

Staged Authenticity and Intimacy

Is it possible for two people to be completely open to each other? Or is the intimacy in every interpersonal relationship ‘fake’ on some level?

In his essay “Staged Authenticity,” Dean MacCannell discusses the superficial quality of tourist settings. He introduces the concept of ‘staged authenticity’, whereby the touristic desire for authentic experiences induces the rise of “social structural arrangements that produce them” (98). He also uses the term ‘staged intimacy’, which on first reading seems to be just another term for the same phenomenon. In this essay, I will tease out the difference between these two terms and argue that MacCannell, by drawing analogies between ‘authenticity’ and ‘intimacy’, implicitly proposes that ‘true’ intimacy in interpersonal relations does not necessarily exist. This has radical implications for social relations, dooming the best friends who promise to never keep secrets from each other, or couples who vow to be true to each other in marriage.

Central to MacCannell’s argument is Erving Goffman’s division of social settings into front and back regions: “The front is the meeting place of hosts and guests or customers and service persons, and the back is the place where members of the home team retire between performances to relax and to prepare” (92). MacCannell quotes Goffman in distinguishing three roles in the social performance: the performer, who appears in both front and back regions; the observer, who appears only in the front region, and the outsiders, who are excluded from both regions (92).

The situation becomes more complex when the tourist enters the picture. The tourist seeks “an *authentic* and *demythified* experience of an aspect of some society or other person” (94). The demand for authentic experiences precipitated the emergence of social structures that manufacture them on demand. MacCannell calls these social structures ‘tourist settings’, or “a staged back region” (99), filling the gap between Goffman’s front and back regions. These settings give rise to notion of ‘staged authenticity’.

The idea of ‘staged intimacy’ is analogous, but with one important difference.

MacCannell's examples all indicate that the term connotes a more personal connection. For instance, MacCannell quotes the description of a restaurant with an open kitchen, "strategically located on the Stroegat, the main strolling street of the city. Everyone is flat-nosing it against the windows these days watching the four cooks" (99). The passers-by might well walk away with some new insight or authentic experience of La Cuisine. However, they are more likely to simply be "fascinated by cooks at work, preparing a steak or a chicken or a salad" (99); to feel a connection with the individual cooks, instead of the restaurant as a whole. Similarly, when someone partakes in "swinging", "massage therapy", or "wide-screen cunnilingus" (99), he does not leave with a sense of 'intimacy' with the swingers as an organisation, the sex industry, or the pornography industry, but with individuals: the swingers, escorts, or actors themselves. Thus we see that MacCannell uses the term 'intimacy' to refer to the sense of connection with a person or a few people, and less with the organisation or the group that they represent. The converse holds true for the term 'authenticity'.

Despite the differences, MacCannell indicates multiple parallels between 'authenticity' and 'intimacy'. For example, Goffman's concept of the front/back regions can be applied equally well to individuals and to organisations, thus discussion of the front/back regions alone does not distinguish between staged authenticity and staged intimacy. This is a basic premise in MacCannell's essay, and is used in an essential way in his argument. For instance, he writes that intimacy with a person or a group of people "means, in part, being permitted to share back regions with "them"" (94). After this, he begins his account of the touristic experience by stating that it is "circumscribed by the structural tendencies described here" (94). Thus we see that MacCannell's description of the tourist, and related concepts like authenticity, stems from and is limited by the framework of interpersonal relations. This also accounts for why, at first glance, the terms 'staged authenticity' and 'staged intimacy' seem to refer to the same thing.

MacCannell also describes the effects of modernity on both 'authenticity' and 'intimacy', and the similarities are apparent. On authenticity, MacCannell writes: "Primitives who live their lives totally exposed to their "relevant others" do not suffer from anxiety about the authenticity of their lives... The opposite problem, a

weakened sense of reality, appears with the differentiation of society into front and back” (93). In other words, the rise of the front/back distinction is threatening the original concept of truth and authenticity. MacCannell makes the same point with interpersonal relations and intimacy: “In modern settings, society is established through cultural representations of reality at a level above that of interpersonal relations. Real life relations are being liberated from their traditional constraints as the integrity of society is no longer dependent on such constraints” (91), the implication being that it now depends on the front/back dichotomy.

Since MacCannell focuses his discussion on tourist settings, covering the space between Goffman’s front and back regions, it might be expected that he stays relatively silent about the ‘real’ authentic, or the ‘real’ back region. However, there is a more important reason for this. MacCannell writes, “[Daniel Boorstin’s term ‘pseudo-event’] also suggests that somewhere in tourist settings there *are* real events accessible to intellectual elites, and perhaps there are” (105). The last three words indicate that the existence of the ‘real’ authentic is irrelevant to MacCannell’s argument. Indeed, he could well believe that there is no ‘truly’ authentic experience, without affecting the logic of his essay. MacCannell views Goffman’s front and back regions as “ideal poles of a continuum” (105), with the connotation that absolute authenticity only exists as a concept that the tourist will strive for but can never attain.

If MacCannell is agnostic about the existence of absolute authenticity for tourists, and given that ‘authenticity’ and ‘intimacy’ are closely linked in multiple ways, it is untenable for MacCannell to believe in the existence of absolute intimacy in social relations. “In our society, intimacy and closeness are accorded much importance: they are seen as the core of social solidarity and they are also thought by some to be morally superior to rationality and distance in social relationships, and more “real”” (94). The fact that MacCannell needs to use the words ‘by some’ to qualify his claim is revealing; it indicates that he agrees with the first half of the statement above, but not with either the importance or the “reality” of intimacy over rationality in relationships. This points to the more nuanced view that MacCannell holds: in any discussion of interpersonal relations, the concept of the *sense of intimacy* generated between people is more relevant than the *ideal* of absolute intimacy, which might

never be attained and whose existence is irrelevant to MacCannell.

“...once tourists have entered touristic space, there is no way out for them so long as they press their search for authenticity” (106). Just as tourists look for a sense of authenticity in their travels, we as social beings crave a sense of intimacy with others. However, as compared to touristic settings, there is a greater amount of personal agency involved in social interactions. In the modern age, is it truly “no longer sufficient simply to *be* a man in order to be perceived as one”, but “necessary to *act out* reality and truth” (92)? Is staged intimacy the only possible mode of interacting with others? These are the questions that every person can – and must – answer for themselves.

Work Cited:

MacCannell, Dean. “Staged Authenticity.” In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken Books, 1989. 91–107.

Cover Letter

Prof Lo,

The main **motive** for this essay is the observation that ‘authenticity’ and ‘intimacy’ are used seemingly interchangeably in MacCannell’s text, and by transferring his argument from ‘staged authenticity’ to ‘staged intimacy’, we seem to get a rather radical view of interpersonal relations, namely that there is no ‘true’ intimacy in any relationship. Thus either the analogy between the two terms breaks down at some point, or that the analogy is in fact strong enough and MacCannell does indeed hold the view that there might not be ‘true’ intimacy. My **thesis** is that the latter scenario holds.

The path that I took from the first draft to my new thesis was more tortuous than it should have been, considering that the idea of comparing ‘authenticity’ and ‘intimacy’ was mentioned explicitly during the conference. It was a grand tour of sex, morality, staged intimacy, MacCannell’s anti-Boorstin attitude, and his neutrality towards the tourist (in contrast to Boorstin).

Through writing this essay, I think I have gained insights on some elements of MacCannell’s essay, just about enough to piece together to form an argument. The components of my essay are not as strong as I would like them to be, and I can see some strong counterarguments to my points, especially towards the end. At times I feel that I don’t quite have the final, ‘correct’ form of the thesis statement (though I must be close), and that I am tweaking the thesis statement and the argument to the last minute.

Given the time to think deeper, I would like to think more deeply about my thesis, and examine the term ‘social solidarity’ that MacCannell uses and its links to intimacy. But perhaps I have already spent too long reading MacCannell.