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Dark Tourism – an old concept in a new world

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Dark Tourism – an old concept in a new world

There are an increasingly number of death-related visitor sites, attractions and exhibitions, often trading under the guise of remembrance, education and/or entertainment, which attract people eager to consume real and commodified death. Indeed, the act of touristic travel to sites of death, disaster and the macabre is becoming a pervasive cultural activity within contemporary society. From enjoying family picnics on battle sites of northern France or purchasing souvenirs of genocide at Ground Zero, to allowing schoolchildren to experience past lives of unfortunate inmates at the Bodmin Jail Centre, are all illustrations of the seemingly macabre. Consequently, the term ‘dark tourism’ (also know by the rather awkward label of ‘thanatourism’) has entered academic discourse and media parlance. Essentially 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*. Likewise, Tarlow (2005:48) identifies dark tourism as ‘visitations to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives’.

With increasing attention from the academic community and media alike, this article suggests dark tourism, with its roots in a pre-modern age, is an old concept but with new relevance and consequence for the society in which we reside today. Of course, travel to and experience of events associated with death, pain or suffering is not a new phenomenon. Whilst religious pilgrimages, for emotional and spiritual reasons, have attracted people to sites of death and violence for centuries, tourists have long been drawn, intentionally or otherwise, to death-related attractions. Early examples may be found in the patronage of Roman gladiatorial games. With death and suffering at the core of the gladiatorial product, and its eager consumption by raucous spectators, the Roman Colosseum may be considered one of the first dark tourist attractions.

Other precursors to dark tourism, and before the democratization of travel, may be seen in the public executions of the medieval period up until the 19th century. As public

spectacles, executions served as visible reminders of deterrence and retribution. Yet, with the advent of more formalised arrangements to accommodate visiting voyeurs, public executions increasingly took on the characteristics of a spectator event. Indeed, execution sites such as Tyburn boasted specially erected grandstands to offer better vantage points to see the condemned die. In a similar vein, this fascination with 'other death' may be seen in the alleged first guided tour in England, whereby in 1838 a railway excursion in Cornwall took in the hanging of two convicted murderers (Boorstin 1987). Other early examples of dark tourism may be found in the guided morgue tours of the Victorian period, the Chamber of Horrors exhibition of Madame Tussaud, or in 'correction houses' where galleries were built to accommodate fee-paying visitors who witnessed flogging as a recreational activity.

Presently however, dark tourism is manifested in various forms and subsets. These include Holocaust tourism (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Lennon and Foley 2000), battlefield tourism (Henderson 2000), cemetery and internment sites (Seaton 2002), slavery-heritage (Dann and Seaton 2001), celebrity death sites (Alderman 2002), and prison tourism (Strange and Kempa 2003). However, it is only recently that dark tourism, in all its manifestations and various shades has become widespread and seemingly more popular. Whilst it remains unclear as to whether the proliferation of dark tourism is due to an increased supply of attractions and sites, or whether consumers are demanding more and more of the macabre, media inspired or otherwise, death in touristic form is an increasing feature of the contemporary landscape.

It is this demand for the dark tourism product, and the motivation that lies behind it that is of fundamental importance. Whilst there is clearly a need for a much fuller exploration of motivations for dark tourism, in both general and micro-populations, some speculation has already been made. For instance, Seaton and Lennon (2004) suggest that journeys into the realms of death and suffering have two distinct origins. Firstly, they advocate that the existence of *schadenfreude*, a secret pleasure in witnessing the misfortunes of others, may be a prime motivator in people travelling to sites of disaster. Secondly, they suggest *thanatopsis*, the contemplation of one's own death, which also may be a factor at play

when people visit dark sites. However, personal contemplation of death in a contemporary world is often negated through a lack of mechanisms that allow confrontation of death. With increased secularisation and change in family structures, medicalization of the death process and privatization of the death industry, death has become institutionally sequestered from contemporary society. Consequently, this apparent absence of death within contemporary society proves a paradox because as mortal finite beings, as we live so we shall die, therefore death is very much present. Thus, dark tourism and its consumption may be a contemporary mechanism for confronting death, hence making absence death present in the sense it allows consumers to undertake *thanatopsis* in a visible and accepted manner (Stone forthcoming). However, to date the dimensions of dark tourism and its consumption have not been fully extracted or interrogated, only assumed. The task now is to reveal the extent of dark tourism, the motivations that lie behind it, and perhaps more importantly its relationship with the wider society in which we reside today.

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