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'Dark Tourism' and the 'Kitschification' of 9/11

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Abstract:

This paper aims to interrogate the framing of New York's Ground Zero as a 'dark tourist' destination, with particular reference to the entanglement of notions of kitsch in academic discussions of the events of September 11th 2001. What makes Ground Zero contentious, even scandalous, for many scholars is the presence of a conspicuous commodity culture around the site in the form of tourist souvenirs, leading to accusations of kitschification of memory and the constitution of visitors as 'tourists of history'. Drawing upon theoretical ideas of Jacques Ranciere, Bruno Latour and W. J. T. Mitchell around image politics, the alignment of kitsch with the figure of the tourist will be questioned, along with the conviction that the so-called 'teddy-bearification' of 9/11 threatens the formation of dangerous political subjectivities. In attempting to rid the debates of their default settings, and reliance on essentialist notions of kitsch, it is hoped that that the way will be cleared for the sociological, ethnographic and empirical work necessary to considering the cultural and political significance of the Ground Zero souvenir economy.

Keywords:

Introduction

The emergence of dark tourist studies as an academic field of enquiry ostensibly marks a shift, both in the motivations of tourists and in the marketing and promotional strategies of tour operators, to include sites of death and disaster as destinations and visitor attractions (Foley, 2000; Bowman and Pezzullo, 2010). While scholars such Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone (2008, 2009) are keen to point out the long history of fascination with tragic events and their locations, it is generally accepted that the phenomenon of dark tourism is expanding and has been since the late 1990s. The study of dark tourism starts with this expansion and attempts to gain some cultural, political and social understanding of what has been seen stereotypically as the exchange of 'Sun, Surf and Sex' for death, disaster and atrocity (Bowman and Pezzullo, 2010: 188). The analysis of a perceived tourist appetite for 'dark' experiences, thus, forms a central concern of dark tourist studies, alongside questions of ethics (especially the tension between education and commercialisation), marketing and promotion, interpretation and site management (Sharpley and Stone, 2009). With this, the morality of dark tourism has been subjected to extensive interrogation: the media image of 'bus-loads' of tourists flocking to local and global sites of murder and disaster has occasioned a good deal of commentary both affirmative and critical (Stone, 2009: 58).

Not surprisingly, New York's Ground Zero has attracted a good deal of 'moral criticism' (Stone, 2009: 58) and has been constituted as the quintessential dark tourist destination (Joly, 2010; Smith, et al. 2010; Sharpley and Stone, 2009; Walter, 2009; Sturken, 2007). For example, Sharpley and Stone (2009: 5), referring to the doubling of visitor numbers following the attack on the World Trade Center as evidence of 'a greater willingness or desire on the part of tourists to visit dark attractions', implicate the site as an exemplary instance of many of the ethical contradictions of dark tourism. The viewing platform, for instance, is said to allow 'casual or even voyeuristic visitors to stand alongside those mourning the loss of loved ones' (ibid: 8), blurring divisions between public and private grief but also casting aspersions on the motivations of New York tourists who are typically cast as gazing and gawking at a spectacle (see also Lisle, 2004; Stone, 2006).

What sets Ground Zero immediately apart from other destinations, though, is the presence of a conspicuous commodity culture around the site, resulting in what David Simpson has labelled a 'visibly commodified national mourning' (Simpson, 2006: 107). Moral objections to what has been named 'September 11 World' (Blair, 2002 cited in Stone, 2009) coalesce around the production and consumption of 9/11 souvenirs:

> numerous street vendors "selling trinkets that run the gamut of taste" (Vega, 2002); souvenirs on sale rang[ing] from framed photographs of the burning towers to Osama Bin Laden toilet paper, his picture printed on each square (Sharpley and Stone, 2009: 5)

The souvenir economy serves to place Ground Zero as a paradigmatic example of the extreme commodification of death and tragedy. Viewed as profiteering, cynical opportunism or else as an unashamed return to normal/business as usual (Blair, 2002), the pronounced manifestation of tourist commerce marks the World Trade Center as a singularly dark destination in ethical terms.

By the same token, a dramatic failure of taste is seen to accompany the commercial exploitation of the disaster, the short-hand for which is kitsch; the problem of commodification is, in many ways, subordinated to that of aestheticisation in the majority of critical considerations of World Trade Center postcards and snowglobes. Sharpley and Stone cite Marita Sturken's work (2007) as evidence of what they see as the kitschification of the events of 9/11:

> Sturken highlights Ground Zero and its commodification for the (grief) tourist and singles out tourist souvenirs as a way of perpetuating kitsch forms of commemoration and interpretation. These include branded mass-produced objects such as cuddly toys, fridge magnets, key-fobs, badges, caps and book-markers (2009: 121)

So, not only is the process of national mourning perceived to be dominated by the commodity, it is inundated by the worst of all commodities, to the point that profiteering seems the very least of it: the defining characteristic – the hallmark – of the offence of 9/11 souvenirs could be said to be Hallmark.™ Writer Philip Roth's reaction puts it plainly; considering the potential for an appropriate literary response he states:

> September 11 is not something that I can draw on on [sic] an imaginative level. The only story that I can take from it is the kitsch in all its horror – not the horror of what happened, but the great distortion of what happened. It's almost embarrassing, the kitschification of 3,000 people's deaths. (Turlin, 2002 cited in Holliday and Potts, 2012: 207)

For Roth, little is left available to the literary imagination beyond the aesthetic disaster that constitutes the event's memorialisation (Holliday and Potts, 2012).

The implications of this collapse in taste are far-reaching. Sturken predicts a potential political disaster: the 'teddy-bearification' of 9/11, the development of a kitsch 'comfort culture', she argues, operates to 'smooth over tragedy… constitut[ing] a kind of erasure of the effects of violence' (2007: 217). Worse, such teddy-bearified memories threaten the formation of new political subjectivities: dubious aesthetics beget dubious politics. As experiences of collective memory and trauma are refracted through souvenirs, history itself is said to transmute into a visitor attraction: 'a spectacle of grief' usurps collective mourning culminating in what Sturken terms the 'tourism of history' (ibid: 4). Experienced as a tourist (i.e. 'once or twice removed, a mediated and re-enacted experience' (ibid: 9), the event fades into edutainment and 'the purchasing of souvenirs' substitutes for any understanding of 'the contexts of volatile world politics that produced the attacks of 9/11' (ibid: 10). The 'mode of the tourist', further, is analogous to that of the uncritical American citizen who is lured into a false sense of security by kitsch souvenirs; Sturken elaborates:

> Thus, an American public can aquiesce to its government's aggressive political and military policies, such as the war in Iraq, when that public is constantly reassured by the comfort offered by the consumption of patriotic objects, comfort commodities and security consumerism' (6)

Working in deadly partnership with US foreign and military policy, the 9/11 souvenir functions to enclose the consumer within a fantasy realm, effectively screening out political realities and ensuring thoughtless complicity with state aggression.

More seriously, the potential for thoughtless political acquiescence that Sturken detects as part of the structure of 9/11 souvenirs takes on sinister significance when considered historically. Kitsch comfort culture conjures the spectre of Hitler: 'The Nazis were particularly adept at deploying kitsch to create a sense of shared national sentiment and kitsch is a key element in superficial symbols of national unity' (2007: 22). Karen Engle, likewise, sees the formation of reactionary political community in her study of souvenir 9/11 t-shirts. Souvenir hunters are seen to ingest 'the experience of trauma…[as] a fashion statement. Something anyone can put on.' (2007: 76) Such 'melancholic incorporation' of the collapse of the World Trade Center she argues, results in the most ominous self/other relations: 'Mourning translates into sentiment, which translates into kitsch communitarianism and produces a fascist drive to annihilate those outside the group.' (ibid: 78, my emphasis) Souvenir t-shirts are, then, seen to be productive of a 'rhetoric of belonging' which abjects 'an evil "other"' (ibid) resulting in abominable politics. Hal Foster's consideration of what he terms 'Bush kitsch', similarly, invokes both Nazi and Stalinist associations: 'after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, aspects of "totalitarian kitsch" have returned in American

society' (Foster, 2005: 30). Yellow ribbon stickers, stars and stripes lapel badges and vehicle flags, together with FDNY and NYPD baseball caps serve both to harness Republican community and, simultaneously, to '"curtain off" shit and death' (ibid). Foster continues:

> For in lieu of images of flag-draped coffins, let alone of blown-apart bodies, we get these [yellow] bows inveigling our support – which, of course, is less for 'our troops' than for this administration, whose adventures are not exactly in the troops' best interests. Seen from this jaundiced point of view, the bows begin to seem more like collars that bind us sentimentally to the imperial project. (ibid)

The affective pull of Bush kitsch is engineered, in tried and tested authoritarian style, to justify conflict; by mobilising public feeling via sentimental artefacts and symbols, kitsch is construed as part of the armoury of neo-conservative warfare.

The selling of 9/11 (Heller, 2005) is beyond doubt; a substantial commodity culture is discernable at both around the physical location of the former World Trade Center and off-site at Web-based retail outlets (Marcoux and Legoux, 2005). What is subject to question, though, is the certainty with which the identification of kitsch at the scene of the disaster is politically conclusive: of mindless patriotism or of incipient fascism. In Sturken's estimation, for instance, kitsch is 'prepackaged sentiment' (26) and thus a 'circumscribed object' (13) and so 'dictates particular kinds of sentimental responses and emotional registers' (21). The imagined pre-formatting of kitsch with stock responses frustrates Sturken's promised sociological exploration of the tourist subject by locking analysis within tautologous and self-reinforcing circuits of belief and, by extension, hobbling any productive discussion of 'how various sentiments mobilize certain political trajectories' (Staiger et al., 2010: 2).

What is more, the problem of kitschification at Ground Zero is identified as one with a particular constituency: tourists and those, as Sturken would see it, in tourist 'mode' (the passive, the distanced, the uncritical). The tourist has long been implicated as a generator of kitsch: from being accused, en masse, of turning 'indigenous art forms into tourist kitsch' (Urry, 2002: 8) to transforming the landscape via 'faulty interpretation' into a picture postcard (Dorfles, 1969: 259). In the context of dark tourism, however, kitschification is rendered a positively perverse process. As Bowen and Pezzullo have argued so-called 'dark tourists' are implicated in allegations 'that there is something disturbing, troubling, suspicious, weird, morbid, or perverse about them' (190). The presence of kitsch at 'dark' sites risks the 'the kitschification of dark tourism' (Stone, 2010: 85), that is, the trivialisation and distortion of what is already a doubtful enterprise (see also Stone and Sharpley, 2009). Visitors to Ground Zero stand accused, potentially, of a range of crimes from voyeurism, at the milder end of the continuum, to neo-fascist imperialism. Just as the unexamined term 'dark' tends to introduce effects into the discourse of dark tourism (Bowen and Pezzullo, 2010) the uncritical appropriation of kitsch imports considerable baggage into commentary around Ground Zero. In the same way that Bowen and Pezzullo (2010: 187) ask 'what is so "dark" about dark tourism?' it is, therefore, necessary to ask 'what is so "kitsch" about 9/11 kitsch'?

In order to disturb the default settings that accrue with kitsch and, specifically, with its presence at the scene at Ground Zero, it is necessary to revisit key episodes in its history, in particular its association with totalitarianism and commodity culture. Equally, some theoretical elaboration is called for, principally around image politics and the spectacle. Here the combined work of Jacques Ranciere (2004, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d), Bruno Latour (2011) and W.J.T. Mitchell (2006) around images is crucial in resisting the hyperbole that infects the debate around Ground Zero souvenirs. For Ranciere, the projection of a mass public inveigled by commodities would offer evidence not of the threat of fascism but rather of a 'division of the sensible' designed to bind a 'community of sense', that is: 'a certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility.'(2009a: 31). In the context of 9/11 commodities, such a division organises community along the lines of the knowing, acting, politically astute critic, on the one hand, and the mindless-consumer-patriot, on the other (Holliday and Potts, 2012).

For Ranciere, the belief that particular forms deliver – automatically, reliably – particular politics is mistaken: specifically, the 'idea that links political subjectivity to a certain form' (2006: 29). In place of a faith in formalism, Ranciere asks '…what ties "aesthetics" to "politics"' (2006: 20), or rather how do aesthetic practices connect to political practices. Aesthetics do not do things by themselves, they are mobilised by particular social agents in social situations; connections between art and politics or commodities and politics are configured, as Ranciere notes: 'A configuration of sense is an effective form of linkage between perceptions, discourses and decisions [which] creates a specific form of commonsense defining what can be seen, said, and done' (2009b: 120). In other words, and in specific application to kitsch, there are no appearances as such, that is, aesthetic essences that produce determinable responses, only histories of appearances that generate unpredictable aesthetic experiences. Aesthetics are hitched to and detached from political arrangements in complex ways. The idea that kitsch aesthetics guarantee any politics, or can secure any permanent contract between particular forms of visibility and political outcome, hence, is an illusion.

Both Latour and Mitchell would be suspicious of what amounts to a relentlessly negative version of ideology critique, which, if dramatised, would sound something like this:

> I see what you cannot
> I think, you gaze
> I reflect, you are lost
> You need rescuing from what engulfs you

Latour puts it bluntly: 'Either you are cynically pulling the strings or you are being had' (2011: 7). By disabling such divisions the aim is, then, to allow a more productive conversation about the souvenir economy at Ground Zero and other disaster sites a chance to develop. As it stands, debate is frustrated, indeed short-circuited, by the idea that kitsch imprints its logic directly into the souls of a certain class of consumer (setting up a fatal complicity between producers and consumers of kitsch) and that this imprint delivers a stable – and terrifying – set of political effects (usually configured as fascistic or at least totalitarian). With this, the over-

determination of the spectacle and the kitsch commodity needs attention to allow new directions for critique 'for those who are tired of reading cultural objects in order to decide if they (or the emotions they produce) are good or bad for politics' (Staiger et al. 2010: 6).

Given that the privileged marker of the kitschification of the disaster is the souvenir, it is essential to take stock of the souvenir stall in less abstract terms than is suggested by notions of 'the commodity' or even 'the souvenir'. What becomes clear once the souvenir is singularised – encountered as specific products – is the range of responses that become available, in contradistinction to the predeterminations imagined by kitsch critics. At the same time, the advent of customisation platforms such as CafePress and Zazzle has allowed a new generation of consumer-driven commodity production to flourish. As a result, many of the stock responses to consumer culture need to be adjusted beyond notions of a cynical culture industry (Adorno, 2001). As it will become clear, some of the more troubling 9/11 objects can be found hosted by print-on-demand, customisation sites. The question of how to deal with these objects critically has to move beyond any strict division between producers and consumers and to be mindful of the specific manner of their production and consumption.

Kitsch, totalitarianism and commodity culture

The standard position on kitsch can be traced to relatively few sources: Gillo Dorfles' Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste (1968) together with Milan Kundera's literary meditations in The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1985) tend to operate as authoritative viewpoints, both characterising kitsch as determined by a structure of deception. Dorfles laments the prevalence of funerary kitsch for its disavowal of death: 'Today, death is a candied affair, swamped in sentiment and pathos. We have death disguised as life; death concealed, adulterated and masked…. Death…is now a counterfeit travesty' (1968: 135). Kundera's distillation of kitsch as a 'folding screen to curtain off death' (1985: 253), likewise, establishes denial as its functional and defining feature.

The trope of the screen reverberates through discussions of totalitarian kitsch. From National Socialist confidence in the theatre of the spectacle (the work of Leni Riefenstal) to Socialist Realist painting (Boris Vladimirski's Roses for Stalin), the idea of backstage atrocity veiled by romanticised, nationalistic images is the accepted trademark of totalitarian aesthetics (Friedlander, 1984; Barron, 1991; Groys 2005). Designed to extinguish the very possibility of critique and dissent, totalitarian kitsch is seen to hail its subjects with mythic portraits that are dazzling – indeed blinding – and so is ideological in the Althusserian sense of representing an 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (2006: 109). For Kundera's character Sabina, whose deliberations on kitsch are directed toward totalitarianism, the May Day parade is the kitsch occasion par excellence, with its 'idiotic tautology ('Long live life!'), which attracted people indifferent to the theses of Communism to the Communist parade' (1985: 243). The 'denial of shit', kitsch thus serves to abject political dissent: 'we can regard the gulag as a septic tank used by kitsch to dispose of its refuse' (1985: 245) and to secure agreement via the aestheticisation (i.e. disguise) of politics.

At the same time as curtaining off the real (and, crucially, disavowing barbarism) totalitarian kitsch engineers ersatz emotional responses on the part of its subjects via its sentimentalised regime of images. Sabina, pondering the thoughts of a Communist senator looking down on the parade, surmises:

> Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says:
> how nice to see children running on the grass!
> The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!
> It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. (1985: 244)

The copy of authentic feeling, the second tear reproduces the hollow structure of the kitsch object; kitsch sentimentality (marked by one tear too many) is, at once, too much and not enough emotion (Holliday and Potts, 2012).

The duplicitous anatomy of totalitarian aesthetics continues into conceptions of the kitsch commodity. If the commodity form is itself seen, via the fetish, as underhand (in Marxist terms as withholding the grubby facts of its production), the kitsch commodity is doubly devious. Matei Calinescu identifies an invidious level of 'deception and self-deception' in kitsch aesthetics:

> Seen as a lie, a kitsch work implies a close relationship and even a collaboration of sorts between the kitsch-artist and the kitsch-man. The latter wants to be 'beautifully' lied to and the former is willing to play the game in exchange for financial gain … The temptation to believe the aesthetic lie of kitsch is a sign of either undeveloped or largely atrophied critical sense. Mental passivity and spiritual laziness characterize the amazingly undemanding lover of kitsch. (1987: 229)

By allowing himself to be governed by a cynical kitsch-culture industry, and wallowing in passivity by failing to develop his critical faculties, so-called 'kitsch-man' is complicit in his own bankrupt destiny. In short, those in thrall to kitsch are the worst of all consumers: unthinking and incapable of thought, passive, easily led, deluded and, as a consequence, politically pliable.

To return to Ground Zero, the presence of kitsch at the site of the disaster is read as a type of revisionism (Holliday and Potts, 2012). As with Foster's Bush kitsch (to recall, yellow ribbons designed to 'curtain off' the war dead), the trope of the screen recurs through many objections to 9/11 souvenirs. Kitschification prompts what Christopher Hitchens has termed 'flagification' (2003: n.p.), an 'enfeebling' distraction from the necessary forebearance that ought to mark the event: 'stoicism, made up out of absolute, cold hatred and contempt for the aggressors, and complete determination that their defeat will be utter and shameful.' Daniel Harris makes the point vividly: 'America hid from the harsh realities of the attack behind a maudlin curtain of heavenly firemen and weeping angels' (2002: n.p.) Eliciting a profound dereliction of duty – distracted by the comfort of kitsch we fail as witnesses to the catastrophe – the power of the souvenir is such that we are at risk of succumbing to 'Pavlovian reactions…our intellectual independence shot down by salvos of patriotic kitsch' (ibid).

Iconoclasm and the limits of ideology critique

The construal of kitsch as a partition to the real establishes critical action as ineluctably iconoclastic. Like Dorothy's dog Toto, who pulls back the curtain to reveal the mechanical workings of the Wizard of Oz's projected authority, the critic must tear down the partition to show the truth behind kitsch. Kundera makes this role plain in The Unbearable Lightness of Being: 'the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions. A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it' (1985: 247, my emphasis). For Ranciere, however, the idea of a hidden truth, which can only be revealed by a privileged group, either of intellectuals or an elite vanguard, institutes a more fundamental partition, one that is, ultimately, anti-democratic. One of the primary divisions that consume his attention regards intelligence itself: between 'one deemed capable of difficult thought and the other not' (Tanke, 2011: 3). The process of dividing and distributing the sensible world (partage) aims toward axiomatic results: the world is as it appears. Ranciere explains:

> The distribution of the sensible thus produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made or done. (2004: 85)

With this, Ranciere prioritises the spectacle as an object of attention, arguing that it functions as one of the most foundational discourses in the distribution of the sensible – originating with Plato's Allegory of the Cave – in terms of orchestrating a division between activity and passivity. Joseph Tanke summarises: 'At bottom, the voice that denounces the all-consuming power of the consumer society is the same as that which warned us of the images on the cave wall' (2011: 92). Partitioning truth from mere images, active citizens from passive spectators, authenticity from alienation, knowledge from illusion, immersion from reflection, the notion of the spectacle represents an intractable mechanism of prejudice for Ranciere; such oppositions function, consequently, as 'embodied allegories of inequality' (cited in Tanke, 2011: 92). The sensible alignment of the spectacle to passivity and its inversion to action, then, renders critique an irresistible matter of iconoclasm. Those endowed with clear vision (critics) have no other option than to show those captivated by the spectacle (the mass of spectators) the error of their ways: the illusion must be dissipated and the philosopher-king must lead the spellbound out of the cave.

As well as setting up a structural inequality between those who see and those incapable of seeing, iconoclasts betray a fear of images to the point that all are distrusted – either they lie or gloss over the truth or else induce passivity. What Ranciere terms 'the intolerability of the image' (2009d) in left-critical discourse, thus, establishes an aesthetic orthodoxy, in that the only trustworthy image is one that is broken, and better, shattered by iconoclastic critical action. Iconoclasts not only produce images, then, albeit via 'a hand with a hammer' (Latour, 71), they live in fear even of those images lest they too lead us astray. Mitchell would argue that the sin is one of idolatry, relating to the production of graven images:

> Taken literally, the implication is that there is a "slippery slope" principle at work: if you start making images, it is inevitable that they will, as we say,

"take on a life of their own", become idols, take the place of God and thereby become offensive (2006: 134)

So, what is feared is the proliferation of images together with the idea that this unbridled life will foster idolatrous behaviour: the worship of fetishes, which substitutes for Truth. Latour highlights the history of modern art as a extended trial against image-making, one that has generated ' a fabulous large-scale experiment in nihilism…a deleterious an-iconic inferno' (2011: 76). Aside from questioning the virtue of iconoclasm as the 'highest piety in intellectual circles' (2011: 69), Latour takes the intensity of the image wars as evidence of a belief 'in belief' (2001: 84) on the part of image breakers: iconoclasts project images as they frantically seek to seek and destroy the images of their opponents. Iconoclasm, in the words of Mitchell, 'is not just a belief structure but a structure of beliefs a*bout other people's beliefs'* (2006: 20). The job of the critic becomes reduced to 'the endless task of unmasking fetishes' (Ranciere,), an irredeemably negative, melancholic enterprise. Iconoclasts have little available to them beyond despair and the exhausting, unremitting task of rooting out image-worship.

Bruno Latour proposes the neologism 'iconoclash' (2011: 68) as a way out of the serial violence and despondency of iconoclasm. Iconoclash refuses the distribution of knowledge and ignorance, science and belief, civilisation and savagery by insisting upon a more tentative approach to images and objects. Rather than approaching criticism with a hammer, Latour suggests 'a cautious and careful hand, with palm turned as if to catch, elicit, educe, welcome, generate, entertain, maintain or collect truth and sanctity' (72). The critic would be better off for assuming an altogether more modest task:

> With iconoclasm one knows what the act of breaking represents…. For iconoclash, one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive (68)

In short, iconoclash enables a shift from the destruction of the image to its contemplation by installing a hesitation into the proceedings, a moment's pause to allow for the possibility of debate rather than denunciation. Mitchell offers a corresponding critical approach, which he codes as 'yielding' (82) and likens, borrowing from Erwin Panovsky, to the encounter with an acquaintance 'who greets [one] on the street by removing his hat' (48). Far from being mere urbane civility, the idea of a more gracious approach is to allow a space, precisely, for criticism: to ask 'what do pictures want?' rather than to indiscriminately set about destroying them (which is unfailingly counter-productive). Mitchell imagines the possibility of a blockbuster 'Offending Images' exhibition, the prime purpose of which would be to 'describe and analyse the multifarious modes of offensiveness, and to diagnose the social forces that gave rise to them' (143). In place of censure and castigation, then, a more yielding critical method would involve a consideration of the constitution of bad objects together with how, why, and, crucially, who they offend. Mitchell's insistence on the idea of offending rather than offensive images places the emphasis on the perpetration – by particular, situated perpetrators – of offence in contradistinction to the belief that certain images are intrinsically offensive.

From kitsch! to kitsch?

What all of this means for a consideration of Ground Zero kitsch is, first, the idea of pure visibility must be abandoned. To recall, Simpson's appeal to a 'visibly commodified national mourning' is in itself insignificant, as is Walter's (2009: 50) identification of Ground Zero as the 'most visible site of dark tourism'. Rather than subscribe to the belief in the hyper-visibility of kitsch – its gaudy loudness – and in turn, in recognisability and automatic offensiveness, Ranciere would ask, to whom are these objects offensive and, crucially, how is the offence constituted. In short, what is the anatomy of the scandal of 9/11 kitsch? As it stands, kitsch is itself imagined as self-identical term – like Las Vegas, it is perceived as visible from space – and disaster kitsch is taken to represent an affront that needs no explanation beyond apprehending its consumers, attempting to lead them away from the spectacle, and lapsing into deeply melancholic, even apocalyptic, conclusions.

It would be helpful to take a closer look at of some of the offending objects in question, not least in order to move away decisively from the abstractions imposed by notions of the commodity. As it will become clear, the 'commodification' that is evident around Ground Zero both as a location and as an event is or ought to be considered the beginning of the story (rather than the end of days). Taking stock of particular objects is, therefore, intended to initiate a conversation about what it might mean to 'exit through the gift shop' (Banksy, 2010).

The array of souvenirs available for sale at Ground Zero is complicated, further, by a new breed of object forged in the crucible of web-based, interactive product personalisation. A close relative of Youtube and other dealers in user-generated content (UGC), mass customisation (MC) platforms such as Moonpig, MyMuesli, Threadless, Zazzle, Lulu, Spreadshirt, Zyrra and CaféPress allow users to specify preferences, tailor apparel from bras to t-shirts, upload their own designs and to create personalised gifts (Kumar et al., 2008). MC operations Zazzle and Cafepress, for instance, offer the ultimate just-in-time, pop-up business model in that production is organised around a print-on-demand service. Customers can either upload their own designs or purchase the work of other customer/designers or set up their own retail outlet without incurring any start-up, logistical or customer service costs. What is provided is the configuration toolkit to design custom logos and images together with a vast array of blank canvases upon which to print: everything from t-shirts and badges to thermos flasks and gym bags. The growth of mass customisation, simultaneously, has provided expansion for opportunities to materialise bigotry and hatred. Arguably, some of the most objectionable 9/11 items can be found on CaféPress including a series of objects in celebration of waterboarding (a form of torture designed to simulate drowning, deployed against detainees in the 'War on Terror', euphemistically known as a 'coercive interrogation' technique [Forsythe, 2011: 83]) As tempting as it is to recoil from these things, the composition of their offensiveness is in urgent need of delineation, especially given the self-belief of MC businesses: as merely responding to customer needs, and giving them what they want, when they want it (Cafepress Youtube).[i] From this, are we as critics simply to confirm the view that these souvenirs are the material manifestations of hatred – Have it Your Way, racists! – or might there be other explanations?

Among my [9/11] souvenirs

The briefest of surveys easily confirms a substantial patriotic souvenir economy surrounding Ground Zero. Of the twelve available 9/11 memorial t-shirts on the NYC Webstore, for instance, ten are emblazoned with flags, five of which reference the armed forces. Not surprisingly, the exemplary form of patriotic souvenir bears some version of the stars and stripes. On the day of the disaster, Walmart is reported to have sold 116,000 flags and as Jennifer Scanlon (2005) has noted, the U.S. flag materialised, among other things, as t-shirts, car stickers, air fresheners, registration plates, seat covers, playing cards, paperweights, key rings, hair scrunchies, braces, frisbees, and golf balls. A world of secondary production has flourished in the past decade too: eBay hosts a brisk trade in commemorative 9/11 memorabilia: from twin towers earrings to reproduction dollar bills to poker chips 'in honor of our American heroes' (Broderick and Gibson, 2005) bearing witness to a burgeoning Ground Zero collector's market.

The anniversary of the attack has occasioned some new items, together with new technologies that were little more than the twinkling in designer's eyes: commemorative iPad or iPhone cover, anyone? Or what about a Firefighter Never Forget laptop speaker? Aside from the expected array of t-shirts, baseball caps, mugs, bumper stickers and collector's coins, a niche range of dog apparel has been produced (the commodification of dog ownership is another story), including designs featuring slogans such as: '9/11 was an inside job' and 'Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism since 1492'. For those without dogs there is everything from flip-flops to pyjamas to patriotic stadium blankets bearing messages spanning the sincere, the conspiratorial and the post-ironic. If street vendors and souvenir outlets around the site continue to sell the traditional range of souvenirs, to the continued consternation of many, then the recent generation of novelties is no less controversial.

The universe of what could be termed Osamakitsch has long been buoyant, not to say opportunistic, dealing in objects such as piñatas, toilet paper ('wipe number 2 with [public enemy] number 1!'), cigarette lighters and condoms via pop-up retail sites complete with combative domain names. A brief sample includes: blowshitup.com, kissmyUSbutt.com, f-osama.com, nukeafghanistan.net, osamayomama.com, killosama.com, and fuqafghanistan.com. The coincidence of Bin Laden's killing with the 10th anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks has since converged in a range of bellicose souvenirs categorised under the heading of 5/1/11, which make previous lines appear positively naïve. CaféPress, for instance, promotes over one hundred items of underwear including 'Osama Sleeps with the Fishes' Boxer Shorts and '5/1/11 9/11 Avenged Classic Thongs' together with one of the more unfathomable and repellent categories for new parents: Al Qaeda baby clothing. Equally jawdropping is the line in 5/1/11 and 9/11 Christmas stockings (including 'Ding Dong Osama's Dead' and 'Obama whacked Osama' both available in customised felt).

It is more than easy to see these commodities as a horrorshow. Conversely, it is a strenuous undertaking not to see many of them as deeply offensive: CafePress's range of Waterboarding Gifts (featuring Waterboarding Works! maternity t-shirts, 'I ▣ Waterboarding' mugs, not to mention 'Property of Guantanamo Bay Waterboarding Team' baby bibs and blankets) is, at the risk of understatement, obnoxious. What is less easy to see, however, is what might be said beyond expressions of incredulity and

disgust. While Sturken is right to be suspicious of indiscriminate arguments around creative consumption when it comes to Ground Zero souvenirs – any attempt to simply redeem these items in the name of consumer 'agency' and creativity leads into morally reprehensible territory – it is not enough to bind these objects as examples of kitsch or as evidence of something called kitschification.

Latour would urge against a religious, graven-images type of response to this idol-shop of horrors: instead of smashing its constituent objects in a paroxysm of ideology critique, he would suggest treating them as a 'cabinet of curiosities' (77). As with Mitchell's imagined blockbuster exhibition, the intention would be to bring them into the space of criticism (that is, iconoclash) and, above all, to move past 'the cycle of fascination, repulsion, destruction and atonement, which is generated by forbidden-image worship' (that is, iconoclasm) (70). Beginning with the constitution of their objectionable qualities, then, what is to be made of 360 items of waterboarding merchandise available to order on CaféPress? What is the anatomy of their offensiveness?

Distinguishing between pictures and images, Mitchell presents a means of considering the notion of the image, offensive and otherwise, that is pertinent to thinking about kitsch and kitschification: 'You can hang the picture on the wall but you cannot hang an image on the wall. An image is what comes off the picture.' (84). The picture thus constitutes the material support for the image and the image is a somewhat ghostly and insubstantial notion that can only be encountered in its material manifestation as a picture. The picture/image distinction works also for sculpture; images can manifest as three-dimensional objects and assume myriad shapes and forms. What this means is that, first, images have social lives: they are capable of detaching themselves from pictorial support and finding – potentially limitless – new hosts and, second, that the power of images is such that, even if pictures can be slashed, burned or vandalised, the 'image cannot be destroyed' (84).

Sturken's objection to the kitschification of the US flag offers an example of an image detaching itself and taking up a profane new residence:

> the flag itself has taken on new dimensions of kitsch in its proliferation in consumer products in times of crisis; it has been used to sell pizza, is worn as a t-shirt, and in one of its most kitsch manifestations, was worn by Bono inside his jacket as he sang at the January 2002 Superbowl halftime show while the names of the 9/11 dead scrolled behind him on the massive stage. (2007: 57)

What is implied here is that the lining of the lead singer of U2's jacket and a pizza box offer unworthy pictorial support for the stars and stripes image. Similarly, the materialisation of the flag as, say, a golf ball or hair clip or a pair of flip-flops is viewable as a pictorial offence: the profligate dispersal of the flag's image across the debased landscape of consumer culture. Where Sturken sees the corruption of an image, however, Mitchell would see strength: the continued survival of images, their ability to thrive in multiple forms is the marker of success. In this respect, the image is a form of species; viewing images in quasi-biological terms helps to resist iconoclastic urges:

> While we can recognise beautiful, interesting, or novel specimens, our main job is not to engage in value judgements but to try to explain why things are the way they are, why species appear in the world, what they do and mean and why they change over time….A species is neither good nor bad: it simply is…(86)

Looking at the 'waterboarding' series of objects, and, importantly, to the facts of their creation, it is evident that a similar offence is being perpetrated. Refracted through Mitchell's picture/image framework, custom merchandising platforms provide a series of vacant forms – pictures – capable of hosting any image. CaféPress makes an extensive range of forms available including: posters, t-shirts, sweatshirts, hoodies, mugs, calendars, maternity clothing, hats, baby clothes, teddy bears, blankets, bibs, briefs, boxer shorts, thongs, bags, dog bowls, water bottles, beer steins, thermos flasks, badges, fridge magnets, aprons, placemats, coasters, ornaments, Flip Mino and iPhone covers. Users then materialise their chosen or designed images by uploading and affixing them onto ready-made artefacts. This does not make the resulting objects any less troubling but it goes some way to explaining how, with the click of a mouse, the image of waterboarding can find its way onto a baby's cot blanket or teddy bear's t-shirt (there are 32 waterboarding bears on the site). A result of the opportunistic transfer of image to predetermined picture, these objects come into being via a catalytic process of promiscuous image bonding to a limited range of hosts and as such testify to the capricious nature of images. Given this, the question then becomes, what is the significance of the pictorial transfer of images? What difference does the material support make to the image?

For Mitchell, the control of images is beside the point: the genie has long escaped the bottle ('images have been offending people since the beginning') and, more to the point, 'images are not words', i.e. they are always excessive and 'are always saying (or showing) something more than any verbal message can capture' (132). Put simply, the image is context-dependent, as is its potential offensiveness; distilled to a single term, the image is a situation. A brief detour by way of an assemblage taken from conceptual artist Fred Wilson's 1992 project Mining the Museum should help to make this clear.

A groundbreaking event in museology, Mining the Museum consisted of radically rearranged artefacts and exhibits belonging to the Maryland Historical Society. Wilson was at liberty to reorganise the permanent collection and the resulting installations worked to highlight the ways in which institutions and curators shape questions of history, truth and value. Item MTM010 'Metalwork', for instance, juxtaposed pieces from the museums silverware collection with slave shackles (see Foster, 1996: 27), calling attention to the indivisibility of slavery and imperial wealth. Throughout the installation Wilson demonstrates, actively and concretely, the way in which meaning is situational and contextual. Objects that appear self-contained and benign in their significance suddenly become charged when subject to rearrangement. 'Modes of Transportation, 1770-1910' offers a particularly sharp example with its simple placement of a Ku Klux Klan hood inside an antique perambulator (see Foster, 1996: 195). The resulting collision of symbols of childhood with racial hatred sparks new meanings: prejudice as a pedagogical project, which belies the myth of innocence and natural development; white supremacist children are made not born.

The shock of this particular section of Mining the Museum can be seen to speak to the shock of the 'waterboarding' baby outfits touted by CafePress. As a profane, mass culture cousin of 'Modes of Transportation', a 'Waterboarding Works!' baby blanket and matching hat, similarly, summons the vision of a child interpellated by hate speech but without the critical context of the museum space to mute the blow. Where Wilson's exhibit, comprising of museum objects, gives us the protection of historical distance, CafePress presents the prospect of active, suffocating bigotry. In answer to the question of the significance of the image's material support, it is evident here that it makes all the difference. An example of what Mitchell terms guilt 'by association' – 'with the wrong kinds of people, values, or materials' (131, my emphasis) – the image of waterboarding combined the materials of baby clothes produces an exceptionally toxic product.

The situation of the object, nevertheless, is incomplete, and while it might be enough for some of us (or possibly too much) that these products exist, it is a mistake to straightforwardly read off a politics or project a community solely on the basis of their existence. In other words, the circumstances of reception and consumption need to be accounted for in order to deal adequately with the matter of politics. In the case of mass-customised objects, their material existence is itself under question. As a print-on-demand service CafePress boasts how it carries thousands of items without actually stocking any of them beyond the blank forms that support user's designs. Waterboarding thermos flasks and beer steins, t-shirts and teddy bears must, therefore, be ordered in order to exist as material objects. As it stands, without reception or consumption they exist only as potentials – possible incitements to sadismasochism, as in the case of the 'Hot Ladies' "Waterboarding Makes Me Wet" vest – the hail of the object must be answered in order to enable its activation.

Even if purchases were made, and sales figures were gleaned, such information would tell us little about the social life (Appadurai) of the acquisitions; how are these things consumed? Further questions abound: How do they take up space in the everyday lives of consumers? What degree of irony is present in their design and consumption? How does irony inform or obfuscate a politics? What linkages can be identified between everyday use of what appear to be 'kitschy', dubious objects (seemingly indelibly bad for politics) and political participation?

To return to the question of dark tourism and the case of more run-of-the-mill souvenirs such as snowglobes, calendars and postcards, it should be evident that the critical practice of herding them into an enclosure labelled 'kitsch!' and, more, abjecting their consumers from politics by declaring them to be 'dark/grief/thano tourists' or 'tourists of history' frustrates an important debate. At the very least, what has been apprehended as 9/11 kitsch cannot be construed as speaking with one voice and would be better thought of, following Latour, as a 'cabinet of curiosities'. Then, if certain items are deemed to offend, the anatomy of the offence must be delineated rather than closed down in the name of kitschification or the spectacle. Wilson's museal interventions ought to remind us that, in Mitchell's words:

> The offensive character of an image is not written in stone but arises out of social interaction between a specific thing and communities that may themselves have varied and divided responses to the object (131)

Similarly, MC platforms can be used to produce counter-images. CafePress also hosts items that seem critical of the 'war on terror', for instance: 'Who Would Jesus

Torture?' mugs and t-shirts take issue with the pro-waterboarding stance, albeit with a heavy dose of post-irony.

By taking some of the more extreme objects from the outer limits of the universe of 9/11 souvenirs the point is to highlight the necessity of critique rather than censure and to insist upon consumers, or, in the case of mass-customisation, producer-consumers, being treated empirically and sociologically. It is one thing to trace the contours of a cultural and social imaginary as it manifests in material commodities and there is a great deal of value in such an approach: Neal Curtis's work on the 'Elite Force Aviator', George Bush action figure is exemplary in illuminating the increasing military-industrial deployment of the entertainment and cultural industries (2009). Likewise, Sturken's diagnosis of a kitsch comfort culture is compelling as a reading of the response-inviting structure of the FDNY teddy bear and its extended family of things. But it is another entirely to leap from the semiotic structure of the souvenir to the political sensibility of the consumer.

Despite the dominance of notions of kitsch and kitschification, the work of careful critique, nevertheless, is being done: The Selling of 9/11, for instance, includes a number of essays that map the reception and consumption of media images and material goods (most notable are: Trimarco and Depret, 2005; Spigel, 2005; Broderick and Gibson, 2005). C.E. Emmer's (2012) investigation into the on-line discussion of Dennis Madalone's viral music video, 'America We Stand as One,' combines empirical evidence of consumption with a deft consideration of the value of the notion of kitsch as a meaningful descriptor. Britta Knudsen's (2011) narratological consideration of Ground Zero tours details how visitors are interpellated by a combination of the site's design, material culture, media images, individualised witness testimony through participant observation. Joy Sather-Wagstaff challenges both the ahistorical framing of particular sites as dark tourist destinations and the idea of a morbid tourist gaze in her attentive ethnographic work on the World Trade Center site (2011)

In the meantime, so that this work is allowed to flourish, the perceived invitation of (what is perceived to be) a kitsch object – in Mitchell's terms what does it want? – needs to be offset with how it is met. The presence of kitsch does not amount, automatically, to kitschification – of either memory, or of culture or politics, and so the simple attribution of the term to groups of things, people and situations needs to be questioned. In short, 9/11 teddy bears may well want us to cuddle them but things seldom get exactly what they (might appear to) want.

(7948 words)

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