

Beyond the bounds of the earth, closer to dreams: daily sentiments on a two-month journey around the coast of Spain (on the occasion of an exhibition, if not, of what?)

by Javier Camarasa and Jorge Luis Marzo, 2004

The pedalo

I pedal a blue pedalo. My hand gripping the rudder gives me the feeling of being in complete control of the situation. The sea is so calm that I seem to be sailing on the frozen surface of a lake, gliding gently across it. And yet despite the calmness I have to correct my direction from time to time with little taps to the shaft my hand's resting on. The beach gets gradually further away. I ought to feel at peace, I say to myself. For I suddenly had a funny feeling. You may walk tranquilly on the frozen surface of your life, and in a second be aware how the ice cracks beneath your feet. And that's a dangerous frisson when you're on a pedalo. For the sea makes you fearful of its depth, not its breadth. As if by some slight of hand, then, the pedalo becomes a float, is a vehicle no longer.

I pedal and note the sweat running down my face and chest. It's hot, oppressively hot. There are no clouds and the sea stops being turquoise and turns blue-black. My knees hurt and the image of my two feet rising and falling becomes almost hypnotic. I can't stop looking at them. I feel a desire to stop a moment and to plunge into the water and freshen up, but that blackness, which before was a fine sandy dust in suspension, unblemished and tranquil, frightens me. I note another shudder. For I see myself pedalling, sweating, toiling. I feel a tremendous mistrust of that image. I want to linger, to stop pedalling. What's more, I haven't come here to wear out my knees. But I'm afraid of stopping right now. The two horizon lines seem very far off. The hotels have gotten smaller and the line before the pedalo moves vertically with ever-increasing brio. I feel alone. Yet didn't I come for this, to experience a bit of solitude? Or isn't it the

other way round, to rid myself of the persistent solitary air that accompanies me throughout the year? Bewildered, I see myself toiling, I see myself alone, I see myself sweating. Must I go back now or follow the wake of the sea a little more? Why am I tired, when I've come to avoid such a thing?

More than an industry

Tourism is no longer simply an industry: it is a model of social, economic, political and cultural relations that has been set up as the basic referent offered to and called by citizens, institutions and companies. For locations like the beach, which attracted Swedish girls and stimulated the senses, are places where social and political conflict disappears, creating spaces for happiness without responsibility: "Beyond the earth, closer to dreams." Spaces like the hotel to which millions of citizens escape after the difficult months of dealing with the workaday world and urban life, are points of flight and disconnection, the escape valves of a system that supports ever more pressure. But above all, the apartment, the second residence "right on the beach," has become the basic motive, the ultimate rationale of the dream of millions of families who flee from their own lives, from hard graft and pain, in pursuit of the long-sought-after prize, in which they may well have invested the surplus of years of work. Mass tourism in Spain takes place in the hotel, but above all in the apartment, a place in which local capitalism has gained more height and diffusion: all this paid *españoreligiosamente* by proud citizens who consider buying an apartment for the son who's getting married as the final outlay in the rite of initiation of adolescents into the culture of property and collaboration.

Spaniards feel proud because tourism makes the land hospitable: the world comes to us: 80 million people, twice what we are. Spain is a tourist country not only because it welcomes tourists but because it creates them. The Spaniard is a *Homo turisticus*, not a *Homo viator* or *mobilis*, far from it. He considers that the beach and the relations generated in its environs

are ideal for creating a space in which to develop his life and observe that of the other people. For him and because of him “holiday villages” are built around the beaches: new estates devised for the absence of conflict and in which to represent the defeat of dissension, where citizens endeavour to find, finally, that dreamed-of spot in which to live out their fantasies. A place beyond the earth because it’s closer to dreams, in which a new floating citizen gestures, one without responsibilities, who strolls naked through the streets of great cities, who sinks his money into an apartment with views of the sea, hoping that life may take a televised fall, who accepts the values linked to property culture, thanks to the mortgage, and who champions the commercialisation of social life. A new man who proceeds to sleep like a log, encrusted with sand. In what other place do we remain sleeping for hours in front of other people? On the beach and in airports: public places of transit that offer the complete certainty that our privacy is respected. On the beach a conjuring trick is pulled off: an absolute social levelling, like *vanitas* paintings rendering all equally naked. Because this is what it’s all about: the triumph of tourism is the defeat of conflict. And the trick? Well, the other side of every balcony, every facade, every sunshade, every handrail: chimerical views of the blue sea, of open spaces in which only happiness is seen, which is nothing other than not seeing anything, not seeing anyone.

Playa del Inglés: “Here there’s no history, just a good time”

We head for an ice-cream stall in the middle of a little park that goes down to the beach. Sitting inside is an Ecuadorian with huge black glasses. It’s hot. A bit disorientated, we ask him if he could tell us how you get to the centre of the village. He replies that “The shopping centre’s at the end of the promenade, you go past the minigolf, and after the main road, next to MacDonaldis, there it is.”

The centre of the village is a conglomeration of dozens of bars and terraces with English names in which hundreds of Brits watch football on

huge TV screens. It's 12.30 in the morning. A strong smell of sweat, suntan lotion, air-freshener, beer and boiling oil floats in the air and makes the skin greasy. In general the people are silent, a jug of beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. All are obese. All are sunburnt and go about practically naked, if we except shorts, trunks and the odd teeshirt. From time to time an intense roar bursts from their throats, a roar that one imagines has to do with the football. If you perform the exercise of not imagining it, your skin gets goose bumps, although with the skin all sweaty and greasy this may go unnoticed.

In the coach that takes us from Puerto Rico to Playa del Inglés we've sat in the front seats next to the driver. As the bus cruises at around 80 km/h up and down the narrow, asphalt slopes of the seaside hills on the south of the island we've been hitting it off with the driver. During the commentaries on toponymic details such as the origin of the name of hamlet called Patalavaca [literally *Cowfoot*], hotels and apartments totally inundate the surrounding landscape. We ask the driver to drop us at the most central stop once we get to the village. Every now and again a drunk sitting behind us put his oar in. While we cross Playa del Inglés from stop to stop the driver points out things to us:

—Here in the discothèques it's amazing. You go in alone and you come out with a girl, or two...and night after night. In any of 'em, all you have to do is choose.

—It's amazing, the souse confirms from the second seat, although he doesn't give the impression that he goes to bed with any German girls. It's all very nice, he growls hoarsely, while he tries hard to focus on us.

We don't decide to get down at any stop in particular, somewhat bemused by the magnitude of the English locality. We ask the driver for the historic centre.

—Not the shopping multicentre, but the old quarter, the one from before tourism, we insist.

—No, no, the driver replies, Here there's no history or any of that stuff, here there's just a good time.

We ask him what the population living here is.

—Thirty thousand or so.

We register our serious doubts as to the accuracy of this figure, judging by the size of the buildings we're seeing.

—I dunno. There are lots of hotels here with five and ten thousand beds, apartments and bungalows. Just do the sums.

When we arrive at a spot beside the beach the driver says, chuckling,

—I can't go nearer the centre, unless you want me to drive onto the beach...

—Don't worry, he won't be able to, the drunk to our rear explained all the same.

Conflict is anathema

In this new public world, conflict is anathema. In this new environment in which everything is culture, anger is sold by the kilo, it's packaged in TV programmes and trouble comes up smelling of roses. In the new globalised cities, centralising discourses are adopted about urban space: who's interested in a public space that's scary? Public space must be a *facade*, which is in turn itself a plaza, which roofs it over, which solidifies it. A facade which in itself creates public space. It is a facade that gives the spectator the illusion of participating, on finding himself immersed in the collective illusion of a common space, in which people increasingly approach each other, and in which personal parallaxes are replaced by institutional ones. Interiors are now exteriors, because privacy is publicity. To be stretched out on the lounge on your balcony with views of the sea or lying on a towel on the sand: what does it matter! The citizen is insistently told that the illusion must unfold inside as well as outside.

The tourists arrive, and with them the city. Just as pilgrims from Rome brought the Baroque city with them in the 16th and 17th century. Because a common fate in glory and happiness requires a sufficiently eminent theatre capable of rising to the occasion, a piece of stage machinery that will be designed by the selfsame powers who guarantee that the dream takes on certain predefined formats. The tourist or “touristised” city is the clearest of signals that current public space is built on the ruins of dissension. All must be non-conflictive and smoothed off. Nobody must cut themselves on the sharp edges.

Right on the beach

Benidorm, a contemporary Baroque city. Its buildings are set out like a great army. In the vanguard, the front line on the beach; in the gaps the front line leaves are the bulk of the troops of high-rises, covering any weakness on the flanks. In the rearguard, sheathing the mountainside, a multitude of small row- and back-to-back houses. In the centre the jewel in the crown, *Terra Mítica*: all of Mediterranean culture summed up in papier mâché.

Thousands of windows, all looking towards the one spot, the sea; and a single horizon, a bird’s-eye view of nature and its wayfarers from the privacy of the apartment. You have to make sure of a balcony for the spectacle that is resolved on the sand, a reconquered space, every morning, with towel and parasol; the weapons of the tourist who dreams. One looks and one is looked at, one is spectator and actor, in a continuous Baroque movement that is self-nourishing. Like a perfect machine one doesn’t need to maintain, the tourist’s object of observation are tourists, the more the merrier.

The spectacle of Benidorm is an enormous stage set of all that is created via the homologising of human experience. In that sense tourism is a field of social experiment, as Baroque town planning was in its day: stage sets of power legitimated by the spectators.

What does the tourist see during a tour of Benidorm? There are no great cathedrals, or monuments, or beautiful views. Just the recognising of the modern dream through thousands of facades and balconies that are in themselves public space, unfailingly so. Towns made uniquely of facades which thanks to the theatrical spectacle of the masses pay homage to the wisdom of power, to the capacity of the powerful to provide the quintessence of life: the certitude, the certainty that conflict remains doomed to failure.

The buildings of the new touristised city only have one of their sides with views, with balconies, with terraces. The other three are smooth surfaces of cement. Buildings meant to be facades, to be terraces. Vantage points over the new public space created by dreams and a social sun that shines all year. Benidorm builds skyscrapers because that way everyone will have their lookout post, their little monument to work, to the reward, to having managed to survive the crossing without being shipwrecked. Lots of balconies that look towards success, from where to enjoy success. What there is behind doesn't count, it doesn't exist, it doesn't speak: why should it? It's an exact replica of the streets that are seen from the balconies. Sunshades, windows, handrails, new Baroque forms that protect the truth: the beach.

The sea sparkles in our sunglasses

The sea sparkles in the facade windows, in the glass panes of apartments and of hotels, in the black depths of our sunglasses. We cannot imagine that the shipwreck is something more than that stupid idea in which those we call failures entertain each other. For the shipwreck exists during the crossing. In fact the crossing is itself a shipwreck, a calculated or intuited shipwreck. For the castaway it must be the system which decides his destiny. However ill-fated the latter may be, although it may lead to death, to defeat, he prefers that it's the system which continues ruling because it's a way of lightening the burden of insecurity. Conrad said, when

speaking of the civilised man in the middle of the jungle as he went back up the dark river of life: “Never get down from the boat.” The commonplace of the great theatre of the world is converted into the most effective form of idleness: there’s no reason to rise up in protest about the bad luck one might have had, there’s no reason to struggle violently to change the position allotted to individuals, since within the dramatic order the rapid succession of changes is intrinsically guaranteed.

The tourist gaze

In a huge room a closed door is visible at the far end. It opens and people enter. The guide tells them to gather around the centre where there’s a big mirror. A circle forms and some of the tourists take out their video and still cameras. Once the people are spread around the guide begins a short speech:

—Here you may observe a few typical examples of what has come to be called cultural tourism. Don’t confuse this with the beach tourist, who’s easy to recognise by his brownness or redness in the early stages. Don’t confuse this either with the mountain-loving tourist, who’s much heftier and has an athletic appearance. This species, much thinner on the ground than the ones above, has his main sphere of operations in such enclosed spaces as museums, ancient buildings, and in general all that goes by the name of culture. Due to his nature he usually visits museums on his own or in small groups. If he’s in company he often makes little comments like, “Just look at the quality of the textures... It’s a genuine whatever it is!” It has to be said that his pride obliges him to comprehend all that a mystical gaze sees and emits at certain moments. When he doesn’t like something, however, he makes comments like “I’m hungry.”

Okay, Ladies and Gentlemen, follow me, please.

No recompense

The province of Tarragona is a dumping ground for industries that have kept on growing since the 1970s: the Tarragona petrochemical industry, the offshore attempts at extracting oil, the nuclear power stations of Vandellós I and Vandellós II in l'Hospitalet de l'Infant, the Ascó nuclear power station. And in the midst of all this, the Ebro and its delta disappear little by little. L'Ametlla de Mar and l'Hospitalet de l'Infant are the villages closest to the Vandellós nuclear power stations, some seven kilometres away respectively. Between the two there stretches El Torn Beach.

El Torn Beach is a sensational spot whose peacefulness is only interrupted when the train goes by at top speed along the hillside. From the train the landscape appears unexpectedly like a kinetic exercise in voyeurism. El Torn is a nudist beach. Perhaps the best nudist beach in Catalonia: long, open and provided with broad natural sands.

Tourism itself renders the presence of those nuclear power stations planted facing the beach non-conflictive. El Torn is the sleight-of-hand needed to hide an all-too undeniable truth: the disaster of the Spanish coastline has no recompense.

Homo turisticus

Today tourism is the field in which programmes in social experimentation are implemented. So say the mayors, architects, sociologists, urbanists and hoteliers. And the punters. An experiment that will end up creating a new citizen: *Homo turisticus*.

Identity

While different peoples disavow the debate on tradition, the idea of identity gradually takes on a renewed value, since by dint of doing or undoing what one wishes to project as traditional in socio-urban as well as commercial terms, one can always construct an ongoing "authenticity" of realities and

of commodities. Authenticity will never be lacking. It is invented instantly and consumed instantly.

When all is said and done, the creation of the universal standard that is tourism has provided another qualitative jump, which we might define as “any place can be any other place”: a perfect equation of the command of space and the annihilation of time. Why bother travelling to the farthest shores of Polynesia to observe the customs of its peoples if we can enjoy them “canned” just around the corner? Neither is it necessary for you to waste your time wading through the pages of *The Odyssey*: for the same price that we introduce you to Ulysses we entertain your kids for a few hours and if you’re not happy you have the pyramids of Egypt a stone’s throw away.

If in the grand European peregrinations a place was sought “beyond the bounds of the earth,” Paradise right now is endless amusement and entertainment, with their various cultural or sports varnishes: “Go back to being a child” in an increasingly infantilised society. The most genuine is the most amusing.

Nothing new, this, it also happened in the panoramas, those pictorial illusory constructions of the end of the 19th century. The difference is that that was amusement, today it’s systemic.

Within the enormous disorientation that ubiquity causes, the only thing that’s left to us is the accumulation of vacuous stage sets in the retinal memory we then spew over our friends on “returning.”

On the Ramblas in Barcelona the souvenir shops for tourists run by Pakistanis and Moroccans sell Mexican sombreros made in China. Authenticity resides in the moment in which the tourist sticks his head into his *mariachi* hat. That is the authentic experience of authenticity. The personalised experience of the tourist is the true exercise of the authentic.

The camera

To: "Edgar Clement" <stleu@hotmail.com>

From: diga@retemail.es

Subject: From the beach

Date: 9 Aug 2003, 20:20 h

“In short, I could tell you about lots of things, ideas and happenings. I reckon I’ve been going for more than a month from beach to beach, from one resort to another (Salou, Lloret, Oropesa, Benidorm, etc.). Now I begin the Canary Islands. Camera in hand, trying not to shake. At times I think, I wish I was on holiday! When we began the project the wish was to see the worker, worn out through eleven months of submitting to capital, exposed to the class gaze, like when you said to me, ‘Who am I to judge the young *gringos* who after being hammered by their godawful American system go off as tourists to Tijuana to drink all day and help themselves to the skirt?’ The same happens here with the English guys, the Germans, Dutch, Belgians French, etc. After a month in the jungle of the beach, things have changed. The beach is the new system. I wish I weren’t behind the camera!”

Touristisation

The touristisation of the culture doesn’t just have to do with situating history in easily consumable contexts or inserting it in networks through which visitors have obligatorily to pass. Because it also has very much to do with policies that mean that the visitor apparently knows the reason why the reality of a place is the way it is. In fact this is the main exercise in ventriloquism and legerdemain in cities like Barcelona that aspire to be global.

It’s a question of power first eliminating, and then acculturating. The clearest example is a recent exhibition about El Somorrostro. Fifteen years ago Señor Maragall’s city council levelled the communities which were living along the city’s coastline. The question is not what might have been done, what in all certainty should have been done, but the way it was done. Today a public exhibition asks “What happened to them?” Forum 2004

suddenly gets rid of part of the urban fabric of Poble Nou and of the Besos. In a few years we'll see exhibitions that'll be called, What happened to them?

The reinvention of the city

Josep Acebillo, Barcelona City Council's municipal architect. "Making a city for tourists is making it for the citizens. Have you seen *The Full Monty*? It's the story of an industrial city that doesn't know how to digest its crisis and in order survive they do striptease. This has happened in Detroit, in Manchester and in Barcelona, which had a textile industry of which nothing remains. Barcelona has backed tourism in order to live. Before the Olympic Games two million visitors a year slept in Barcelona. Now nine sleep here. We are reinventing the city."

José Camarasa, Benidorm City Council's municipal architect, replied in amazement to the question about what the plan for public space was in the town, "The beach! What else?"

Salou

Native beach of Aragón, in the same way that Benidorm is of Madrid. Having got there, they tell us a story. One day years ago someone from the company contracted to build Port Aventura presented himself and asked in a small family workshop in the area which dedicated itself to producing hinges and the like if they'd be prepared to fulfil a much bigger order than usual. "Sure," replied the boss. "You'll see," said the man from Port Aventura, "we're going to be needing two or three hundred thousand hinges inside a few months." There were hundreds of cases like this in the region. Anyone who was able to manufacture something for the park made a packet. With the millions gained they bought land and built apartments and hotels, converting what in itself was a flourishing tourist trade into a monster of the Mediterranean coast. "The fathers worked incredibly hard to make huge fortunes," they proceeded to tell us. "Their children devoted

themselves to squandering the money gained by their parents on cars, holidays abroad, parties, you name it: they had no idea how you built a hotel and they cared even less.” “Now what happens is that the children of these children have come to realise that things have to change: that basically such a mess has been created that if they don’t stop and think about what tourism has done to their environment it’s not that they might lose all those businesses but that the whole thing may become a sort of Saturn that devours everything it comes across.”

Lloret de Mar

After a few days in Lloret de Mar one has the feeling of being in the Far West. In the case of all the people we spoke to the magic word comes up: pioneers. They were pioneers in everything: in putting up hotels, in making a go of them, in publicity campaigns, in attracting customers from all parts of Europe, in freeing themselves of the tyranny of tour operators, who totally dominate the Balearic and Canary Islands, in providing shops that were absolutely unique in the Girona area. They began in the 50s: what wonderful days, those, in which British couples came to enjoy the sun, the food, the beaches... and all for a pound! The locals made friends with the tourists and vice versa, since they came back every year. Whoever had a few rooms to rent and could offer typical food in their home could make enough money to build their first hotel. Well-mannered people, eager to have a laugh and to participate, eager for a bit of elegant exoticism. “We were the first and we’re very proud of it.” Today Lloret is a paradise for British, Dutch, French, Italian and German teenagers who get out of it to the point of collapsing in the famous “Riera,” the street of sin, of discothèques, of a lively time. And the entire village complains. A village that walks slowly down the street thanks to the weight of the money jingling in its pockets.

“This week it’s full of Italians, they’re quieter. Last week it was the Dutch and there was a problem with fights: they burnt rubbish containers

and more than one ended his spree in the police station or in hospital.” They complain that Lloret may have become the symbol of cheap, “hooligan” tourism. A shopkeeper repeats the diatribe against the Dutch, who won’t leave him in peace, who’re always looking for a fight and who always go around drunk. He admits to enormous nostalgia for those early days of well-mannered tourism, the pioneer days. But he sells “Perezskaya” vodka at 4 euros a bottle and a five-litre carafe of sangria at 3 euros. “The authorities ought to do something about all this,” he adds, while persistently observing the whereabouts of all the tourists overrunning his shop.

Tourismology

The tourist is a “perfected” individual since he has been capable of creating a system of social relations transcending conflict and negotiation of any kind: he is someone who goes beyond the system: just as each person, aware of their complete justification, flops down contentedly on their towel, an inalienable frontier in the new social world of tourism. Out of all this there is born tourismology, the celebration of the disappearance of all space of conflict, underlined by the great slogans of the construction business: “Nothing happens here: just *you*.”

Pedalo

All alone am I. Me and my pedalo. My knees hurt terribly. Maybe I’ve got too far from the beach. Objects and people are no longer distinguishable. I don’t see the yellow of the sand, everything’s become too blue. My back and face are burnt, I reckon. But I still have control of the rudder. It’s only a matter of turning a bit and facing the first horizon once more. I wonder if I’ll be capable of refinding my towel and bag, lost in the midst of such a crowd; if I still have that bit of beach, covered by the dome of the parasol, which guarantees me my independence. I set to pedalling like a madman.