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Stone, Philip ORCID: 0000-0002-9632-1364 (2005) Dark Tourism Consumption - A call for research. e-Review of Tourism Research (eRTR), 3 (5). pp. 109-117. ISSN 1941-5842

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2005

Consuming Dark Tourism: a call for research

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/philip_stone/5/

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Dark Tourism Consumption – A call for research

There is an increasing plethora of sites associated with death, tragedy or the macabre that have become significant tourist ‘attractions’. As a result, the term ‘dark tourism’ has entered academic discourse. However, dark tourism literature is both eclectic and theoretically fragile. This is especially the case with regards to consumption and its implications for understanding the ‘dark tourist’. Thus it is suggested that the dimensions of dark tourism consumption have not been extracted or interrogated – only assumed. Consequently, with death and the nature of dying at the crux of the dark tourism concept, this article calls for the development of consumer behaviour models, which incorporate contemporary socio-cultural aspects of death and dying. It is suggested that this in turn will lead to a better understanding of consumer motives within the dark tourism domain.

Keywords: dark tourism, death, contemporary society, consumption

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Introducing Dark Tourism

‘A Grave Bid to Boost Tourism’ proclaims a recent press release from Salford City Council (www.salford.gov.uk). As part of a wider ‘heritage trail,’ Salford tourism chiefs have decided to turn the city’s cemeteries into visitor attractions, whereby visitors can gaze upon the graves of Salford’s most famous sons and daughters. Most notably Busby Babe Eddie Coleman and Prince Lobengula of South Africa will feature on this new dark itinerary. Of course people have always held a fascination with death, ranging from a simple morbid curiosity through to respect and reverence. However it is society’s apparent fixation with death and how it is consumed by the present day tourist that is of fundamental importance.

Apart from Salford’s rather indistinct figures of the past now having their tombstones polished for public display, there is an increasing plethora of sites associated with death, disaster, tragedy and atrocity that have become significant tourist ‘attractions’. The most obvious of these attractions is perhaps the former Nazi death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, a now repackaged modern-day complex of exhibitions and ‘places of special interest’. Other ‘dark attractions’ include sites of ancient battles, murder and general skulduggery. From enjoying family picnics at the location of the Battle of Culloden, scene of mayhem, betrayal and blood; to purchasing souvenirs of prostitution murder at the Jack the Ripper exhibition in the London Dungeon; or to simply allow schoolchildren to experience ‘past lives’ of unfortunate inmates at the Bodmin Jail Centre in Cornwall, are all illustrations of how death and suffering may be produced and subsequently consumed. This is perhaps taken a stage further with the Disney-like tour of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. Visitors upon admission are provided with an identity card which matches their age and gender with that of a name and photo of a real

holocaust victim. Against a backdrop of video interpretation portraying killing squads in action, the pseudo holocaust victim enters a personal ID into monitors as they wander around the attraction to discover how their real-life counterpart is faring.

Other less obvious examples include visits to scenes of destruction and personal suffering. Sites such as the Parisian underpass where Diana Princess of Wales passed away, or Ground Zero, the site of mass murder on September 11, have become modern-Mecca's where pilgrim-like visitors can allegedly pay their respects. Even more obscure sites of this fascination with death and pain include mass gatherings of people displaying apparent signs of 'conspicuous compassion' (West 2004) at sites of local murder, abuse or tragedy. Most notably, the slaying of two young schoolgirls in Soham (UK) in 2002 attracted an unprecedented occurrence of mass grief and interest. Of course, whilst a full categorisation of these dark sites, purposeful or otherwise, is beyond the scope of this article, it is perhaps worth noting that the supply of 'dark' attractions often rests upon various factors. These may include an attempt to achieve a mercantile advantage in a competitive market place, or to manipulate 'dark heritage' for political reasons. Additionally, particular sites may be supplied as places for reflection and remembrance.

Whilst it remains unclear as to whether death-related tourism is attraction-supply driven, it is nevertheless suggested that within contemporary society people regularly consume death and suffering in touristic form, seemingly in the guise of education and/or entertainment.¹ As a result, this phenomenon has become increasingly diverse and accepted within contemporary society. Indeed, Rojeck (1993:136) suggests that 'fatality is a striking feature in the landscape of postmodernism'. An example of this is noted by Smith (1998:248) who suggests that activities,

sites or destinations associated with warfare ‘probably constitutes the largest category of tourist attractions in the world’. Whilst war related attractions may be considered a subset of tourist sites associated with death, other subsets include graveyard visits (Seaton 2002), holocaust tourism (Ashworth 1996), prison tourism (Strange and Kempa 2003), and slavery-heritage tourism (Dann and Seaton 2001).

Of course travel to, and experience of, places associated with death and suffering is not new, and the origins of this phenomenon are perhaps rooted in a previous age. Indeed, early examples of death-related tourism may be found in the patronage of Roman gladiatorial games, or attendance at medieval public executions, or perhaps in the guided morgue tours of the Victorian period.

Thus travel to sites of death and suffering may simply be an old concept in a new world.

However Lennon and Foley (2000), offering useful yet preliminary discussions, have coined this phenomenon ‘dark tourism’ and as a result have both validated and popularized the concept as an area for research. Also known as ‘thanatourism’ (Seaton 1996), earlier attempts to classify death-related tourist activity resulted in labels such as ‘holidays in hell’ (O’Rourke 1988); ‘morbid tourism’ (Blom 2000); ‘black-spot’ tourism (Rojeck 1993), or as Dann (1994) alliterates ‘milking the macabre’. Essentially, despite the varying perspectives and terminology used, dark tourism refers to visits, intentional or otherwise, to purposeful / non-purposeful sites which offer a presentation of death or suffering as the *raison d’être*.

However, regardless of the increasing attention paid to this in-vogue subject area by the media, or despite the fact the subject is evolving into a ‘cottage industry’ within academia,² dark tourism literature remains eclectic and theoretically fragile (Sharpley 2005). This is especially the case

with regards to the motivational drivers of dark tourists and an exploration of their behaviour. Indeed, Reader (2003) stresses the importance of understanding the motives of those engaged in the dark tourism practice. Similarly, Seaton (1999:131-132) suggests that visitation to dark tourism sites is far from being a marginal form, but rather it ‘is a widespread and old established motivation, though one which has previously eluded the literature of motivation.’ This elusion is also recognised by Lennon and Foley (2000), who advocate the appealing nature of research, conducted by others, which addresses the psychology of dark tourism consumption.

The consumption of dark tourism

The consumption of tourism and its relationship with society is well documented within the literature. Indeed, tourism consumption is suggested to be socially influenced and culturally framed (Sharpley 1999). However the theory of *dark* tourism consumption remains underdeveloped, as does the empirical interrogation of dark tourist motives. Thus to date, the dimensions of dark tourism consumption have not been extracted – only assumed.

Whilst Dann (1998) identifies a number of motivating factors behind dark tourism consumption, including ‘fear of phantoms’ (i.e. addressing childlike fears), the search for novelty/difference, or a more basic ‘bloodlust’, he accepts these categories are principally descriptive and perhaps relate more to specific destinations, attractions and activities. Wight and Lennon (2002) meanwhile attempt to examine dark tourist perceptions in a ‘dark museum’. In particular, they explore the influences of interpretive techniques upon those perceptions. However this latter study is relatively one-dimensional, and does not readily acknowledge the wider, more fundamental, socio-cultural and psychological aspects of dark tourism consumption.

Nevertheless, a tentative move to address these issues is Tarlow (2005), who suggests four basic emotions interact and play on the dark tourist's psychological state. These emotions, when consuming the dark tourism product, may include a sense of insecurity; a sense of gratitude; feelings of humility; and feelings of superiority. Similarly, Rojek (1997) suggests that a reason for tourists' desire to seek out such dark sites may rest with a fragmented sense of social and cultural identity. Indeed, both Rojeck and Tarlow have begun the important step of suggesting wider socio-cultural, emotional and psychological concerns within dark tourism consumption. Hence, it is suggested that research, in a similar vein, must continue in order to help explain the fundamental facets of dark tourism consumption. This in turn will lead to a better understanding of dark tourist motives, and address the fundamental question of *why* tourists seek out such dark sites.

Further to this point, Stone and Sharpley (forthcoming) begin the process of firmly placing the consumption of dark tourism within a socio-thanatology framework. In other words, as the dark tourism concept revolves around death, it is advocated that the psychological and emotional aspects of death and dying within contemporary society be placed at the centre of consumer behaviour theory. As a result, they suggest dark tourism consumption has wider and fundamental implications for contemporary (western) society, especially with regards to the 'death process' within those societies. It is only when research of this type is undertaken will a better understanding of dark tourism consumption be made. Death and the nature of dying within contemporary society, and its influence upon the consumer are seen as essential components to

begin this exploration. With this approach in mind, the dark tourist and some of their motivations will no doubt be revealed.

¹ This article does not wish to seek to enter into any philosophical debate over the term ‘contemporary society’, rather to recognise significant aspects of the concept. Also referred to as post-modernity, high or late modernity, or late capitalism, broad defining features include an increased commercial ethic and commodification; a dedifferentiation of time and space through global technological communication; and an introduction of anxiety and doubt over the project of modernity.

² It could be argued that dark tourism literature has evolved in parallel with both the growing supply of dark tourism attractions, sites and exhibitions, and the actual demand for such activities. Consequently, there is an increased level of academic interest in the subject area. See for example <http://www.dark-tourism.org.uk>

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