for most people a successful respite both from the routine of daily life, and for some, is also an escape (or detour) from the linear trajectory of their life course. The trip is almost from the moment of its conception envisioned and anticipated as an adventure, as a separate space from 'ordinary life', a space filled with possibilities: "it usually stands out as a demarcated time and space, qualitatively different from the rest of the life course" (Elsrud 2001: 604). It offers the BTraveler the perceived freedom from many of the pressures that are ever present in Spectacular society and which serve to limit their opportunities for adventure and spontaneity.

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[1] It is not an insignificant number, either, of those who travel because their lives are in flux (between educational stages, at blocks in their careers, seeking reprieve from a traumatic event such as the end of a relationship, loss of a job, or death of someone close).

[2] This specific research is based on interviews with Swedish women backpackers.

Due to this new relationship to time, the unscripted and unexpected diversions that occur during travel are viewed as overwhelmingly positive, redefined to be a part of the adventure rather than a setback to it. In BT, *mis-adventure* (that does not lead to physical damage) is still *adventure*. There are entire volumes dedicated to just this. Among numerous titles, here is a brief selection to illustrate the tone of the works: The Unsavvy Traveler: Women's Comic Tales of Catastrophe, Sand In My Bra & Other Misadventures: Funny Women Write From the Road, Hyenas Laughed at Me and Now I Know Why: The Best of Travel Humor and Misadventure, and finally Lonely Planet: Unpacked and Lonely Planet Unpacked Again, "a collection of 26 first-person essays by Lonely Planet writers includes tales that describe, in mostly self-effacing detail, the horrors and embarrassments that can befall even the most seasoned travelers" (Publisher's Weekly: 1999).

That the BTraveler's acceptance of the unscripted and unexpected is in contrast to other tourists' (and Spectacular life in general) perceptions and reactions can be illustrated by these two personal experiences of this writer, which could represent the opposed meta-narratives outlined above:

> *I guided my father[1] on an eight day visit to India. With a limited itinerary, the sense of a domino effect was heightened in that if one leg involving transportation were to be delayed or canceled, it would jeopardize the entire schedule. There could be no change of plans, either, as each leg connected to the next. Not only that, but because time was so short, any time spent waiting was time that was wasted. This was an endless source of stress for him as our transportation seemed to lack the sense of schedule and punctuality that he was used to and finally came to a head on the last day when our return flight to Mumbai (where his connecting flight home departed from a day later) was delayed, first by one hour, then by three, and eventually by eight hours. He did not perceive this turn of events as an adventure, did not perceive the waiting time as fun, and certainly did not take in stride and say, as a BTraveler might: 'Well, this is just part of the fun of traveling in India!'*

[1] Age 56, resident of Syracuse, NY. A white collar executive who has never BTraveled (and did not on this occasion, either), has never visited the Third World, and who had arranged beforehand for all of our accommodations and transportation through a tour agency.

Now compare that story with the following one, which is situated within the BT meta-narrative:

> *We arrived at the Varanasi train station a couple of hours early for our 11:30 pm train. During the rickshaw ride to the station we noticed that the road seemed to be alive and insects began hitting our faces: there were millions of grasshoppers everywhere. On arrival at the station, one could not take a step without crunching grasshoppers and cockroaches underfoot. They were in the air, and there was nothing you could do to keep them off of your body. Our train was first delayed one hour, then two, then five, then twelve hours. We had no choice but to spend the night on the platform, along with everyone else, covered in hopping and crawling insects, laying on the ground coated in dead and living bugs, trying to catch a couple of minutes of sleep here and there, talking and laughing with people over the almost nightmarish situation. Finally, dawn came. Most of the grasshoppers were dead, and a man came and hosed off the platform, the train arrived at noon and it was almost like the previous night was just a bad dream. While we wouldn't necessarily have said that the experience was fun, we certainly saw it as an adventure, we took it in stride, and at the end of it, when the train finally left, we turned to each other and said: ''Well, this is just part of the fun of traveling in India!'*

Not only do they have a newfound conceptual relationship to time, but BTravelers also have the concrete economic ability to act in new ways. Besides having no job to report to and no schedule to keep, they just as importantly have, due to both their relative wealth and the relative cheapness of the countries they travel in, the economic ability to act on whims and take indulgences that they otherwise would feel restricted in taking in their home countries. This factor is just, if not more, important in bestowing perceptions of freedom upon the BTraveler.

While at home, for example, taking a spontaneous weekend trip to visit an attraction in an unfamiliar city may cost hundreds of dollars for even basic transportation, lodging, food, etc. This cost will be a significant constraint in the decision making process of most people, limiting both their destinations, activities, and even the desire to go in the first place. Also, in Western society, planning ahead is structurally encouraged and spontaneity is actually *penalized*, in that last minute plans usually carry a very high premium (transportation fares, hotel rooms, car rentals). In

India, on the other hand, one could do the same kind of excursion for about the same as their normal per day spending.

In essence BT, except for all but the most stingy or most wealthy, by its extreme cheapness allows people to act out their desires to take unexpected excursions and make spontaneous decisions to a much higher degree than is possible at home.

Communion with Danger, Death, Decay and Disease

Phipps is correct when he states that, "there is, ultimately, nothing more indisputably 'real' than the fact of death experienced either close at hand or personally" (Phipps 1999: 82). To acknowledge death is to acknowledge the futility of the Spectacular society and its purposes, to destroy the implied value of material and capital accumulation, and to question the very foundations of one's life within Spectacular society itself. As Debord says: the "social absence of death is one with the social absence of life" (Debord 1994: 115).

In India, death, decay and disease are a very visible and tangible presence in both reality and representations. This is in high contrast to Western society, where their presence and existence is masked and segregated at all costs, replaced with an existential fear of sightless disease and statistical death. This fascination with death, decay, and disease is due in large part to the dual processes of the segregation and professionalization of death and dying along with the idealization of youth, beauty, and the perfect, un-aging (and innocent) human body[1] (Phipps 1999: 83, Debord 1994: 115). For many BTravelers to India, the wider spectrum of the human condition becomes a visible and tangible presence for the first time in their lives. Perhaps no

[1] Most recently, see: Bellafante, Ginia. "The Power of Adult Clothes in a Youth-Obsessed Culture" The New York Times. 28 Mar. 2004.

Indian city typifies this fascination as does Varanasi, in Uttar Pradesh, one of the holiest cities in Hinduism.

Varanasi is one of the most popular BT destinations in India for what I believe is its close association with the markers of death, decay, and disease, and the perceived realness they bring. Almost always described in narratives and guidebooks as a 'must see' place, a 'powerful' place, a 'magical' place, no trip to India is complete without a visit to the burning *ghats* along the Ganges river, where cremation routinely take place in full public view (Phipps 1999: 83, Singh et al. 2003: 361). It is in fact one of the most popular places for dying Hindus to make pilgrimages as it is considered auspicious to die near the Ganges River. Along with bodies being displayed and cremated in public spaces, there are animals in various states of life and death everywhere, fecal matter, urine and rotting food scattered are on the streets, and human beings with diseased and mangled bodies roam around. According to Lonely Planet, in Varanasi:

> You'll see huge piles of firewood stacked along the top of the ghat, each log carefully weighed on giant scales so that the price of cremation can be calculated. There are no problems watching cremations, since at Manikarnika death is simply business as usual, but leave your camera at your hotel (Singh et al. 2003: 365).

There is also the ever present risk posed by various bacterial, viral, and contagious diseases that come with lack of sanitation, poor food standards, little clean drinking water, and the presence of microbes that either do not exist or have been eradicated in the Western world. Even the physical structure of the city appears is a state of decay: narrow winding roads, crumbling buildings, and open sewers.

In contrast to Western societies, with their almost obsessive dogma of sterility, hygiene, and sanitization, BT in India, by eschewing this kind of separation from the microbial world, puts the BTraveler in the regular position of being able to touch it

with their hands, see it with their own eyes, and perhaps even feel its effects upon their bodies (Phipps 1999: 82).

That there are Western BTravelers who have gotten malaria and other potentially fatal diseases, have been mugged, have been sexually assaulted or raped, and have been severely injured or even killed, is a matter of fact. But these kinds of events are rarely if ever mentioned outside of newspapers or extremely personal confidences, and overall, their occurrence is most likely extremely rare. Certainly life in India *is* qualitatively different from life in, say, America or Western Europe. Nature often intrudes, sanitation is poor, and there are hucksters and thieves out to separate the tourist from their possessions. However, if travel to India really was filled with a serious level of danger that threatened life and limb, I doubt 2.6 million tourists would have traveled there in 2003 (World Tourism Organisation: 2004).

Ultimately, what is attractive about the Indian BT experience is the relative *safety* that exists within the overall climate of death, disease, and decay. It is similar to the popularity in America of thrill rides at amusements parks (roller coasters) and 'extreme' sports (sky diving, base jumping, rock climbing). They satisfy the need for activities that are more 'real' through their nearness to danger. They are what Baudrillard would call a simulation: by *simulating* a dangerous or risky activity, we get the same *feeling* and *social response* as if we were really in danger, all the while the entire event is regulated and planned so that it is statistically quite safe. In fact, areas of the world where danger and disease are a real and present threat see a drastic and sometimes even complete drop in the number of every type of foreign tourist (such as in Egypt after militant attacks on tourists at historic sites; in Kashmir, during the insurgency and martial law; and in countries and regions with endemic exposure rates of malaria, AIDS, or other serious diseases).

The irony is that for all the talk of danger, suffering, and risk, what is being described by most people is actually more akin to *inconvenience*. Diarrhea, upset stomachs, fevers, coupled with long transit delays, undesired deviations, physical discomfort, and the natural world's intrusion into life all figure prominently in these stories. These perceptions of danger and risk *are* based in a certain reality: India is indeed a very dangerous place to live. It *is* filled with disease, violence and death.

The only problem is that most of the damage and destruction that India (and the rest of the economic South) meets out is not for the most part felt by the foreign tourist, with her access to first rate medical care[1], high levels of nutrition, clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, the power that their relative wealth brings, and their ultimate trump card: return passage home. The real damage is felt by India's hundreds of millions of poor, undernourished, and exploited people who cannot afford medical care, drink polluted water, and whose bodies cannot cope with diseases and the extreme physical and mental hardship in their lives.[2]

V. Constructing the Real Self

Ultimately the BTravelers attraction to India does not lie in the actual level of danger involved in traveling there. This is because, according to Elsrud:

> It is not necessarily the content of an act, which defines it as with or without risk. It is how the act is experienced, when and where it takes place, and what mythology has to say about it that creates the definition. Thus, for instance, a bus-ride in India may be experienced differently (and as riskier) by a traveler than a bus-ride in England or Germany would, regardless of the actual danger involved. Furthermore, this bus-ride, irrespective of the actual danger, can then serve as an important ingredient in an identity narrative… (Elsrud 2001: 603).

[1] Many, if not most, BTravelers appear to have some form of health insurance. See Riley (1988: 319).
[2] See, among others: Dugger, Celia W. "Deserted by Doctors, India's Poor Turn to Quacks" The New York Times. 25 Mar. 2004.

In their analysis of BT narratives, Elsrud, Desforges, Sorensen and Noy all conclude that the BTravelers desire the 'realness' of BT in large part or even totally because it is an ideal foil for them to construct their 'real' selves around. In their narratives returned BTravelers are "consistently describ[ing the] deep and profound personal changes [the have taken place] as a result of the trip" (Noy 2004: 87). The entire BT experience, from its anticipation to the act itself to the narration of stories upon return, all provide the BTraveler with ways of imagining and performing their identity as a particular sort of person (Desforges 2000: 931). The 'sort' of person that they are most often trying to imagine would fit under the terms of *daring, adventurous, risky, brave, exciting,* etc.

In Spectacular society, the individual builds their identity (or has it built for them) based upon mass experiences, consumer patterns, and labor affiliations. Perhaps you are the kind of man who drives a Volvo rather than a Ford, or wears Patagonia fleeces instead of Burberry jackets, or your favorite television program is Friends rather than Survivor, or you are a truck driver as opposed to a university professor, or in your leisure time you go to NASCAR rather than polo matches. All of these images and activities create and reinforce identity. India's caste system can be seen as the extreme example of this personal branding. Instead of an identity based upon consumer and social preferences, it is wholly based upon the caste into which one is born, as dictated by the system and its enforcers. This makes it instantly apparent *exactly* where one stands in the social order and how one should view themselves *as a person*. One's identity *is* one's caste.

According to Debord the problem is that "when images chosen and constructed by *someone else* have everywhere become the individual's principal connection to the world he formerly observed himself…" then it is the exceptional person indeed who feels that their identity is the product of both chosen and unique experiences. In the

Spectacular world "the erasure of personality is the fatal accomplishment to an existence which is concretely submissive to the spectacle's rules" (Debord 1991: 7, 8).

What constitutes any given persons narrative can be thought of as their *narrative capital* (Noy 2004: 97). When you are participating in BT, you gain access to a higher quantity and higher density of narrative capital. While traveling, Potts says,

> You'll find that you're not just exploring new places but weaving a tapestry of life experience that is much richer and more intricate than you could have ever imagined while you were still at home (Potts 2003: 180).

Obviously, as with most things in the capitalist world, people want their narrative capital to have a higher rather than lower absolute and relative value. The BT experience aims to give people the chance to create an identity based upon their own (unique) experiences in the world, which will carry a "higher quotient of realness." (Desforges 2000: 946) In other words, the authenticity of the budget travel experience is "consumed and employed as a recourse for the telling of a valid and 'real' narrative identity," and the telling of narratives (of personal change) serve a dual purpose: they are intended to impel the listener and they are "part and parcel of an *ongoing transformative experience* that the teller is going through" (Noy 2004: 8, 94).

The Postcards section of the LP website is a place where travelers can leave snapshots of their journey. In her analysis of the LP Postcards section on India, Gogia found that more than half of the entries focused on the following themes: arduous journeys, prolonged sicknesses, the perils of thieves and dishonest merchants (Gogia 2002: 26). One can almost hear the BTravelers recounting their stories, using the adversity and nearness to danger as way to create an identity that is perceived to be daring and adventurous. Phipps continues, stating that BTravelers,

> engage in a competitive recounting of austerities undertaken and survived, be it a three day train trip without a seat or a bout of typhoid. Every suffering is valuable because it can be reconstituted later in a powerful narrative strategy adding to a sense of true connection with alterity (Phipps 1999: 81).

Using Elsrud's example of the bus ride from the beginning of the section, and Potts from the beginning of the paper, here are some other examples that travelers have posted on the same theme:

> The bus journey from Rishikesh to Gangotri is very scenic, but not for the faint hearted. After one particular near miss with a bus coming the other way on a blind bend, even the local passengers looked alarmed. Somehow, tyres screeching and pulses pounding, we stayed on the road…
>
> *-Michael Kendon, UK (Jun 02)*

> We came on an overnight bus from Bikaner to Jaisalmer which is not recommended to even the most intrepid of travelers. Mad Max was seated behind the wheel and we had only left Bikaner 30 minutes before we'd had about four near accidents. The fifth time was not so lucky. We collided with a taxi, the bus screeched to a halt and our driver and the taxi driver yelled at each other...
>
> *-Jo Lane, Italy (Jul 02)*

> But worse was to come, shortly after I had moved down the bus and was trying to doze off I heard this crash and the next thing I know the side windows on one side of the bus had broken in. I think maybe from hitting branches of a tree. And here is the funny part, the driver did not even stop, he kept going until we got to Udaipur and I was freezing cold as I only had a light jacket on.
>
> *-Derek Brennan, Ireland (Feb 01)*

Noy argues that the BT experience, "although constructed as strenuous and at times risky (and perhaps precisely because of its construction), is unanimously viewed as a highly positive experience." Experienced B-travelers "tell of their new place in life in positive terms – they are wiser, more knowledgeable, more socially and emotionally apt, etc., than they were prior to the journey" (Noy 2004: 84). Accordingly, the prospective BTraveler imbibes the implicit message of the BT narratives: *BT will lead to positive change and a better you.*

VI. Conclusion

At its heart the BT experience consists of the alienated individual trying to create an identity based upon 'realness.' We must ultimately fall back on Debord's conclusion that alienation cannot be combatted with alienated forms of struggle (Debord 1994: 154). BT, for all that it does offer, is itself an alienated form. There are indeed many ways that BT *does* give the traveler perceptions of freedom, such as how it reorders time and provides freedom from routine and labor. But in more fundamental ways it is merely an extension of the Spectacle rather than liberation from it, and the realness that it does achieve is neither sustainable nor a true challenge to the Spectacle. As much as it tries to envision itself otherwise, BT is a commodified experience that relies wholly on the commodification of labor, the ability to purchase its goods and services, and the global structural inequalities of the capitalist system.

If alienation is the inability to successfully objectify oneself in the world or to be able to see oneself in one's labor, then it cannot be overcome through the purchasing of someone else's labor, no matter how exotic the locale (Janson: 2004). The BT meta-narrative disdains the purchasing of specific 'items,' yet is fully in favor of purchasing the whole 'product' of BT, along with all of the perceived benefits that this particular product brings with it: adventure, realness, narrative capital, etc. In short, BT is a product that promises to deliver a shortcut to understanding and spiritual and intellectual growth (Noy 10). Because of this, it has been shown how the entire meta-narrative of BT revolves to a large degree on how *you* will have an exciting experience in India, on how *you* will grow because of the BT experience, and on how *you* will consume the markers of realness in order to construct a new (or modified) identity. That BT is such a personal and individual quest has profound implications, because alienation is *collectively* created, and to attempt to combat it in such an

individualized and transitory way as BT provides is only creating a *simulation* of resistance.

Its very popularity is a testament to how successful the meta-narrative has been in masking this truth. The commodity value of BT is symbolic, one whose value is dependent upon its social status and its perceived uniqueness. The BTraveler consumes the symbols of realness that have been constructed within the meta-narrative, living vicariously through them, hoping that some of their realness will rub off on them, and regardless of anything else, incorporating them into their own narrative capital.

It is ironic too that the BTraveler chooses to escape hierarchy and social roles by traveling to one of the most patriarchal, rigid, structured, and hierarchal societies on the planet. What the BTraveler realizes is that their status within the global Empire trumps that of India: they are above the caste, economic, and power relationships that most of the population finds themselves trapped within. They have the ability to wield all of the power and privilege that the Spectacle has bestowed upon them. The journalist Decca Aitkenhead also came to this realization in her book The Promised Land. She describes BTravelers in Thailand who, despite,

> the fond belief in their own poverty, what they actually take away from Thailand is the experience of being immensely rich. They behave accordingly, just as careless and bored and discontented as rich people anywhere else, with so much time and no purpose but their own amusement. Guarding their money like millionaires, they greet every Thai with flinty eyed suspicion" (Aitkenhead 2002: 95).

Before departure even, the BTraveler has thoroughly imagined, embraced, and anticipated the experience as it has been constructed through the meta-narrative. As Baudrillard would say, the map precedes the territory, and the simulation of the BT experience is inseparable from the actual experience (Baudrillard 1994: 1-2). This is in part the purpose of the guidebook: they familiarize unfamiliar spaces, domesticating

the foreign so that it becomes negotiable and maneuverable (Sorensen 2003: 13; Bhattacharyya 1997; Gogia 2002: 18,24). This is shown by the very existence of the 'circuit' within which most BTravelers stay. Even within the circuit there is a small sphere of the 'familiar' and it is not uncommon for a BTraveler to refuse to stay in a hotel or eat at a restaurant that is not listed or reviewed in the Lonely Planet guide. For all of the image of adventure that setting off on the trip implies, there is a very real fear of life outside of the mapped and known borders of the simulation, of the Spectacle.

BT also fails to see that the Spectacle is *everywhere*, and that neither India nor the BT form is outside of it (Debord 1994: 13). The idealization of India contributes to this, constructing it as a place that for cultural and historical reasons has remained 'pure,' which of course could not be further from the truth. It also constructs the world in terms of national boundaries which, as far as the spectacle's continuity is concerned, no longer exist (Hardt and Negri 2000: xii, xiii). To see this as a result of neo-colonialism or even imperialism is to miss the point entirely, because the Spectacle reproduces and perpetuates itself within the very fabric of society, at both the local and the global. As the entire planet has fallen under its sway, so too has every locality become a site of its reproduction: it is, as Hardt and Negri describe it, an ether that is *everywhere*.

And so here we all are, the Western BTraveler, on the road, living the BT experience, treading the well worn trail, faithfully observing the conventions and taking our just rewards of adventure and identity. Here we all are, crossing oceans, walking in circles, and simulating the time of our lives.[1]

[1] After Aitkenhead (2002: 95).

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