## 2.1 Authenticity and Uncertainty in Touristic Experience

If it is to function properly, the human medium always works within a social context governed by intersubjective trust. Texts that feature an operative kind of self-reflection are therefore frequently concerned with how and under what circumstances humans cooperate and interact. In many texts then, the human medium's exemplary integration of material and symbolic sensemaking of human experience is typically juxtaposed with analyses of said collective human experience and coordinated human behavior. The more or less explicit parallel, depending on the text, is found in the ongoing, dynamic, and often implicit negotiations of trust and consent that occur both between writer and reader as well as social actors involved in the coordination of human action on a cultural and societal level more generally.

In such instances, writers of reportage contrast their own acts of material and symbolic meaning-making with the ways in which collective human behavior is organized and mediated. Most notably, they explore the potential differences in human interaction that such contrasting illuminates. They thereby emphasize their own humanity as media and analyze the complexities of human social behavior.

In a modern Western society such as the U.S., instances of human social action are often affected by the spatializing, commodifying, or dismantling effects of capitalism. Just like the writers themselves, capitalism functions both as a set of ideas in symbolic sensemaking as well as a concrete material force that changes physical reality. Therefore, particularly sharp considerations of such material and symbolic shaping of human experience can be found in textual representations of touristic experiences, for instance. In this typical setting, human experience itself is the product to be manufactured and managed. This active, intentional production of human experience of course is akin to the ways in which the writers themselves produce experience to be processed

and sold to readers. However, as writers identify and ponder fundamental differences, they also raise important ethical questions rooted in their own, inevitably social humanity.

The texts analyzed include the reportage written by David Foster Wallace, about his experience on a cruise and its communal sense of leisure; George Saunders's visit to Dubai and the descriptions of the communal function of globalized luxury tourism; and John Jeremiah Sullivan's attendance at a Christian rock festival, where he observed the communal celebration of religion.

In their texts, they all position themselves as self-aware singularly producing human media, in contrast to the re-producing of reality that shapes these instances of manufactured and managed human communing in tourism. More specifically, all three writers identify fundamental uncertainties that occupy the core of communal acts of the material and symbolic construction of everyday realities. They often illustrate these uncertainties by way of intersubjective conflicts between themselves as professionals in service of the rather general human curiosity of their readers and the interests and actions of others taking part in or producing such touristic experience. Importantly, they thus also all critically highlight tourism's reflexivity. That is, how the very mediation of communing in tourism informs the communing itself with often ideological means, through the shared embodying of belief in both pre-existing consumerist and religious narratives.

Concerns with uncertainty in touristic experience are reflected more specifically in concerns with alienation and authenticity and their constructed nature. Recent critical analyses of tourism have therefore raised questions about who authenticates, how and why.[1]. Similarly to texts of reportage then, acts of construction of authenticity illuminate issues of power and responsibility. From a producer's standpoint, authenticity can be manufactured industrially. On the end of the consumer however, akin to the relationship between writer and reader, authenticity is always experienced subjectively as a produced, temporal human feeling.

This connection is central to the arguments made in all three texts. Still, from within this framework there exists a range of different perspectives onto authenticity in tourism. Early critical attention to authenticity in tourism focused on the authenticity of the tourist's object, the destination, or experience. This perspective goes back to Daniel Boorstin's provocative book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961). Boorstin argued that traveling

1 Rickly and Vidon, "Introduction: From Pseudo-Events to Authentic Experiences."

had stopped being about spontaneous experience. As tourism, it had become commodified as a series of pre-fabricated, inauthentic pseudo-events seeking to transcend time and space.[2] In one of the first systematic analyses of tourism, *The Tourist: A Theory of the Leisure Class* (1976), Dean MacCannell rejected Boorstin's nostalgia but maintained that tourism was marked by a kind of staged authenticity that worked, because it enabled the off-duty worker to experience an idealized enactment of him- or herself. He argued that it was:

> only by making a fetish of the work of others, by transforming it into an 'amusement' ('do it yourself'), a spectacle (Grand Coulee), or an attraction (the guided tours of Ford Motor Company) that modern workers, on vacation, can apprehend work as a part of a meaningful totality.[3]

This experience had a unifying effect on societies, MacCannell argued, because the experience of the work of others alleviated the alienating effects of people's own experience as workers: "The alienation of the worker stops where the alienation of the sightseer begins."[4]

Alongside a recent shift in scholarly attention the very experiential aspects of authenticity have come into focus. Daniel Knudsen has argued that all consciously experienced authenticity could be classified as fantasy because a sense of alienation, stemming from the transformation from a biological to a societal human being, remains in every human's unconscious.[5] Importantly then, in tourism, the very fundamental uncertainties in human communing are manifested in the ways in which authenticity is produced and felt individually.

Existential authenticity, as this concept has been termed, is concerned with what is commonly known as "being true to oneself" and the very modern quest to attain this state of being. Rather than concerning the authenticity of either objects or experiences, this approach is concerned with the ways in which authenticity is itself a (temporal) experience that is produced within and between tourists and with the people with whom they interact.[6]

Intrapersonal authenticity refers to the dimension of existential authenticity that concerns the sensual and symbolic aspects of the body as the source

2 Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*.
3 MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, 6.
4 MacCannell, 6.
5 Knudsen, "Afterword: Authenticity and Life."
6 Rickly and Vidon, "Introduction: From Pseudo-Events to Authentic Experiences," 5–7.

of the authentic self. Here, the body is both a signifying display of personal human identity and a subject that produces feeling by way of its sensory organs. As such, the body and its drives are controlled, for instance in contexts of labor, which may result in a sense of existential inauthenticity or alienation.[7] Ning Wang argues that tourism makes the experience of personal authenticity possible because "sensual pleasures, feelings, and other bodily impulses are to a relatively large extent released and consumed and the bodily desires (for natural amenities, sexual freedom, and spontaneity) are gratified intensively."[8] Intrapersonal authenticity also refers to acts of self-making or self-identity that are realized in touristic contexts because the routinization of everyday lives hardly leaves space for experimentation with identity.[9]

Interpersonal authenticity, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which communal experience matters in touristic contexts. Wang mentions family tourism as a way to "achieve or reinforce a sense of authentic togetherness".[10] She also references Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, which means an ideal "inter-personal relationship among pilgrims who confront one another as social equals based on their common humanity."[11] Tourism, she argues, can have similar effects, given that "the pleasure of tourism exists not only in seeing exotic things, but also in sharing and communicating this pleasure with other tourists who are seeing the same sights together."[12]

In their specifics then, these different aspects of authenticity help to again identify a fundamental kind of uncertainty as the more general characteristic of communing that unites the three texts. Uncertainty is an existential fact of all social actions, and the waves of mediatization have further affected the complexity of Western societies because they have illuminated their constructed character. In theory, everyday realities are the specific instantiations of the complex material and symbolic constructs that social theorists call social worlds. They are highly mediated products of material infrastructure and communication made and performed by humans.[13] Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp define the social world as:

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7 Wang, "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience," 361–362.

8 Wang, 362.

9 Wang, 363.

10 Wang, 364.

11 Wang, 364.

12 Wang, 365.

13 Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, 6–7.

> the intersubjective sphere of the social relations that we as human beings experience. Those relations are rooted in everyday reality, a reality nowadays always interwoven with media to some degree. The social world is, in turn, differentiated into many domains of meaning, even though it is also bound together by multiple relations of interdependence and constraint.[14]

Put rather generally, then, everyday reality is the outcome of communal human actions that occur in certain differentiated and intersecting domains based on the shared practical orientations of the humans acting therein.[15]

Such communal human action is highly temporal. It is typically based on a shared "meaningful belonging that provides a basis for action–and orientation–in common."[16] The highly contested term that comes to mind is 'community'. Couldry and Hepp use the term 'collectivities'[17] because they are also concerned with digital realities. I prefer Studdert and Walkerdine's 'communing' or 'communal being-ness' because these terms emphasize the temporary quality of such material and symbolic human togetherness in space and time and indicate that they involve "actions and movement, being and becoming".[18] Luc Boltanski has argued that the social world, as a construct, and its specific manifestations in everyday reality undergird a radical uncertainty, because any real construct of reality is inevitably positioned against the backdrop of all of everyday reality's possible and different constructions. Boltanski identifies dispute and fragility as core characters of social bonds; this is because humans possess bodies and, hence, are capable of only taking one particular point of view on the world at a time.[19]

As analyzed in the following case studies, this radical uncertainty at the heart of the social world is particularly apparent in the relationship between writer and reader. Critical endeavors in reader response theory have shown that this relationship is similarly marked by a fundamental uncertainty with regard to the reader's interpretation of texts. As shown earlier, awareness of the fragility of this connection has increased alongside mediatization and conceptions of the postmodern.

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14 Couldry and Hepp, 20.

15 Couldry and Hepp, 20.

16 Couldry and Hepp, 168.

17 Couldry and Hepp, 168.

18 Studdert and Walkerdine, *Rethinking Community Research: Inter-Relationality, Communal Being and Commonality*, 29.

19 Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, 57–61.

As the case studies also show, however, writers engage differently with these uncertainties that mark both the communing in the social world they experience as well as the relationship they aim to establish with readers.

First, very much in the vein of Daniel Boorstin's critique, David Foster Wallace details the alienation that results from inauthentic bodily and communal experience on a cruise that exploits trust for economic gains, and drafts a critical response in text. George Saunders pitches an optimistic belief in a basic kind of human sameness that is situated in the human potential to be kind as a countermeasure to individualized consumerism. And as he experiences interpersonal authenticity with fellow festivalgoers, John Jeremiah Sullivan affirms a basic human weakness that consequentially results in a tolerant ethic that acknowledges the human need to believe. All three texts identify a general ideological force that aims to brush over uncertainties. Yet they also locate possibilities of change and difference in the specific human interactions perceived as authentic, due to their very embracing of uncertainties.

## 2.2 The Desperate Medium in David Foster Wallace's "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (1997)

As mentioned, David Foster Wallace made no secret of his motivation to create a form of literature that could confront the mass mediation of American society in either interviews or essays. However, Foster Wallace, who committed suicide in 2008, also left an exemplary body of work. While he is primarily known for his short fiction and his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996),[1] written between 1992 and 2008, Foster Wallace also produced a substantial trove of innovative yet controversial reportage, essays, and commentary, which influenced and inspired other writers of literary journalism.[2] For John Jeremiah Sullivan, Foster Wallace "got his finger into a certain wound and was moving it around,"[3] and Leslie Jamison stated that the "multiplicity of [his] perspectives feels almost like an ethical stance; the refusal of the single view."[4] An experimental fiction writer, Foster Wallace had no journalistic training and he never claimed to be a reporter. Nevertheless, he was very interested in non-fiction literature. As a reader, he preferred the writings of George Orwell or Joan Didion to those of Tom Wolfe or Hunter S. Thompson, whose texts—except for *Hell's Angels* (1967)[5]—he found to be "naïve and narcissistic."[6] Foster Wallace seemed

1 Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*.

2 On Wallace's influence, see most recently and explicitly Roiland, "Derivative Sport: The Journalistic Legacy of David Foster Wallace"; See also Lorentzen, "The Rewriting of David Foster Wallace"; Kraus, "Viewer Discretion: The Trajectory of Writer-Worrier David Foster Wallace"; Sullivan, "Too Much Information."

3 Roiland, "Derivative Sport: The Journalistic Legacy of David Foster Wallace."

4 Roiland.

5 Thompson, *Hells Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*.

6 Jacob, "Interview with David Foster Wallace," 153–54.