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### Monument Valley, Instagram, and the Closed Circle of Representation

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#### Abstract

#### Introduction

I spent five days on the Arizona Utah border, photographing Monument Valley and the surrounding areas as part of a group of eight undertaking a landscape photography workshop under the direction of a Navajo guide. Observing where our guide was taking us, and watching and talking to other tourist photographers, I was reminded of John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" and the idea that tourists see destinations in terms of the promotional images they are familiar with (Urry 1). It seemed that tourists re-created images drawn from the popular imaginary, inserting themselves into familiar narratives of place. The goal of the research was to look specifically at the tourist gaze, that is, the way that tourists see view destinations and then represent that vision in their images.

#### Circle of Representation

Urry explained the tourist gaze as a particular way of seeing the world as a series of images created by the tourism industry; images which were then consumed or collected through tourist photography. He saw this as constituting a "closed circle of representation" where the images employed by the tourism industry to attract tourists to particular destinations were reproduced in tourists' own holiday snaps, and as more tourists sought out these locations, they were increasingly used to represent the destination. Susan Sontag saw travel employed as "a strategy for accumulating photographs" (9) suggesting that the images were the culmination of the journey. Urry also saw the end point of tourism as travellers to a destination "demonstrating that they have really been there by showing their version of the images that they had seen originally before they set off" (140).

Talking to the guide, my group, and other tourists about the images we were recording, and reviewing images tagged Monument Valley on Instagram revealed that digital and network technologies had altered tourists' photographic practices. Tourist impressions of destinations come from a wide range of popular culture sources. They have, even on smartphones, fairly sophisticated tools for creating images; and they have diverse networks for distributing their images. Increasingly, the images that tourists see as representative of Monument Valley came from popular culture and social media, and not simply from tourism promotions. People are posting their travel images online, and are in turn looking to posts from others in their search for travel information (Akehurst 55). The current circle of representation in tourist photography is not simply a process of capturing promotional imagery, but an interaction between tourists that draws upon films, television, and other popular culture forms. Tourist photographs are less a matter of "consuming places" (Urry 259) and more an identity performance through which they create ongoing personal narratives of place by inserting themselves into pre-existing stories about the destination and circulating the new narratives.

Jenkins analysed brochures on Australia available to potential tourists in Vancouver, Canada, and determined that the key photographic images used to promote Australia were Uluru and the Sydney Opera House, followed by sandy beaches alongside tropical blue waters. Interviews with Canadian backpackers travelling around Australia, and an examination of the images these backpackers took with the disposable cameras they were given, found a correlation between the brochure images and the personal photographs. Jenkins concluded that the results supported Urry's theory of a closed circle of representation, in that the images from the brochures were "tracked down and recaptured, and the resulting photographs displayed upon return home by the backpackers as evidence of the trip" (Jenkins 324).

Garrod randomly selected 25 tourists along the seafront of Aberystwyth, Wales, and gave them a single-use camera, a brief socio-demographic questionnaire, a photo log, and a reply-paid envelope in which they could return these items. The tourists were asked to take 12 photos and log the reason they took each photograph and what they tried to capture in terms of their visit to Aberystwyth. Nine females and four males returned their cameras, providing 164 photographs, which were compared with 70 postcards depicting Aberystwyth. While an initial comparison revealed similarities in the content of tourist photographs and the picture postcards of the town, Garrod's analysis revealed two main differences: postcards featured wide angle or panoramic views, while tourist photos tended to be close up or detail shots and postcards included natural features, particularly bodies of water, while tourist photographs were more often of buildings and man-made structures. Garrod concluded that the relationship between tourism industry images and tourist photographs "might be more subtle and complex than simply for the two protagonists in the relationship to mimic one other" (356).

#### Method

Identifying a tourist's motivation for taking a particular photograph, the source of inspiration for the image, and the details of what the photographer was attempting to capture involves the consideration of a range of variables, many of which cannot be controlled. The ability of the photographer and the sophistication of their equipment will have an impact on the type of images captured; for example this may explain the absence of panoramas in Aberystwyth tourist photos. The length of the stay and the level of familiarity with the location may also have an impact; on a first visit a tourist may look for the major landmarks and on subsequent visits photograph the smaller details. The personal history of the tourist, the meaning the location has for them, their reasons for visiting and their mood at the time, will all influence their selection of photo subjects. Giving tourists a camera and then asking them to photograph the destination may influence the choice of subject and the care taken with composition, however this does ensure a direct link between the tourist opinions gathered and the images analysed. An approach that depends on seeing the images taken independently by the tourists who were interviewed has logistical problems that significantly reduce sample size.

Fourteen randomly selected tourists at the visitors centre in Monument Valley, a random sampling of 500 Instagram images hash tagged Monument Valley, and photographs taken by seven photographers in the author's group were studied by the author. The tourists were asked what they wanted to take photographs of while in Monument Valley, and why of those particular subjects. The images taken by these tourists were not available for analysis for logistical reasons, and 500 Instagram images tagged #MonumentValley were collected as generally representative of tourist images. Members of the photography workshop group were all serious amateur photographers with digital SLR cameras, interchangeable lenses, and tripods. Motivations, decisions and the evaluation of images were discussed with this group, and their images reviewed in terms of the extent to which the image was felt to be representative of the location.

#### Monument Valley

Monument Valley can be considered a mythic space in that it is a real place that has taken on mythic meanings that go beyond physical characteristics and lived experiences (Slotkin 11). Located on the Navajo Tribal Park on the Arizona Utah border, it is known by the Navajo as Tse'Bii'Ndzisgail or "Valley of the Rocks." Monument Valley is emblematic of the Wild West, the frontier beyond which civilization vanishes, a mythology originally derived from the Western Films of director John Ford. Ford's film, *Stagecoach*, was shot in Monument Valley and Ford returned nine times to shoot Westerns here, even when films (such as *The Searchers*, set in Texas) were not set in Arizona or Utah. The spectacular desert scenery with its towering rock formations combine epic grandeur with brutal conditions, providing an appropriate backdrop for dramatic oppositions: civilization versus barbarity, community versus wilderness, freedom versus domestication. The mythological meanings attached to Monument Valley were extended in the films, novels, television programs, and advertising that followed. Footage of Monument Valley is used to represent a blend of freedom and danger in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Easy Rider*, *Thelma & Louise*, *Marlborough* and *Chevrolet* advertising, the television series *Airwolf* and episodes of *Doctor Who*. Monument Valley was the culmination of Forrest Gump's exhaustive run, and the setting for music videos by Kanye West, Madonna and Michael Jackson, each drawing on the themes of alienation and the displacement of the hero. While Westerns are on one level uniquely American, they are consistent with widely known romantic myths and stories, and the universal narratives evoked by Monument Valley have appeal far outside the USA. The iconic images of Monument Valley have been circulated well beyond tourist informational material, permeating a breadth of popular culture forms.

#### Photographing the Valley

Photography is intrinsically linked with tourism, fulfilling a number of roles. Travel can have as its purpose the collection of images, and as such, photography can function to structure the travel experience, and to evaluate its success (Schroeder; Sontag). Recognisable images of the location provide evidence that travel was undertaken, places were visited, and the traveller has experienced some form of authentic or exotic experience (Chalfen 435). Sharing images is an essential part of the process. The various roles of photography are to an extent dependent on having a shared mental image of what photographs from the travel location would look like. This mental image is derived, in part, from tourism sources such as postcards, brochures, and websites, but also from popular culture, and increasingly from photographs taken by other tourists. Travel images are shared online on sites such as Trip Advisor and Virtual Tourist, as well as travel blogs and photo sharing sites like Flickr and Instagram. People who post images online are likely to look to the same sites to search for travel information from others (Akehurst 55), reinforcing specific images as representative of the place and the experience.

At the beginning of our photography-based tour we were asked which locations we wanted to photograph. There was a general consensus, with people looking for vistas and panoramas, "golden hour" light on the rock formations of buttes and mesas, sunrises and sunsets with silhouetted landscape forms, and close-ups of shadow patterns and textures. Our guide added that one day had been set aside for the iconic images, which were described as the "Forest Gump" shot from Highway

163, the Mittens at sunrise, John Ford Point (as most recently seen in *The Lone Ranger* movie posters), and the vista from Artist's Point or North Window. When I asked tourists at the visitor information centre the same question about the images they wanted to capture, the responses were uniform with all of them saying the view of The Mittens, which was immediately before them. Seventy-eight percent (N=11) said that they were after a general panorama with the distinctive landforms, and Highway 163 was named by 57 percent (N=8). Few gave more than these three sites. Forty-two percent (N=6) described the John Ford Point image with the Navajo rider as a goal, and the same number said they would like to take some sunrise or sunset images. Twenty-eight percent (N=4) were looking to take images of themselves or their friends and family, with the distinctive landscape as a backdrop. There was a high level of consistency between the images described by the guide as "iconic" and the photographs that tourists wished to capture.

Categorising five hundred Instagram images with the hashtag Monument Valley revealed 195 pictures (39 percent) of the Mittens, 58 of which were taken at sunrise or sunset. There were 88 images (18 percent) taken of Highway 163. John Ford Point featured in 26 images (five percent) of images and Artist's Point was the location in 20 (four percent). Seventy-nine photographs (16 percent) were of other landmarks such as the Three Sisters, Elephant Butte, and Rain God Mesa, all visible from the self-drive circuit. Landmarks which could only be visited accompanied by a Navajo guide, accounted for 48 (nine percent) of the Instagram images. There were 16 images (three percent) of people, meals, and cars without any recognisable landmarks in the frame. The remaining 28 images (five percent) were of landmarks in the Southwest, but not in Monument Valley, although they were tagged as such.

As expected, the photography tour group had a fairly wide range of images, which included close-ups of rocks, images of juniper trees, and images taken in places that were accessible only with a high clearance vehicle and a Navajo guide, such as the Totem Pole and Yei Bi Chei, the Valley of the Gods, and the slickrock formations of Mystery Valley. However, in the images selected at the end of the workshop as representative of their experience of Monument Valley, all participants included the iconic images of Highway 163, the Mittens, and the Artist's Point vista.

Very few images were of the Navajo people. Tourists are requested not to photograph the Navajo unless they were at a sign-posted location where a mechanism was available for paying for the privilege. Here the Navajo posed in traditional dress, engaged in customary activities, or as foreground interest in the desert landscape. The few tourists availing themselves of these opportunities seemed self-conscious, hurriedly taking the snap and paying the fee. Gillespie explains this as the effect of the "reverse gaze" where the photographed positions the photographer "as an ignorant and superficial tourist" (349).

At the time, only one of the iconic images was featured on one of the official tourist sites, with the Mittens forming the banner image on the Visit Utah Monument Valley page. The Visit Arizona Monument Valley page had a single image (of the Ear of the Wind natural arch), and the Navajo Nation Parks and Recreation Monument Valley page also had a single image, that of the Three Sisters formation.

## Image and Meaning

The dominant subject in both tourist and tourism industry images is the Mittens. This image is also prominent in popular culture beginning with John Ford's film *Stagecoach*, through to Kanye West's *Bound 2* music video. This suggests that there is a closed circle of representation in tourist photography, with visitors capturing the images they have previously seen as representative of the destination. However, there may be an additional, more prosaic, explanation. The Mittens can be photographed from the terrace at the visitors centre, from the rooms at the View Hotel, or they can be captured from the car park, meaning that tourists do not have to leave their cars to attach this image to their travel narrative. The second most photographed landscape was that of Highway 163, an image that can be taken without even having to pay the fee and enter the Navajo Park.

Garrod's study of tourist and professional images of Aberystwyth noted that tourists did not have photographs taken from the top of the hill, and while no explanation for this was given, it could be that ease of access was a consideration. While the number of visitors to America's national parks and recreation areas is increasing each year, the amount of time each visitor spends at the attraction is in decline. The average visit to Yosemite lasts just under five hours, visitors stay for just under two hours in Saguaro National Park in Arizona, and at the Grand Canyon National Park, most visitors spend just 17 minutes looking at the magnificent landscape (Bernstein; de Graaf). In Yosemite National Park many visitors "simply rolled by slowly in their cars, taking photos out the windows" (de Graaf np). So, ease of access to locations familiar from popular culture images is a factor in tourist representations of their destinations.

Our photography tour group stayed five days in Monument Valley and travelled further afield to locations only accessible with a Navajo guide, however the images selected as representative of Monument Valley were of the same easily reached landmarks. This suggests that the process around the perpetuation of iconic tourist images is more complex than simple ease of access, or first impressions.

What is apparent in looking at both the Instagram images and those photographs selected as representative by the tour group, is that what is depicted is not necessarily contemporary tourist experience, but rather a way of seeing the experience in terms of personal and cultural stories. Photography involves the selection, structuring and shaping of what is to be captured (Urry 260), so that the image is as much the representation of a perception, as a snapshot of experienced reality. In a guide to photographing the southwest of the USA, Matrés regrets the greater restrictions on movement and the increased commercialisation in Monument Valley (170), which reduce the possibility of photographing under good light conditions, and of capturing images without tourist buses, sales booths, and consequent crowds. However, almost all of the photographs studied avoided these. Photographers seemed to have expended considerable effort to produce an idealised image of a Western landscape that would have been familiar to John Ford, as the photographs were not of a commercialised, crowded tourist destination. When someone paid the horseman to ride out to the end of John Ford Point, groups of tourists would walk out too, fussing over the horse, however having people in the image led to those on the photography tour rejecting the image as representative of Monument Valley. For the most part, the landscape images highlighted the isolation and remoteness, depicting the frontier beyond which civilization ceases to exist.

## Conclusion

Photography is one of the performances through which people establish personal realities (Crang 245), and the reality for Monument Valley tourists is that it is still a remote destination. It is in the driest and least populated part of the US, and receives only 350,000 visitors a year compared, with the five million people who visit the nearby Grand Canyon. On a prosaic level, tourist photographs verify that the location was visited (Sontag 9), so the images must be able to be readily associated with the destination. They are evidence that the tourist has experienced some form of authentic, exotic, place (Chalfen 435), and so must depict scenes that differ from the everyday landscape. They also play a role in constructing an identity based in being a particular type of tourist, so they need to contribute to the narrative constructed from a blend of mythologies, memories and experiences. The circle of representation in tourist images is still closed, though it has broadened to constitute a narrative derived from a range of sources. By capturing the iconic landmarks of Monument Valley framed to emphasise the grandeur and isolation, tourists insert themselves into a narrative that includes John Wayne and Kanye West at the edge of civilization.

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