

AUTHENTICITY AND SIMULATION IN POST-TOURISM

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Abstract

Post-tourism has undergone a few mutations in recent decades. The ironically-disposed post-tourist has come to accept and eventually seek destinations where space and time, and sometimes people themselves, have been commodified for touristic purposes. Various degrees of authenticity of a few popular tourist destinations are analyzed in the light of Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra. The conclusion briefly lays out the modern tourists' dual attitude towards commodification and (in)authenticity.

Keywords: post-tourism, authenticity, commodification

1. Changes and challenges in post-tourism

A few mutations in tourists' objectives occurred towards the end of the 20th century. One was determined by an urge to repress memories of the genocides that underlie modernity, from the World Wars to Bosnia and Rwanda, and generated a postmodern quest for ahistorical places; accordingly, touristic niches have been developed that focus on themes such as "unspoiled nature" and "savagery" (MacCannell 2003). At the same time, destinations whose historicity is touristically exploitable have devised new ways of catering to the needs of post-tourists, who may seek either accepted simulacra (from Victorianized English cities to *Cardo Culinaria*, a Roman restaurant in Jerusalem boasting "The First-Century Dining Experience"), or lived, ongoing authenticity, e.g. in Berlin, where "plenty of visitors avoid the big sights altogether" taking, instead of a visit to the Brandenburg Gate, "a Sunday jaunt through Mauerpark's flea market" (Braun & Novy 2010). Whatever the case, the shift from the canonic list of the traditional tourist is evident. More accurately, what is post-tourism?

Post-tourism involves the cultivation of an ironic disposition to the tourist site. The post-tourist accepts that the site will be swarming with other tourists and treats this as part of the tourist experience. The Romantic ideal of being alone with the tourist object so that one can possess it fully is abandoned. Post-tourists have come to terms with the commodified world and do not hanker after pre-commodified experience (Rojek 2003).

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Most touristic visits, however, have a broader scope, such as the natural and/or cultural landscape as a whole. In fact, landscapes should be understood synergistically, as a “particular association of their physical and built characteristics with the meanings they have for those who are experiencing them” (Relph 1976). This is what makes them actual tourist destinations, constructed by both locals and visitors. Thus, space and time are arranged and commodified through a process that makes geographies and cultures “intersect and reciprocally inform each other” (Anderson and Gale 1992).

Even before the emergence of a sophisticated, two-sided post-tourist who, while seeking direct contact with locals, does not mind the “simulation of a local culture” (Featherstone 2003), the tourism industry was forced to respond to changing demand. One solution was museumification, which may be either grand-scale, e.g. the Creusot-Montceau Ecomuseum, set up in 1972 in Burgundy, France, where “entire working-class neighborhoods, living metallurgic zones, an entire culture, men, women, and children included – gestures, languages, customs [were] fossilized alive as in a snapshot” (Baudrillard 1994); or confined to Disneyfied showcases of architecture and/or crafts, e.g. El Poble Espanyol of Barcelona (built in 1929) and the Village Museum of Bucharest (1936), both simulated places, displaying simulacra and relocated authentic artifacts respectively.

Time and everyday life are commodified and simulated in both directions: the future, e.g. Future World at Epcot, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, a theme park opened in 1982, “comprised of several rides that demonstrate current and future technology”; and the past, e.g. the Land of Legends at Lejre in Denmark, where visitors can experience life in the Stone, Iron or Viking Age, or the pioneer villages of North America cited by Relph (Relph 1976). Museumification and commodification go hand in hand.

If postmodernism has brought on the disintegration of culture into “pure images without referent or content” (Baudrillard 1994), it follows naturally that what post-tourism offers for consumption consists of “visual signs and sometimes simulacrum” (Urry 2002). The postmodern, third-order simulacrum, an image that “has no relation to any reality whatsoever”, being “is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1994) and preceding the original, shares the tourist market with second-order simulacra, which undo the bond between image and reality, and first-order simulacra, characteristic of premodern, “cruel” societies, where signs were not arbitrary and the image used to be just an artificial representation of a certain reality (Baudrillard 1993). Symbols and signs may occupy a larger territory in contemporary culture, yet Baudrillard’s posit that they have superseded reality and that meaning itself has become meaningless has been challenged as being anything from obscure to irrational.

The post-tourist is not only aware of, but even delighted with the simulacrum, because he knows that the place he is visiting is just “another pastiche surface”, a feature of postmodern experience, and that “the apparently authentic fishing village could not exist without the income from tourism” (Urry 2002). Even when he seeks “pure”, rather than “apparent”, authenticity by mingling with locals, he may find out that little genuineness is left after human intervention in those city- or landscapes. Powerful economic factors commodify “the natural and cultural environments of the destination” as a “recreational resource” (Hughes 1995). As culture has become a commodity, moreover, since “the shameless commodification and commercialization of everything is, after all, one of the hallmarks of our times”, sexuality, nature and the authenticity of the product become commercial requirements involving “a bias towards the immediate, the spectacular, the aesthetically acceptable” (Harvey 2001).

2. Disneyfication

Some post-travelers to Europe find the place dirty, boring and linguistically unintelligible, while the “well-designed” Disney World provides “much more fun”, making people happy (Harvey 2001). Certainly, this is not the only reason why Europe attempts to “redesign itself to Disney standards”, and destinations become “Disneyfied” to the point of placelessness: chaotic, meaningless, uniformized and “lacking both diverse landscapes and significant places” – it is the outcome of faster communication and me-tooism, but also the expression of a leveling attitude (Relph 1976). Uniformity has spread from repeated industrial landscapes to look-alike resorts and amusement parks.

Postmodern landscapes are places for consumption: they are not for people to live in, nor do they “provide a sense of social identity”, because they are simulated – just like Main St. in EuroDisney (Urry 2002). The paradoxical post-tourist is looking for genuine experiences not only in local flea markets, but also in entirely artificial environments, from virtual worlds to Disneyland, as if to illustrate that “technology can give us more reality than nature can” (Eco 1988).

“Disneyfication” or “Disneyization” is almost an all-weather buzzword, evoked whenever big business interests stand out too much, commodification is perceived as excessive, tastes change for the kitschier to satisfy tourists, the simulacrum tends to detach itself completely from reality, or destinations become ahistorical and/or placeless – in fact on any number of occasions.

3. Manipulation of space: degrees of authenticity

Destinations that are “purposefully created or developed as tourist attractions” must be distinguished from “accidental” sites (Sharpley 2009). Since place authenticity is so often simulated in tourism, generating second- and third-order simulacra, it is

important to establish both a definition and degrees of authenticity. On the face of it, an authentic place may be thought to be one that was *not* created for touristic purposes, even if it may regularly undergo changes to satisfy tourist needs. However, we will regard authenticity as “being inside and belonging to *your* place both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to know this without reflecting upon it” (Relph 1976). This honest, “unselfconscious sense of place”, which takes a place for what it is, provides a strong sense of identity. Simply put, place authenticity may be:

a) *Real*, i.e. non-touristic functions predate the touristic function (e.g. De Wallen a.k.a. Red Light District in Amsterdam, Zlatá ulička/the Golden Lane in Prague, the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris).



De Wallen, Amsterdam © A. Solomon

De Wallen. Following a four-century-old hassle with the authorities and many ups and downs in the level of tolerance, prostitution was legalized in the Netherlands in 2000, and Amsterdam's De Wallen network of streets and alleyways, with their hundreds of sex venues, coffee shops selling light drugs, sex theaters and

museums, became one of the city's main tourist attractions. Police controls and law enforcement allow both tourists and locals uninvolved in the sex or drug trade to walk through the neighborhood unthreatened, so “normal” people may be seen there at any time of day. The intense commodification of sex in every nook and corner has often drawn comparisons between the Red Light District and American open-air shopping malls or Fifth Avenue, the only difference being that it is a wide range of human bodies that its neon windows have on display: “commodification of bodies has been perfected to the level of an art form” (Aalbers 2005). Since the prostitutes luring customers from their windows do not only deliver, but also stand for real sex, being unique and real, they may be considered first-order simulacra. At the same time, as they are unfaithful copies that, while revealing a reality, also denature it, their image belongs in the “order of maleficence” (Baudrillard 1994).

b) *Staged*, i.e. assembled/recreated for commercial/tourist purposes (e.g. El Poble Espanyol in Barcelona, the Village Museum in Bucharest, the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in Las Vegas with its recreation of St. Mark's Square and gondola rides).



El Poble Espanyol, Barcelona © A. Solomon

El Poble Espanyol. One of the largest open-air museums in the world, it is a simulated “all-Spanish” town, purpose-built to the blueprints of architects and artists who sought inspiration in 1600 Spanish towns. After the 1929 international exhibition closed down, the success of the complex determined the authorities to reverse the decision to demolish it. Today it also hosts more than 40 artisans’ workshops, where visitors can both see at work traditional handicraftsmen, from leatherworkers to glassblowers, and buy their products. Authentic craftspeople sell commoditized goods to ambivalent post-tourists in replica houses constructed in a simulated town. Is this a kind of Disneyland?

The architecture representing almost all the regions of Spain faithfully reproduces the original models, each house being an individual copy, while the artificially-created, movie-set like town in which all the reproductions are amassed is an invented place, a second-order simulacrum that imitates reality. Its main square was selected as a filming location for *Perfume: The Story of A Murderer* (2006): a simulacrum within another simulacrum that predates it. At Disneyland, where the simulacrum predates the original, the hyperreal dissimulates the fact that there is nothing – i.e. no reality in the traditional acceptance – behind it. So far as the hyperreal is defined as “a real without origin or reality”, the argument holds water; nevertheless, Baudrillard carries on with the highly questionable assumption that the whole of America is no longer real, but hyperreal, i.e. simulated, “sheltered”

from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, claiming that “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” (Baudrillard 1994).

c) *Mixed* (e.g. Pompeii, La Pedrera in Barcelona, enactments of savagery, i.e. formerly primitive groups earning their living “by charging visitors admission to their sacred shrines, ritual performances, and displays of more or less ‘ethnologized’ everyday life” – McCannell 2003).

Pompeii. Although excavated with an eye to preserving as much as possible the aspect it had right before the AD 79 eruption that buried it, the Roman city welcomes visitors with copies of its famous frescoes, mosaics and statues, because the originals were long ago ferried to the Archeological Museum in Naples, together with the bodies of its ancient inhabitants, having been too exposed both to the elements and to the tourists’ unhampered hunt for souvenirs. The exhibited plaster casts of the victims of the eruption are simulacra that both replace and fill the forms of the originals. Authentic (houses, streets, temples, etc.) and simulated (copies of art and people) elements coexist. Interestingly, in 2008 the site was allegedly in danger of Disneyfication, when a heritage councilor suggested limiting the number of visitors in parallel with renting the place for private events to heavyweights such as Google and Microsoft for “astronomical” fees. The idea was at odds with the traditional Italian outlook on national heritage which, in combination with deep-rooted suspicion of commercial dealings undertaken by foreigners, has so far prevented Pompeii from becoming the backdrop for an “American-style theme park” (Nadeau 2008).



Pompeii: remains and plaster cast © A. Solomon

4. Manipulation of time: history or heritage?

An interesting development in the commodification of history and memory is the fashionable concept of “vintage”, applicable to anything from clothes to cars to architecture, which valorizes items as simulacra taken out of their original context: a “golden age” that is nothing but the distorted perception of a previous era. The nostalgia for the recent industrial past and a sense of community that have all but disappeared in a fluid, uncertain postmodernity is sublimated into tourist-oriented activities that make previously unprofitable tasks profitable again, as a simulacrum, and turn workers into “exhibition fodder for tourists” (Rojek 2003).

In their turn, tourist destinations are adjusted by “manipulations of history and culture” (Ringer 2003) to suit the visitors’ interests and timetables. Tourists on a tight schedule will only seek “a brief comprehensible history that can be easily assimilated – heritage rather than history” (Urry 2002).

Development of tourist-worthy heritage often entails the displacement or simulation of historical artifacts, because “heritage attractions (as all tourist attractions) must be safe, clean and pleasing”, the depicted place being “intentionally constructed”, as in the case of some “re-imaged” or themed city streets in England, Victorianized through “aesthetic reconstruction” (Hughes 2003). A “heritage style”, including “sandblasted walls and Victorian street furniture”, has emerged in the wake of de-industrialization in northern England since the 1980s. Once something has become “history”, “once the past has been turned into a commodity, it is made safe, sterile and shorn of its capacity to generate risk and danger, subversion and seduction” (Urry 2002). Uncertainty about the future and disappointment with the present state of affairs underlie the perpetual yearning for a “golden age” and benefits the “heritage industry”.

A reverse operation may be undertaken to make a gloomy past more acceptable. The appalling coal-mine landscape seen by Orwell on his 1936 investigative trip to northern England, his “mental picture of hell” (Orwell 1937), has been cleaned up and “sanitized” into a posh tourist destination commanded by the Wigan Pier Heritage Centre – a model of heritage industry that attracts more than one million tourists a year (Urry 2002).

The distortion of the past for tourist purposes has been also conceptualized as “dissonant heritage” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), a contemporary phenomenon consisting of conflicting views concerning one and the same historical fact or place, hence controversies on the representation of the past and the meaning of heritage, frequently encountered at tourist destinations.

Since not all tourists are attracted by safe, agreeable destinations, time and space may be manipulated to become ghastly or life-threatening. The commodification of death has spawned various types of “dark tourism”.

5. Dark tourism

Retouching their definition of dark tourism as presentation and consumption of real and commodified death and disaster sites, Malcolm Foley and John J. Lennon present it as an “intimation of postmodernity” supported by communication technology, which allows instant reporting and continuous repetition (Lennon & Foley 2000). Dark tourism is also a challenge on the “inherent order, rationality and progress of modernity”, characterized by progressive blurriness between the educational message and tourist commodification (Sharpley 2009). As importantly, “atrocities heritage is both a highly marketable combination of education and enjoyment and a powerful instrument for the transference of political or social messages” (Ashworth 1996).

After Pompeii was excavated, English aristocrats put it on the Grand Tour itinerary, turning it into “the greatest thanatopic travel destination of the Romantic period”, in line with a tradition going back to the Middle Ages, when public executions and generally “the contemplation of death” were customary (Seaton 1996). Ever since then, dark tourism (whose name varies with authors – thanatourism, morbid tourism, Black Spot tourism, grief tourism, fright tourism, etc., or destinations – e.g. graveyards, holocaust tourism, atrocities tourism, prison tourism, slavery-heritage tourism, etc.) has constantly diversified to include “attractions” as diverse as Beirut and Jack the Ripper’s London tour. Again, the distinction must be made between “accidental” and purpose-built sites.

A number of possible “drivers” of dark tourism have been mentioned, from voyeurism and Schadenfreude to the desire to overcome one’s childhood fear of ghosts (Sharpley 2009, Dann 1998 and others). Although uncertainty persists about its motivational factors, and as to whether it is demand or rather supply that generates it, i.e. whether it is tourist- or place-driven, several classifications have been produced, e.g. “houses of horror” (haunted hotels, dungeons such as the Tower of London and the Tower of Dalibor at Prague Castle), “fields of fatality” (Waterloo, Auschwitz, Cambodia’s “killing fields”, cemeteries where celebrities are buried), “themed thanatos” (museums and collections themed around suffering and death, such as the itinerant Museum of Torture or Pompeii) (Sharpley 2009); or Seaton’s five categories (Seaton 1996).

The race for competitive advantage mobilizes heritage, or the simulacrum thereof, even in “the most disadvantaged places” (Robins 1991). Any place may become a destination, however bleak, macabre or dangerous, but constraints imposed by the

museum's theme and commodification for tourist consumption often undermine historical accuracy.

5.1. Fascination with death – the others' and one's own

Even if the rapid progress of communications has made it possible for almost everyone to be a spectator of death much more often than before, almost obsessively, contact with death is usually through a representation or a simulacrum, either on the news or in movies. Old funeral and burial customs gave way to sanitized, almost impersonal services for disposing of a dead body. We have proceeded to “the exclusion of the dead and of death” from our culture (Baudrillard 1993). The paradox is that postmoderns become ever more estranged from death the more exposed to it. However, a subliminal fascination with death must exist since gore is such a success in the media, and crowds throng “Body World” exhibitions. People are not content with the abstract contemplation of death.



Bucharest, 2013: The Human Body exhibition © A. Solomon

Rather than death itself, dark tourists are fascinated with “the broader context within which death occurs” (Sharpley 2009), while the “repackaged ‘other’ death” allows them to “(un)comfortably indulge their curiosity and fascination with thanatological concerns in a socially acceptable and indeed often sanctioned environment, thus providing them with an opportunity to construct their own contemplations of mortality” (Stone 2009). Within or outside the category of dark tourists, an even more “specialized” group finds excitement not in the simulacra displayed in museums of torture or plaster casts of corpses, but in playing with their own death.

In dark tourism, however commodified, sanitized or hidden behind simulacra, death is real; but it is the death of others, “reassuring rather than threatening”, and

it orients people towards “strategies of survival rather than making them aware of the futility of all [life] strategies in the face of mortality” (Bauman 1993). Crawling through commodified Viet Cong tunnels and firing AK-47 rifles, although a simulation, throws a bridge between the contemplation of the other’s death and traveling to dangerous destinations for a test – or taste – of one’s own: “surviving to tell the tale” becomes part of “dark tourism as classification status” (Sharpley 2009). The tourist’s possible own death retraces the way from simulacrum back to the “real thing”. The motivation of these tourists is no longer to “view their own death as distant, unrelated to the dark tourism product which they consume, and with a hope that their own death will be a ‘good’ death” (Stone 2009), but to confront their own death “hands-on”. Spiking tourism to unlikely destinations such as theaters of atrocity in Rwanda and Afghanistan and disaster areas like Chernobyl, whose authorities opened the “Zone” for tourism in 2010, as well as swimming with sharks for an adrenalin rush at the Melbourne Oceanarium, indicates growing demand for commodified danger, and perhaps the resurgence of an atavistic need blunted by (post)modern lifestyles – the need for stimulation of the response to stress. The staged, commodified meeting with a shark is arguably a simulacrum of accidental encounters, but the physical contact – and danger! – decidedly is not. The Monaco Oceanographic Museum offers a watered-down, “educational” type of shark encounter at its Touch Tank, where a visitor can stroke baby sharks as well as other species as they swim by.

5.2. Ethical issues

While consumerism and commodification may pose no ethical problems for developers of tourist sites, souvenir manufacturers and sellers, and other people who stand to gain from the tourism industry, dark tourism to destinations whose authenticity is real or mixed often interferes with feelings of respect for the dead, especially when the tragic events occurred in recent memory. Since the very social identity of a community is built around “particular configurations of space, time and memory” (Urry 2002) and death is still a powerful taboo today, albeit for different reasons, the commodification of death for the use of visitors is likely to be perceived as morally offensive. The sale of 9/11 trinkets at Ground Zero, or the presence of “hot dog stands, postcard vendors, film stores and discount pottery warehouses” at Auschwitz are dilemmatic to say the least (Lennon & Foley 2000). One may go so far as to speak of “the rights of those whose death is commoditised or commercialised through dark tourism” (Sharpley 2009).

6. Conclusions

Post-tourists are not only people who willingly pay to keep a tourist destination or attraction going which enables many locals to earn a living. Both they and those in the tourism business are barbarians in the sense given by Alessandro Baricco: on

the face of it, marauders without culture or history who, from fragments of the past, will not rebuild the original, but erect new structures; in their minds, “the Greek column, the monocle, the revolver and the medieval relic are aligned in a single row and stored in the same depository for relics” (Baricco 2009). Authenticity and origins mean nothing to them, because their world makes sense only when those fragments of the past interact with others, setting off a new reality – a barbarian idea that everybody rejects in theory, but readily practices. Heritage towns, pioneer settlements, former industrial communities engaged in performative labor and other such reconstructions “present a cannibalized version of history which is designed to maximize tourist flows” (Rojek 2003).

The clash and concord between a modern world that ironically decries both the loss of a prettified “golden age” and inauthenticity, on the one hand, and the postmodern play with commodification and simulacra that everyone is eager to enjoy, on the other, is a source of confusion, which the variety and unpredictability of tourists’ motives will make hard to dispel.

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