

# Giving the future form: Non-reflective and reflective uses of symbolic resources<sup>1</sup>

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## SUMMARY

Taking a Meadian standpoint, that mind is the spatial and temporal extension of the immediate environment, this paper examines how tourists in Ladakh, north India, use symbolic resources (especially books and films) to extend their environment and thus organise their actions and give the future form. Having illustrated some non-reflective uses of symbolic resources, I then provide some examples where tourists actively mediate the role of symbolic resources in constructing their environment. This leads to the question of how such reflective self-mediation arises. I propose one social mechanism, called short-circuiting, which can, in a microgenetic sense, lead tourists to reflect upon the symbolic resources they are using.

## INTRODUCTION

The research that I present is a continuation of work which I have been doing in conjunction with Tania Zittoun, Gerard Duveen, Charis Psaltis and Gabriel Ivinson (Zittoun *et al.*, 2004). In that work we distinguished between non-reflective and reflective uses of symbolic resources. In what follows, I want to use this distinction to articulate the non-reflective and reflective ways that symbolic resources are used to give the future form. And then in the later part of the paper, I will suggest one social mechanism through which such reflective use of symbolic resources arises.

G. H. Mead (1927) wrote that mind is the temporal and spatial extension of the present. Non-symbolic animals inhabit a spatially and temporally constrained present, or an immediate present, which is dominated by their perceptual field. But the environment of humans extends beyond the perceptual field, and the immediate manipulatory area: the human environment extends around corners and into possible futures. Our pasts and futures are symbolic creations that exist within the present, or rather, they are the temporal and spatial extension of the present. When we face a rupture, Mead wrote, we reconstruct the past in terms of that rupture, as a past that leads up to the rupture, and lead ourselves beyond the rupture by imagining possible futures. It is through this symbolic extension of the present that humans, facing a rupture, are able to reconstruct their paths of action, especially, to mediate their ongoing action from the standpoint of future goals and to take account of past experiences.

Before coming to Istanbul, I went to the *Lonely Planet* website to gather information about Turkey. Guidebooks are, perhaps, the modern exemplar of a symbolic resource, and the *Lonely Planet* publishes one of the most popular series of

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guidebooks. In the first line of their introduction to Turkey they wrote that the reader should abandon their “*Midnight Express*” stereotypes of Turkey. Having never been to Turkey before, I wanted to use the *Lonely Planet* to imagine what Turkey would be like, and perhaps non-reflectively I harboured images from the film *Midnight Express*. Films like *Midnight Express*, and guidebooks like the *Lonely Planet*, are examples of modern symbolic resources that we use to imagine ourselves *out* of the immediate present — to temporally and spatially extend our environment. These resources offer us a way to imagine not only the world, but also possible paths of action within that world. Using these resources we both lead or selves and are led into the future. Using the *Lonely Planet* guide, more than *Midnight Express*, I found my way here and have with me the appropriate artefacts for dealing with the climate, giving a presentation, and so on. These resources have both constrained my actions and enabled my actions.

In order to explore how we use symbolic resources, like books and films, to lead ourselves into the future, I will be using examples from my PhD work concerning tourists in Ladakh. I draw upon naturalistic group discussions, tourists’ photographs and ethnographic observations.

## LADAKH: “LITTLE TIBET”

Ladakh is in the northernmost part of India. It is situated north of the Himalaya, and just before the Karakorams. It is surrounded by Kashmir, Pakistan, China and Tibet. For tourists Ladakh is imagined as co-extensive with Tibet. Indeed the guidebooks often refer to Ladakh as “little Tibet.”

Historically the imagination of Ladakh and Tibet was unflattering. The first explorers and missionaries in this area described it as a barren wasteland, and the people as childlike (Bishop, 1989). However, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century these imperialist and Orientalist discourses (Said, 1978) became overlaid with more romantic images, which coincided with an increasingly negative representation of modernity.

Currently, in the mass media of occidental culture, the Tibetan Plateau has been imagined as a spiritual land of peaceful Buddhists, as a land of mountains and adventure, and an exotic and timeless land which is as yet untouched by modernity (Lopez, 1998; Dodin and Räther, 2001). All these aspects are evident in popular films like *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Himalaya*, which tell of long treks, traditional life against a backdrop of snowy peaks, deep gorges, snow drifts and fertile valleys.

Shangri-La is also often associated with Ladakh. Shangri-La was, until its recent ‘discovery’ in China, a fictional valley described by James Hilton in the book *Lost Horizon* written in 1933. In the book, Shangri-La is a deep fertile valley isolated in the Himalaya. At the bottom of the valley are Buddhist peasants, while above them, high up the side of the valley, is a semi-religious establishment. Here all that is good in Western culture, literature, science, and art, is being stored, so that when the modern world self-destructs, Shangri-La will, like Noah’s Arc, re-seed the world. Today the meaning of Shangri-La has shifted, and it is now used to signify the antithesis to modern culture. The *National Geographic*, for example, ran a cover

story on Ladakh entitled "Ladakh: the last Shangri-La" in which the modernisation of Ladakh is measured in terms of lost innocence and spirituality (Abercrombie, 1978).

If the reader thinks of a place he/she has not been to, maybe Tibet, the Amazon, Antarctica or Mars, what images come to mind? And where have these images come from? My point is that modern mass culture provides us, largely through the mass media, with a host of symbolic resources to imagine places we have never experienced. These mass mediated images fill out and expand our environment beyond the immediate present (Mead, 1936, chapter 18). Most tourists are in Ladakh for their first visit, yet they do not arrive there by accident: they are following a trail of images circulating in the mass media. Accordingly, tourists arrive in Ladakh looking for adventure, mountain peaks, spirituality and a people 'untouched' by modernity, i.e., the very representations that led them to Ladakh.

### NON-REFLECTIVE USE OF SYMBOLIC RESOURCES

Using these images of Ladakh, this spatial and temporal extension of the tourist's environment, tourists make pre-adaptations even before they have departed for Ladakh. Each pre-adaptation reveals a different facet of the imagination of what Ladakh will be: hiking boots and warm clothes for the mountains; water purification tablets and bed sheets for hygiene; cameras and camera film for the picturesque locals and landscape; bandages and medicines for potential accidents or health problems; sun cream for the burning sun. One interesting pre-adaptation, which is surprisingly common, is bringing pens and paper to distribute to children in the remote villages. This pre-adaptation reveals an expectation that Ladakh is undeveloped, and its people uneducated and thus in need of pens and paper. In the film *Seven Years in Tibet*, Brad Pitt brings modernity to the Dalai Lama, and tourists bringing pens and paper seem to echo this common motif. That tourists feel they need to bring so many supplies easily, and cheaply available in Ladakh, like medicines, camera film, sun cream and pens, betrays the coexistence of the older Orientalist representation in which Ladakh is positioned as "primitive" and without modern goods.

Once in Ladakh, the images, cultivated in the mass media, still organise tourists' actions by leading them to certain places where these images are likely to be actualised. This is particularly evident in the Ladakhi village of Lingshed. Lingshed is a village of about 200 local inhabitants, and yet it has over ten international aid agencies working there, a host of semi resident researchers, and in summer numerous tourists — far more foreigners than any other village, of equivalent size, in Ladakh. Why? The answer, I suggest, is because Lingshed is reputedly the most remote village in Ladakh. It is four days' walk from the nearest road. The foreigners who congregate in this village have led themselves there in search of the ideal image of remote Ladakh, which has been imagined with the help of symbolic resources.

Symbolic resources also play an important role in determining when the tourist has reached his/her goal. It is a problem for tourists to evaluate their experience, and films and books can be used as resources for determining exactly how spectacular a given experience is. When the expectation a tourist has coincides with his/her experience the usual reaction is to take a photograph. For example, one

English woman showed me a photograph of a Buddhist monastery 'perched' on a hill side, and when I asked her why she took the photograph she enthusiastically said:

They [Buddhist monasteries] look incredible, because I had a book on Ladakh, and it was all the pictures I had seen and now I was there!

The symbolic resource, the book she had seen, provides the criteria for this woman to judge her own experience of Ladakh — to know that when she took the photograph she was experiencing the 'real' thing, that she was in a place as exotic as depicted in the books she had seen. And so the symbolic resource confirms that she is a person who has had 'that' kind of experience, who has been there in 'that' kind of place. The monastery in the photograph was similar to the Dalai Lama's Potala Palace in Lhasa, which is featured in *Seven Years in Tibet*. The photograph also echoed the semi-religious establishment described in the book *Lost Horizon*.

A tourist from the USA showed me his photograph of a stone bridge across turquoise waters at the bottom of a steep gorge, and said:

That's a picture of the trail, going down into this gorge, and this bridge was at the bottom, [...] I took that picture for friends back home, they are going to ask me like, "So you walked through the Himalaya, were there photos like in the movie *Himalaya*?" For the most part there weren't cliff-hangers, but some were pretty extreme, so I kind of took this picture for the people back home, although this does not look terribly dangerous, it does look very raggedy and steep [...] great movie, I loved the scenery

This tourist was concerned about narrating his tour to his friends. He took the photograph because his experience was like the film, *Himalaya*, which his friends had seen. The film documents a group of distinctly 'traditional' Nepalese villagers on an arduous journey through dramatic landscapes involving turquoise waters, rock faces that are "raggedy and steep," and stone bridges. The photograph, then, through its association with the film, realises the adventurous aspect of touring the Himalayas, in part through the gaze of significant others. By taking a photograph of the bridge he crossed, this tourist is using the photograph to both confirm his experience and to claim the position of an adventurer in the ancient Himalaya. Looking at the photograph, the stone bridge strikes one as particularly 'un-modern.' There are many modern bridges in Ladakh, that the tourist chose to photograph this bridge again seems to betray a representation which positions Ladakh as 'primitive.'

The point I want to make, with the cases of these photographs, is that they reveal to us something about the images which led tourists to Ladakh. These photographs crystallise for each tourist what Ladakh 'should' be, and these images come not from Ladakh, but from the mass mediated imagination of Ladakh which the tourist participated in long before arriving in Ladakh. And this 'should' is a hybrid construction, which manifestly romanticises Ladakh, yet latently seems to echo imperialist and Orientalist discourses (Said, 1978).

## REFLECTIVE USE OF SYMBOLIC RESOURCES

Recall the first sentence of the *Lonely Planet* guide to Turkey, which I mentioned earlier, that the reader should abandon their “*Midnight Express*” stereotypes. This is an instance of reflecting upon tourists’ use of that film to construct Turkey. It is accusing the reader of having an ill constructed image of Turkey based on that film. The *Lonely Planet* is implicitly stating that it provides a better construction.

Equally tourists reflect upon symbolic resources. In fact, a large part of what I have presented so far, is not outside of tourist discourse. Tourists often talk about the role of books and films in constructing their experiences. They self-mockingly refer to their guidebooks as “my little Bible” or to the *Lonely Planet* as “the Bible.”

In terms of leading themselves into the future, tourists try to control the mediating effect of symbolic resources. For example, one tourist, that I met, said that he bought the *Rough Guide* instead of the *Lonely Planet* because “the *Rough Guide* doesn’t tell you what to think like the *Lonely Planet*.” While another said he did not have and did not use a guidebook because he saw them as constraining tourists’ experiences and blinding tourists to the “real” Ladakh.

Such reflective uses of symbolic resources are not limited to guidebooks. For example, the tourist who photographed the gorge, comparing it to the film *Himalaya*, had deliberately gone to see the film *Himalaya* once he had made his plans to go to Ladakh. He was providing himself with the resources to imagine Ladakh. And another tourist, who I was on a trek with, had a minidisk player, with the soundtrack to the film *Himalaya*, which she listened to during some of the most “scenic” parts of the trek. She was using it to provide a frame for her ongoing experience of Ladakh.

These reflective uses of symbolic resources reveal that not only do symbolic resources give the future form, but that tourists, their interests and goals, may enter into the situation to intentionally give the future a particular form. In these instances tourists are not mediating their action with the symbolic resource itself, but instead are mediating their ongoing action in terms of the imagined future impact of a given symbolic resource.

## SHORT-CIRCUITING

The frequency with which tourists reflect upon the role of symbolic resources in constructing their experiences is peculiar. In other studies of symbolic resources (Zittoun et al., 2003; Zittoun, 2004) such reflectivity is not so common. In the remaining part of this paper I want to put forward one social mechanism, which I call *short-circuiting*, that may help to account for this reflectivity among tourists.

Ichheiser (1949) catalogued many misunderstandings in interpersonal and intergroup perception, including the fundamental attribution error and actor/observer divergence. But for him one of the most important misunderstanding was what he called the mote-beam mechanism, which is the tendency to “perceive (and to denounce) in others certain characteristics, for example, prejudices, or blind spots, or ideologies, or ethnocentrism, or aggressiveness, which, strangely enough, we ignore in ourselves” (p. 51).

The mote-beam mechanism is not cognitive, in a narrow sense, but representational. Ichheiser (p. 13) was working within the Durkheimian tradition of collective representations. The mote-beam mechanism arises from a divergence in the representation of self and other. Amongst tourists in Ladakh, for example, it is common to criticise other tourists as having inauthentic experiences, trapped in the bubble of their guidebooks or prior images, while claiming authenticity for self's experiences while failing to see that self is not so different from other as is insisted. Let me illustrate with two extracts. In the following exchange two English students criticise other tourists for blindly following the guidebook:

*Eric:* There is like two types of tourists we have met-

*Matt:* The ones who want to see it, and the ones who really want to experience it (pause) every guidebook you read says this is one of the last places on earth where Tibetan Buddhism is as it was, and so there is that kind of "I got to get there before it goes" kind of thing, because every one accepts without thinking that it will go

Eric and Matt make a clear distinction between self and other. Matt says that other tourists only visit Ladakh because they believe, on the basis of their guidebooks, that the traditional Tibetan Buddhism is disappearing. These other tourists accept this view "without thinking." Here is the mote in the eye of the other. Now let us turn to the invisible beam in the eye of self. A couple of minutes later, in the same discussion, when explaining why he has come to Ladakh, Matt says:

*Matt:* [...] Because everywhere in the world is becoming more similar, and so its like if you want to go on holiday and find something that will interest you, you have to look for difference, and so the quick quicker it becomes the same, so then the *Lonely Planet* will say "it was once the last place, but it is now Copacabana"

Matt, without reflection, states that he came to Ladakh because "everywhere in the world is becoming more similar," moreover, he uses the *Lonely Planet* guidebook to make his point. Thus what Matt previously criticised other tourists for he does not (in this extract) see in himself. This, then, is the mote-beam divergence.

The mote-beam mechanism is the ground upon which short-circuiting operates. Short-circuiting occurs when the asymmetry in representing self and other collapses so that self, in effect, becomes other to self. In the following exchange, Norman reports a short-circuit to me:

*Norman:* I would love to take photos of them [elderly indigenous people], but I, since 1966, which shows my age, since my experiences in Central America I don't do that

*Me:* What experience was that?

**Norman:** Well watching a bunch of Germans, as a matter of fact, with huge thousand millimetre telephoto lenses photographing primitive Indian tribes people who felt their soul was being destroyed, and these people were sitting there blatantly photographing (pause) they should have been kicked out

Norman says that he does not take photographs of elderly indigenous people because in central America he had seen other tourists do that and he was appalled at their behaviour. The behaviour of the other tourists with cameras was more visible, or “blatant,” than his own photographic behaviour. Norman’s, reported, self-reflection on his own photographic behaviour was stimulated by other tourists. But this is only a reported short-circuit, if we follow the conversation further we find the microgenesis of a short-circuit. Betty, develops Norman’s point about ‘other’ tourists:

**Betty:** I think a lot of the time people don’t realise what they are looking at [...] certainly at Key *gonpa* [Buddhist monastery] I got that feeling, there were just lots and lots of Westerners there, and all taking photos, you know they had tripods and they had videos, and you know, all around the performance area,

**Carol:** -I could not believe it-

**Betty:** You know they were taking it as, as a colourful performance — which it was — but there must be, behind that, which we are not aware of, a philosophy that we don’t understand [...] and we are there intruding as Westerners intruding with flashing [cameras]

**Me:** But then the question is if we don’t understand what is going on [in these festivals] why is it so meaningful, why do you take photographs?

**Betty:** Because it’s pretty to look at

**Carol:** Because it’s colourful, it’s different

**Norman:** It’s totally different to anything we have seen in the past (pause) we have all been brought up on the *National Geographic*

This exchange has three clear phases. First, Betty tells about tourists she saw at Key *gonpa*. “They” did not understand what they were looking at, “they had tripods,” “they had videos,” and “they were taking it as, as a colourful performance.” In all these utterances she criticises other tourists: she sees the mote in their eye.

Second there is the short-circuit: Betty finds herself in agreement with the attitude of tourists she had been describing. Presumably Betty’s description of the other tourists evokes the actions of these tourists, to some limited extent, within Betty, and Betty then feels a surprising empathy with these actions. Thus Betty interrupts herself saying “-which it was-” in agreement with the tourists. The critique has returned

and no longer applies only to other tourists: the boundary between self and other has collapsed and Betty finds herself talking about herself from the standpoint of her earlier self.

Third, after the short-circuit, there is a change of perspective. Now it is "we" who are not aware, "we" who do not understand and "we" who are intruding with cameras. This we perspective is carried over by me and then by Norman, who concludes that "we have all been brought up on the *National Geographic*." Norman is suggesting that "we" have been unreflectively using symbolic resources like the *National Geographic* in order to imagine what Ladakh should be and to evaluate Ladakh.

The self-reflection is made more palatable by the use of "we" rather than 'I,' nevertheless we are still dealing with a self-reflection. The key to this self-reflection, I argue, is the change of pronoun use from "they" to "we" that arises through the moment of short-circuiting. Interestingly, although it is ostensibly only Betty who short-circuits, the effect is group wide, and other group members adopt "we" rather than "they."

Once such a short circuit has occurred, it is not the case that the tourist has become fundamentally reflective, or has achieved a generalisable ability. Tourists are not consistently reflective or non-reflective. In the previous exchange a reflective position is collectively elaborated, but as soon as the exchange is over, then the reflective position dissolves — presumably only to be reconstructed in a later exchange, either through short-circuiting or some other microgenetic mechanism. But equally that is not to say that short-circuiting is not a dynamic in ontogenetic development. We could speculate that if this pattern, this short-circuiting, recurs on a regular basis that it may over the course of the life span be one of the dynamics through which reflective self-control and self-mediation is established. Self perceives other to use symbolic resources before self perceives self to use symbolic resources, and through reacting to the other comes to react to self.

I do not mean to imply, however, a hierarchy between reflective and non-reflective uses. Both non-reflective and reflective uses of symbolic resources open up different domains of action, and accordingly both give the future form. Although it is more obvious that a non-reflective use excludes a reflective use, it is equally the case that a reflective use excludes a non-reflective use. For example, the tourist who chose not to take a guidebook so as not to be blinded from the "real" Ladakh, was equally denying himself a powerful resource for constructing various paths of action and thus constraining (as well as enabling) his domain of future experience. Accordingly, to impose a normative hierarchy, with reflective uses as somehow superior to non-reflective uses would be to oversimplify the phenomena.

## CONCLUSION

To be able to mediate something, to manage it, and to be able to use it to lead self into the future, self must, so to speak, escape self. In Meadian terms, self must become other to self by inhabiting the temporally and spatially extended present. Symbolic resources like books, films and guidebooks make this possible by allowing tourists to step out of their immediate environment, and imagine possible futures. It

is from the standpoint imagining being in Ladakh that the tourist pre-adapts. Equally, once in Ladakh, tourists use symbolic resources in order to evaluate their experiences, and to imagine how others will react to these experiences. In the case of the photograph of the bridge, the tourist claims to have taken the photograph from the standpoint of his home audience, which again is in an imagined future.

The reflective use of symbolic resources allows the interests and goals of the tourist to enter into the situation, so that he/she can mediate the way in which symbolic resources give the future form. The contribution that I have tried to make is to detail one way that tourists can become reflective, or self-mediate, their use of symbolic resources. The mechanism I have presented, short-circuiting, is by no means the only microgenetic path to self-reflection, but it is, I argue, one path. It is a path within the social world, through social interaction, which can lead self to become other to self, thus expanding the environment to include a new aspect of self that can be mediated, including self as a user of symbolic resources.

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