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# Selling the Amish: The Tourism of Nostalgia

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## Introduction

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### A Snapshot of Amish Country Tourism

**O**n a hot summer afternoon some years ago, I witnessed a bewildering event. I was sitting on a bench outside a snack shop on Main Street in Intercourse, Pennsylvania, with friends. We were taking a break from browsing the shops of this charming tourist town in Pennsylvania's Amish Country.<sup>1</sup> As we sipped our freshly squeezed lemonade, a minivan pulled into one of the parking spaces in front of us. Two middle-aged white couples climbed out of the van. They were talking amongst themselves in a jovial way and seemed to be, like us, tourists.

As the group moved toward the shops to our right, one of the women spotted an Amish buggy heading in our direction at a brisk pace. Very excited, the woman thrust her hand into her purse, dug around a bit, and pulled out a camera. She then took off running toward the street. By the time she reached the street, the buggy had passed her. Not deterred, the woman ran down the street after the buggy. About a half-block down the road she stopped and, with her feet planted in the middle of the road, took a picture of the back end of that buggy. Thrilled, she ran back to her group and announced that she got the shot.

### Amish Wisdom on Tourism

In late August 2004, I, along with a few friends, attended a New Order Amish worship service in Holmes County, Ohio.<sup>2</sup> Held in an outbuilding across the lane from the home of the Amish family who were hosting

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church that Sunday, the worship service lasted for a little over two hours. About a hundred people attended. For the duration of the service, we sat on backless benches, with the women on one side of the room, the men on the other, and the ministers in the middle. In the course of the worship service, one minister gave the main sermon, another minister followed with a shorter one, the congregation sang several hymns in the characteristically slow style of the Amish, and the congregation prayed together, each of us kneeling with head bowed over the bench on which we had been sitting. Shortly after the service, we shared a meal consisting of sliced cold meat and cheese, homemade bread, peanut butter spread (a mixture of peanut butter and marshmallow creme), pickles, and water. A dessert of cookies and coffee followed. While eating, as during worship, women and men sat separately.

After the meal, the Amish men escorted us visitors to a shaded area, where we sat on the grass and talked for an hour or so. The Amish women sat in another group about ten yards from us. The men talked to us about New Order Amish life. We learned, for instance, that the New Order Amish are deeply committed to Sunday school. For them, Sunday school is essential for explaining the biblical bases of their beliefs and practices. Rather than expect Amish youth to follow the rules because that is tradition, they argued, it is far better to explain the rationale behind the rules and expectations of Amish life. This is the better way, they said, even though doing so invites questions and, thus, increases the chances that some of their youth might arrive at different answers and even leave the New Order. These Amish men conceded the point that the Old Order Amish, who do not hold Sunday school or encourage such questioning, retain their youth at significantly higher rates than the New Order do.

As our conversation came to a close, I asked these Amish men what they thought about the tourists who come by the millions every year to Amish Country. Expecting them to express frustration with their overwhelming numbers, ubiquitous cameras, and ignorant questions, I was surprised to hear these Amish men talk about the important opportunity tourism provides for sharing their Christian witness through their visibly different common life and daily practices. They also spoke gratefully of the privilege they have to live a peaceful life, and they expressed compassion for tourists who, struggling with the rush and pressures of modern life, appear fascinated by the simplicity and slower pace of Amish life.

## Questions and Inquiries

These two experiences of mine, each surprising in its own way, raise interesting questions about Amish Country tourism. Why would a middle-aged woman run down Main Street to capture a picture of the back end of a buggy? While the level of this woman's enthusiasm is unusual, her fascination is typical of the desire many visitors have to encounter the Amish and to capture their unusual lifestyle in photographs. Indeed, her eagerness invites questions about Amish Country tourists in general. What is it about the Amish that inspires millions of Americans to visit and revisit Amish Country each year? What is it that they want to see, capture, and experience? Even more important, what do tourists actually get when they visit Amish Country? Judging from the number of tourists carrying shopping bags out of gift shops, heritage centers, and bulk food stores, one thing they are certainly getting is a lot of merchandise. But is Amish Country tourism only a matter of consumption? Is it just about eating, browsing, and buying all things more or less connected to the Amish? Or is something beyond consumption going on here?

The second experience also raises questions. How do tourists see the Amish? Are they historical relics? A peculiar people frozen in time? Members of a bizarre religious sect? Do they merely offer a charming peek into an idealized version of premodern life? Or do they inspire important questions in tourists? Are the New Order Amish men right? Do the Amish witness to another, more peaceful, and perhaps even more humane way of life that visitors, weary from the hectic pace of modern life, find appealing? Or do the Amish function as little more than props for a tourism that promises visitors a trip down memory lane?

In this book, I address these and related questions. Although I talk about the Amish, my primary goal is not to describe them. Many others have offered excellent accounts of the Amish, and references to their books and articles can be found in this book's bibliography. Instead, my purpose is to understand Amish Country tourism and, specifically, how it attracts and sustains the interest of millions of visitors each year. The purveyors of Amish Country tourism use a variety of strategies to draw tourists in and give them pleasure during their stay, and I explore those techniques. I focus especially on the role the Amish play, wittingly or unwittingly, in providing visitors with satisfying experiences.

Because I am interested in the significance of the Amish in Amish Country tourism, I describe how the image of the Amish is constructed by the stories that are told and the experiences that are created for the enjoyment of tourists. However, because the Amish cannot be reduced to what tourism techniques make of them, I am also interested in how the Amish challenge the images of them that tourism constructs.

## Shaping the Lives of Tourists and Amish

It is easy to imagine that nothing important happens when tourists visit Amish Country. For anyone who has toured such areas or who has watched visitors move through them, it is tempting to conclude that whatever tourists get in Amish Country, it is certainly not authentic encounters with Amish people. After all, visitors to Amish-settled areas do not spend their time getting to know the Amish, who (for good reason) do not necessarily want to get to know the tourists. Instead of encountering the Amish, tourists experience tourist attractions. Some tourist attractions provide helpful information about the Amish, such as where they came from, how they live in community, what their commitments are, and so forth. However, most do not. Most say little if anything about the Amish but instead focus on selling the tourist a souvenir, an amusement park ride, or a home décor item. Even if tourists meet an Amish person in the role of a tour guide, buggy-ride driver, or clerk at a produce stand, they do not in the course of such brief interactions come to know the Amish.

A visit to an Amish tourist area does not afford visitors an authentic encounter with the Amish. As I argue in chapter 2, it cannot. This is because all tourism is a form of mediation. Like a photograph, a television set, or a newspaper, tourism presents an image of something, not the thing itself. In doing so, it tells tourists how to see what is in front of them and guides them in making meaning of it. When visitors tour a Civil War battlefield, for instance, they do not experience the Civil War. Instead, they look at a field, listen to a guide tell them a story, or remember some account of a battle they saw on the History Channel. What they see, hear, read, and remember helps them conjure up an idea of what the Civil War was like. In the same way, Amish Country tourism consists of a collection of attractions, images, and stories that tells visitors what to notice about the Amish, how to interpret what they see, how to think about themselves in

relationship to what they see—in short, how they should understand the Amish. Visitors would be mistaken to assume that everything the tourism industry tells them about the Amish is true. Indeed, the Amish are always more complicated and more interesting than any representation tourism offers of them.

However, to say that tourism cannot provide visitors with an authentic experience of the Amish is not to say that nothing meaningful happens when a tourist spends time in Amish Country. On the contrary, I argue that what transpires among tourists and the Amish is important. This is because Amish Country tourism consists of a system of representation that shapes the way Americans think about a significant and growing religious minority in this country and Americans' relationship to that minority. In addition, it influences how tourists see themselves, as well as their past, present, and future.

A system of representation consists of various signs. Each sign connects a signifier (such as a word, an object, a sound, a taste) to a signified (the meaning associated with each signifier). Within any system of representation, meanings are associated in fairly reliable ways. This system makes it possible for human beings to make sense of their world relatively easily. For instance, in the system of representation that governs ground transportation in the United States, the color red (a signifier) is often associated with danger, alarm, and urgency. This being so, whenever one sees, say, red flashing lights, one knows that danger lies ahead and that one should be alert.

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Of course, not all signs are so easily read. Take the new car market, for example. As a system of representation, the new car market consists of many signs—each new car being one. Each sign within the system is designed to mean something that at least some prospective buyers are supposed to find appealing. With the creation of more and more niche markets, the meaning of the Scion versus the Nissan versus the Ford has become increasingly complex. Human beings are good at making sense of even such complex systems of representation. Thus, anyone who pays even a little attention to this system of representation knows that, whereas “Escalade” means big, powerful, luxurious, and gas guzzling, “Prius” means small, high-tech, socially progressive, and “green.”

Human beings not only understand complex systems of representation, they are also heavily influenced by them. Thus, which cluster of meanings

they find most appealing—that associated with the Escalade, the Prius, or some other vehicle—will have a great deal of impact on which car they buy.<sup>3</sup> In ways such as these, systems of representation shape not only the meanings that human beings make of their world but also the commitments they develop, the values they embody, and the decisions they make.

Like the new automobile market, Amish Country tourism is a system of representation; it associates the Amish with some meanings and disassociates them from others. Within Amish Country tourism, for instance, the Amish are connected with terms such as “simple,” “peaceful,” and “hardworking” but not “sophisticated,” “violent,” or “lazy.” In this way, tourism tells visitors who the Amish are. By associating these words with the Amish, the tourism industry encourages visitors to evaluate the Amish in more or less positive ways. For instance, brochures often praise the Amish for these attributes. Thus, tourists come to know the Amish as not only simple, peaceful, and hardworking but also as good.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Amish Country tourism also offers images of tourists. It tells tourists who they are and suggests how they might evaluate and even alter their manner of living. Indeed, those same Amish Country brochures often talk about the speed of American life and how it causes visitors to experience excessive stress. Further, by contrasting the positive attributes of Amish life to the negative terms they associate with modern life, these brochures often make the suggestion that taking a certain course of action (such as spending more time around the Amish in Amish Country) is likely to make visitors happier. Amish Country tourism constructs these meanings about the Amish and tourists not only through the words and images of brochures, advertisements, and the like, but also by the environments that consist of buildings, interior décor, merchandise, and so forth. These tourism environments, within which tourists spend a day, a weekend, or longer, construct these meanings in various and powerful ways.

One of the most powerful tools for creating these meanings is story. Each of the tourist towns featured in this book retells one or more stories. The architecture, interior décor, merchandise, and other elements come together to invite the visitor to imagine that they are part of these narratives. The stories retold in a town, such as those about gender or the nation or the frontier, are popular myths that have long shaped American identity.<sup>5</sup> As tourists move through the spaces of the town, those myths are called to mind. The Amish, who have traditionally not been included

in those myths because they were understood to stand outside mainstream American culture, are repeatedly woven into these myths as if they too were part of them. As a result, they seem to take on qualities of the characters in those myths.

The central argument of this book, then, is that Amish Country tourism creates a lot of meaning and that the meaning it generates matters to visitors. As millions of tourists move through the inns, shops, restaurants, and gardens of Amish Country every year, they are invited to imagine themselves as figures in the myths these environments tell. Insofar as these narratives give visitors compelling ways of understanding the Amish and their world, they also have the potential to shape the identity of the tourists, their view of the world, and their decisions. Since the millions of tourists who visit Amish Country each year appear to enjoy their experiences there, it is important to understand the myths they are taking up, how those myths produce pleasure for them, and how the myths might influence the visitors' self-understandings and aspirations for the future.

Amish Country tourism should be taken seriously. Although it is tempting to infer that Amish Country tourism is culturally unimportant because it does not involve an authentic encounter between tourists and Amish, it would be a mistake to do so. Amish Country tourism is not meaningless entertainment, just a distraction from everyday life. It impacts the lives of millions of tourists each year and influences the lives of hundreds of thousands of Amish.

Although Amish Country tourism is powerful in its constructions of meaning about the Amish and tourists, it is important to remember that no system of representation can completely or forever fix the meanings that it makes. Things are always too complex and changing for that. Thus, it is wise to take seriously what those New Order Amish men told me that Sunday afternoon. They said that tourism affords them an opportunity to witness to the millions of visitors who cross their paths each year. Put in the terms I am using here, the Amish are themselves a system of representation and, as such, are saying something to tourists. If those New Order Amish men are right, then the meaning that the Amish create by their witness might differ significantly from or even contest what Amish Country tourism would have visitors see and believe about them.

## Scope and Method

Amish Country tourism happens in many places throughout the United States, but it occurs on an especially large scale in the three largest Amish settlements in the world, which are located in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio. Across these three settlements, what Amish Country tourism offers is quite similar. As I discuss in chapter 2, in all three locations, tourists encounter such attractions as huge Amish-style restaurants accompanied by bakeries and food shops, as well as amusement parks or water parks, furniture stores, and comfortable inns. Given the similarities among these three tourism areas, I have chosen to focus on Amish Country tourism in Ohio.

Ohio Amish Country tourism offers good study material for two reasons. First, although Ohio is home to the largest Amish settlement in the world, comparatively little scholarly research has been done on the Ohio Amish.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, much scholarly attention has been given to the Pennsylvania Amish and quite a few articles and books have been published on the Indiana Amish. Second, Amish Country tourism in Ohio grew rapidly during the fifteen years (1995–2010) that I conducted my research. Many inns, restaurants, and shops were built or expanded during that time. The Amish settlement in Ohio experienced huge economic growth during that time, largely because of tourism.<sup>7</sup> These developments warrant scholarly attention.

This book focuses on one of the Ohio Amish settlements, in order to do a close reading of the complex representations that make up Amish Country tourism. To understand how some signs are related to other signs and how they thereby tell stories and make meaning, it is necessary to look at them closely. Focusing on Amish Country tourism in one settlement enables such a close reading.

The particular kind of close reading offered in this book pays attention to what in the field of rhetorical studies is called “visual rhetoric.”<sup>8</sup> Rhetoric is about how systems of representation persuade human beings (more or less successfully) to understand themselves, others, and their world in particular ways; to value people, ideas, events, places, and so forth in certain ways; to take or not to take one or another form of action; or to identify or dis-identify themselves with a person, a community, a nation, or an identity.<sup>9</sup> Traditionally, the field of rhetorical studies has focused on spoken and written texts. However, in the last decade or so, many rhe-

torical scholars have turned their attention to other kinds of visual texts, understood in a broad sense, in recognition of the fact that a great deal of persuasion makes use of communicative modes beyond speech and writing, such as objects and spaces. Visual rhetoric, then, is about how these other modes of communication shape the way human beings think, value, act, and identify.

Because the tourism industry uses signs in the forms of images, buildings, interior décor, and merchandise, it is right to take a visual rhetorical approach to understanding Amish Country tourism. By taking this approach I am able to attend closely to the three-dimensional and multisensory spaces that address tourists in complex, meaningful, and sometimes surprising ways. My readings are based in ethnographic research that was conducted over the course of fifteen years and included (among other research strategies) personal observations, extensive field notes, hundreds of photographs, and several interviews.

## Overview and Organization

As a case study, I consider three of the most heavily trafficked tourist towns in Ohio's Amish Country. Noting that each of these towns features a distinct theme, I look at how these themes are constructed in the architecture and in the interior décor of those buildings. I consider how those themes are further developed in the merchandise that is sold within the buildings. I also attend to how tourists move in these spaces and engage the objects found within them.

Along the way, I talk about the tourists. As it happens, they are a relatively homogeneous group. Of course, there are differences among them. On the whole, however, they are white middle-class Americans who come from areas within a day's drive of an Amish settlement. Given the location of the three largest settlements, that means that they tend to come from the Midwest and the Northeast. They share anxieties typical of their demographic in this time and culture. Recognizing this, I argue that the pleasure that comes from Amish Country tourism has a lot to do with the fact that it offers symbolic resolutions to those anxieties.<sup>10</sup> By retelling myths that appear to provide solutions to their concerns, Amish Country tourism reassures visitors that the future looks bright; it thereby brings them pleasure.<sup>11</sup> I explain how the Amish fit into these narratives and how they

are made to legitimate these myths and authenticate the solutions offered by them.

In the first chapter, I introduce the Amish by describing their origins, theological and biblical beliefs, and distinctive practices, as well as some recent changes that have significantly affected their common life. In chapter 2, I provide an overview of Amish tourism in the three largest settlements of Amish in the world, describe the average tourist to Amish Country, and summarize the current wisdom on Amish Country tourism. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, I focus on three themed tourist towns in Ohio. The first is Walnut Creek, a town that only twenty years ago could boast of little more in the way of tourist attractions than one Amish-style restaurant. Today, with its Victorian theme made visible in its shops, inns, and restaurants, Walnut Creek encourages millions of visitors each year to experience time, gender, and nation in what is portrayed as soothing and reassuring ways. In chapter 4, I turn to Berlin, with its American frontier theme, and consider how the story of the American frontier told there helps ease American anxieties about the relationship between technology and human agency. Chapter 5 is about Sugarcreek, the town with the longest history of tourism in Ohio's Amish Country. I consider how this town, known to tourists as "The Little Switzerland of Ohio," addresses tourists' concerns about race and ethnicity in a multicultural age. In the final chapter, I take a look at a distinctive tension in all Amish Country tourism between one strong desire that tourists have and the Amish resistance to it. I close with an exploration of the possible consequences that tourists' frustration may have for their future transformation.