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[Guest Contribution]

Introducing Dark Tourism: Typology, Concept and Practice

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Introducing Dark Tourism

Dark tourism is the act of travel to sites of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre. Today, within socially sanctioned dark tourism sites, visitors tour gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, fire rifles on former battlefields in Vietnam, inspect human skulls at Cambodian stupa memorials, gaze at preserved corpses in Rwanda's genocidal landscape, or purchase commemorative 9/11 souvenirs of tragedy at Ground Zero. Consequently, dark tourism has gained significant traction in scholarly and media parlance over the past twenty years or so. Yet, despite its increasing use to intellectually frame difficult heritage, dark tourism remains divisive as a concept as well as being ethically contentious in practice. Much of this discordance is shaped by taxonomical and definitional disagreements of dark tourism, the conceptual frameworks that it adopts, as well as the imposition of *darkness* on those who both produce and consume 'heritage that hurts'.

I argue in this essay, therefore, that those who fret about dark tourism typological and conceptual frameworks should focus more, perhaps, on how dark tourism can traverse disciplinary borders, challenge social scientific subject gatekeepers, and engage directly with heritage-producers and tourist-consumers. Dark tourism as a global scholarly brand can connect difficult heritage with visitor experiences and, in so doing, enlighten the (im)possibility of (re)presenting death and disaster within contemporary visitor economies.

Dark Tourism as a Typology

There is no such thing as 'dark tourism' – or at least there is no universally accepted definition of what dark tourism actually is or entails. Indeed, tourism may simply be defined as the movement of people: while the term 'dark' has so many subjective and contrasting connotations and linguistic complexities that it is almost futile to define 'darkness' in dark tourism. Nevertheless, despite inherent cultural and semantic intricacies of the terminology, dark tourism represents a branded scholarly typology of heritage sites, exhibitions, and visitor attractions that all have a single common denominator. This commonality is an interpretation of death for the modern visitor economy. Heritage sites that interpret death and the causes of such dying, whether untimely, or in violent or calamitous circumstances, often exist for memorialisation or educative purposes. However these sites are also part of a broader service sector whereby tourism and the commodification of culture and heritage has been mainstay for many years. Of course, issues and impacts of commodifying cultural heritage are well-rehearsed and are not repeated here, yet the problems of

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‘packaging up’ diverse global *sites of death* or heritage sites *associated with dying* remain.

It is here that lays the conundrum of whether we can actually classify ‘dark sites’ and identify which tourism destinations are dark. To some extent it matters little if agreement cannot be reached amongst the intelligentsia of what is or what is not ‘dark’ in dark tourism. Arguably, what matters more is scholarly recognition of heritage sites that seek to interpret death-events which have perturbed our collective consciousness. More importantly, academic rigour is required to ascertain visitor behavioural reactions to such sites, as well as identifying fundamental interrelationships with the cultural condition of society. That said, however, there has been a concerted academic effort to offer typological frameworks of death-related tourism. Much of this effort has focussed on the conceptual *shading* of dark tourism and whether some sites are darker than others. An obvious point of course is that a death-event being more despairing and distressing than another is open to a multitude of idiosyncratic meanings and selective heritage interpretations. What is less obvious is how particular visitor sites can be allied that can lead to a fluid, if not subjective, continuum of intensity – both for producing such heritage sites as well as for divergent visitor experiences. For example, sites with explicit political or commemorative interpretation, sites that are anchored in edification, memorialisation or edutainment, sites that possess locational authenticity or have chronological distance to the actual death-event, as well as the extent of sites adopting neo-liberal business marketing to drive visitor footfall. While this list is not exhaustive and open to evident critique, particularly how to determine such intrinsic features, conceptually positioning sites that portray death, dying and death-events allows potential enlightenment of the politics, history, management and socio-cultural consequences of difficult heritage.

Dark Tourism as a Concept

Dark tourism is concerned with encountering spaces of death or calamity that have political or historical significance, and that continue to impact upon the living. Moreover, dark tourism has, to some extent, domesticated death and exposes a cultural institution that mediates between the ordinary Self and the significant Other dead. Yet, the production of these ‘deathscapes’ within the visitor economy and, consequently, the consumption of recent or distant trauma within a collectively endorsed tourism environment raises important questions of the associations between morality, mortality and contemporary approaches to death and representation of the dead. In a Western secular society where ordinary death is often sequestered behind medical and professional façades, yet extraordinary death is remembered for popular consumption, dark tourism mediates a potential if not complex and relative social filter between life and death. In other societies, such as in Asia, issues of religious practice as well as ancestor worship of the dead raises complex issues of how the significant and untimely dead are remembered. Furthermore, ethical ambiguities inherent within dark tourism are systematic of broader moral dilemmas in conveying narratives of death. Moral boundaries and ethical relativity are often questioned and renegotiated in places of dark tourism. In turn, dark tourism signifies a communicative channel of morality whereby dark tourism may not only act as a guardian of (tragic) history, but also as moral guardian of a modern society which

appears to be in a midst of a collective ethical interrogation.

While dark tourism as an academic field of study has brought the interest of visiting deathscapes into the contemporary imagination, numerous conceptual challenges are evident. These multidisciplinary challenges remain outside of the scope of my essay, yet dark tourism in its broadest sense can be considered dialogic and mediatory. Dark tourism exposes particularities of people, place and culture, where visiting sites of mortality can reveal ontological anxieties about the past as well as the future. Dark tourism also symbolises sites of dissonant heritage, sites of selective silences, sites rendered political and ideological, sites powerfully intertwined with interpretation and meaning, and sites of the imaginary and the imagined. Therefore, analysing distinctions of dark tourism as a concept and researching its mediating interrelationships with the cultural condition of society is important in contributing to our understanding of the complex associations between (dark) heritages and the visitor experience. It is these associations that provide the rationale to study dark tourism where scholarly investigations can enlighten critical approaches to a contemporary social reality of death.

Dark Tourism in Practice

Dark tourism sites exist within the milieu of Other death. Arguably, therefore, dark tourism sites are whose evolutionary diversity and polysemic nature demand managerial strategies that differ from other visitor sites. This notion of ‘aura’ from a visitor experience perspective calls for an affective design and interpretation on the part of heritage memory managers. Difficult heritage and its representation should allow visitors to feel alive in their reconnection with the past and to feel empathy with victims. Indeed, within the context of business practice and consumer research, dark tourism experiences will always evoke emotional tensions, albeit to varying degrees, between diverse stakeholders. Even so, dark tourism in practice should extend unbiased, if not balanced interpretation that offers an opportunity for catharsis and acceptance, as well as grieving for a sense of loss of both people and place. Therefore, while dark tourism as a term may exist within academic imaginations and signifies a broach church of death-related heritage attractions, there are no corresponding ‘dark tourists’. Dark tourists by implication of so-called dark tourism do not exist – only people interested in the social reality of their own life-worlds.

Dark tourism in practice is identifiable where social scientists may scrutinise multidisciplinary quandaries that impact on death and the dead as contemporary commodities. Subsequently, dark tourism exposes a cultural practice that blurs the line between commemoration of the dead and commodification of death. In so doing, those professionals who work on the front line in what might be considered dark tourism sites, attractions, or exhibitions are confronted with unprecedented moral, managerial and doctrinal challenges. The management of political remembrance, the interpretation of suffering, distinctions between difficult heritage and tragic history, and the effect of time and the fading of the significant Other dead into the past are just some of the complex issues memory managers are facing. Moreover, visitor encounters at places of tragedy and death and, crucially, the consequences of those encounters for broader society remain a crux for future dark tourism research. Dark tourism can enlighten an understanding of how contemporary societies deal with and represent their significant dead. Ironically, therefore, dark tourism is concerned with

death and dying, yet through its social scientific study and its empirical practice, dark tourism tells us more about life and the living.

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