

# The tourist semiotic practice: Is the marker authentic?



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In recent years, there has been a debate concerning MacCannell's (1976) formulation of the tourist attraction as a semiotic sign, with the marker as the signifier, and the sight as the signified. In his examples such as battlefields, MacCannell points out that it is the marker that makes a visit worth taking. Lau (2011) regards MacCannell's concept as sight-as-sign, i.e., sights constituting signs, an idea not accepted by MacCannell (2014) himself, and comments that the concept is anti-essentialist, which is incompatible with his two essentialist concepts, that is authenticity and pilgrimage. He argues that it is the sight that constitutes the signifier, the actual historical event the signified, and the latter is what tourists really interested in. However, Knudsen and Rickly-Boyd (2012) critique that Lau "has made tourism essentialist when most theorists and practitioners readily admit it is anti-essentialist..." They argue that MacCannell has not based his theory on the semiotics of Saussure as Lau has stated, but actually that of Peirce, which is compatible with the anti-essentialist theory of tourism as a performance. Agreeing with Knudsen and Rickly-Boyd that his semiotic theory is more dependent on Peirce than Saussure, MacCannell (2014) points out that his concept of "staged authenticity" is not an essentialist concept, and his term of authenticity is "a fundamentally compromised philosophical concept", because he has "never dealt with authenticity as it might be conceived in ontological, essentialist, or existentialist framework". Meanwhile, Lau (2014) makes an anti-critique that labeling his position essentialist is a misunderstanding of the contemporary realist position, and it is MacCannell's adoption of Peirce and Saussure that is confused. Thus, MacCannell's original formulation of the tourist attraction as a sign has become the crux of the debate.

Revisiting MacCannell's (1976) original work, as can be found that when applying Peirce's semiotic triangle into tourism, MacCannell has made an alteration under the influence of the semiotics of Saussure, maybe as a result of his turning away from Saussure to Peirce following Derrida (MacCannell, 2014). While for Peirce a sign is made up of a representamen, an object and an interpretant, for MacCannell (1976) a sign of the tourist attraction is composed of a marker, a sight and a tourist. The tourist is just an interpreter, and cannot be regarded as an interpretant, which is "itself a sign in the mind of the interpreter" (Chandler, 2007, p. 31). Although MacCannell (1976), MacCannell (2014) has indicated that tourist sites request the presence of tourist and the tourists' performance for their actualization, he removes the "tourist" in his formulation of the tourist attraction as a sign, contributing to his utilizing Peirce within a Saussurean framework just as Lau (2014) has mentioned.

A major feature of the semiotics of Peirce, when being compared with that of Saussure, is that it endows the interpreter with the agency to interpret the representamen (marker) with reference to the object (sight), and then create a sign in his mind, i.e., interpretant. Viewing tourists as active semiotic practitioners, the concept of "the tourist semiotic practice" is proposed in this commentary to highlight the agency of the tourist to discern the authenticity of the marker with reference to the sight of the tourist attraction as a sign. Studies have shown that tourists are not passive receivers of performances in tourism; instead they are performers on stages (Edensor, 2000; Edensor, 2001). It is true

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that tourism has increasingly been theorized as a performance rather than a pilgrimage just as Knudsen and Rickly-Boyd (2012) have noted, but still a lot of tourists do have the eagerness to discern the object authenticity of the marker. Object authenticity is accepted here as a property of a tourist object from a social realist perspective suggested by Lau (2010), from which tourists are regarded as being able to discern the degree of the authenticity of the marker with knowledge about the attraction.

MacCannell (1976) has defined a marker as “any information about a sight” (p. 110). Since no markers exist in a vacuum, a marker is redefined here as anything that is said to contain key information about a sight. Thus, in the case of the battlefield, the cemetery (marker) and the battle site (sight) are socially constructed as sharing some key information, i.e., the place where the historical battle occurs. By semiotic practices, tourists are able to discern whether, and to what degree, the marker shares some key information with the sight.

The tourist semiotic practice acts as a mediator to establish a link between the semiotics of Peirce and Saussure, also MacCannell (1976) and Lau (2011), in tourism contexts (Fig. 1). Since MacCannell’s (1976) semiotic theory of the tourist attraction is mainly based on Peirce, let’s firstly make an analysis of the battlefield with Peirce’s semiotic triangle (the downside of Fig. 1). The cemetery as the representamen (marker), the battle site as the object (sight), and the place of the event as the interpretant (sign in mind) constitute the tourist attraction as a Peircean sign, which is a little different from the formulation by MacCannell. The Peircean semiotic model of the tourist attraction here is not essentialist (Knudsen & Rickly-Boyd, 2012) as the marker can be constructed by the developer as “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1976) to cater to tourists’ quest for authenticity.

The battle site as a Saussurean sign is composed of the battle site as the signifier, and the actual historical event as the signified as Lau (2011) has proposed (the upper right side of Fig. 1). Similarly, the cemetery as a Saussurean sign is composed of the cemetery as the signifier and the place as the signified (the upper left side of Fig. 1). Chandler (2007, pp. 27–28) has pointed out that “while the relationships between signifiers and their signifieds are ontologically arbitrary... , this is not to suggest that signifying systems are socially or historically arbitrary”, and “the Saussurean legacy of the arbitrariness of signs leads semioticians to stress that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is conventional—dependent on social and cultural conventions which have to be learned”. Thus, the relationship between the signifier and the signified of the Saussure sign conforms well to the

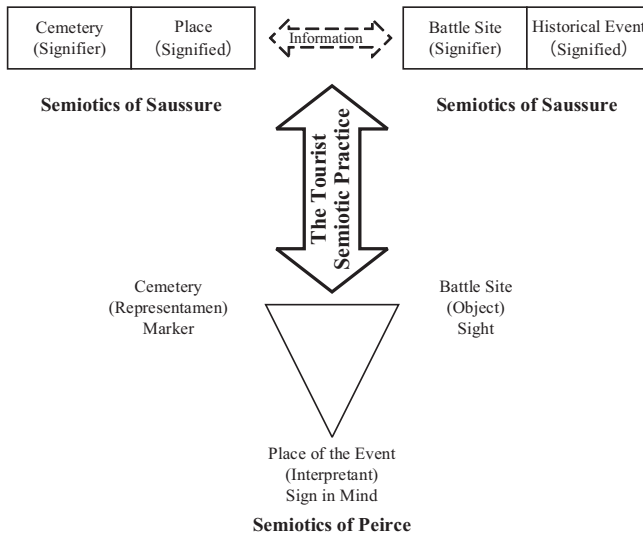


Fig. 1. The role of the tourist semiotic practice in linking the semiotics of Saussure and Peirce in tourism contexts.

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