Dystopian dark tourism: An exploratory examination

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A new theoretical model is presented that focuses on the emerging phenomena of dystopian dark tourism (DDT).
- Increases in dystopian dark tourism may be a result of a great deal of uncertainty about the future.
- Dark aesthetics relate to tourists' encounters with orthodoxies of media immersion, social convention and politics.

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the rapidly emerging fascination with dystopian dark tourism. Using participatory observation, this exploratory study examines and analyzes three specific destinations where tourists engage with both death and dystopia. Through our examination of the Charles Manson 'Helter Skelter Tour' in Los Angeles, the H.R. Giger Museum in Gruyeres, Switzerland and the Inferno Music Festival in both Lausanne, Switzerland and Oslo, Norway, we present a model of dystopian dark tourism that integrates dark aesthetics, simulation, emotional contagion and the current global cultural fascination with both utopia and dystopia. We posit that interest in dystopian dark tourism experiences is reflective of an increased insecurity about death, society and its relationship to violence and cultural production.

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1. Introduction

Dark Tourism is a phenomenon that is not going away, in fact, it is gaining momentum in practice, in its conceptualizations and in theoretical development. Dark Tourism, originally coined by Foley and Lennon (1996) and Lennon and Foley (1999; 2000), examines the relationship between tourism attractions and an interest in death. From a socio-cultural standpoint, dark tourism provides an opportunity for members of society to reflect upon death and juxtapose reflections of an inevitable mortality with those of conscious (Stone, 2012) and even hyperreal experiences (Podoshen, 2013). Dunkley, Westwood and Morgan (2007) claim that this increase is of no surprise given the globalized, sensationalized, media-driven environment we are in. Many have written how people have been drawn to tourism sites associated with death and disaster (Sharpley, 2009; Stone, 2005; 2009; Stone & Sharpley, 2008), which is important in terms of understanding the human condition. Specifically, Stone (2009) mentions that dark tourism as a practice really informs us of the living and their perspectives and motivations related to death consumption. More recently, Stone and Sharpley (2013) address criticisms that dark tourism is a deviant consumption behavior, but they also posit that talking about death in public places is becoming increasingly luminous, suggesting there is a flourishing new willingness to interpret the surrounding discourse.

In this paper we answer Stone and Sharpley's (2013) call to delve deeper into dark tourism interpretation and we venture into an area of dark tourism that has not been greatly explored. Similarly, we also look to answer Levy's (2015) call to examine consumption contexts outside of experiments and hypothesis testing and Dobscha et al. (2012) call for new insights into death consumption
studies. This paper seeks to conceptualize and describe an emergent form of dark tourism that features dystopia as a key underlying element of the destination and motivation. We examine three tourism cases centered on consumption related to violence, death, destruction and bleakness: the Charles Manson “Helter Skelter” Tour in the United States; the Inferno Festivals in Norway and Switzerland; and the H.R. Giger Museum in Switzerland, that, we believe, collectively exemplify our conceptualization of Dystopian Dark Tourism (DDT). This paper examines the concept of dystopia from an inter-disciplinary perspective and we provide a description of the aforementioned venues that conceptualize DDT. Afterward, we describe the key attributes of the respective destinations that relate to their thanatouristic elements and dystopian undertones. The paper culminates in a theoretical model based on the interpretative, experience-near perspective.

2. Dystopia and its emergence in tourism

Dystopia is often regarded as the opposite of utopia (Gordin, Tilley, & Prakash, 2010). Utopias are almost always depicted as perfect worlds and ideal societies; considered as “pure escapism,” because they are sometimes too far away from reality (Booker, 1954). Dystopia, too, may also be far away from reality, however, as opposed to a utopia (which creates an ideal future world, often without borders) dystopia, in literature, presents “an image of future societies, pointing fearfully at the way the world is supposedly going in order to provide urgent propaganda for a change in direction” (Clute & Nicholls, 1993, p.360). As Morson (1981) emphasizes, “utopias describe an escape from history, these [dystopias] describe an escape, or attempted escape, to history, which is to say, to the world of contingency, conflict, and uncertainty” (p.128). Some people may think their lives are miserable and they would rather escape from the cruel reality than escape into a more troublesome world. As such, some may wonder why authors and directors have created a world that is “a [place] worse than [one] we live in” (Moylan & Baccolini, 2003, p.1). But in fact, the purpose of dystopia in fiction, literature, art and other fields may be to warn (Moylan, 2000) as many dystopian texts are created to warn people of imminent dangers (Zaki, 1990), or serve as posted warnings (Wolin, 2006).

In relation to consumption behavior, Podoshen, Venkatesh, and Jin (2014) conceptualize dystopia as a collective vision for a future, alternate society – though one where not all aspects of it are for the greater good. Here, those who are deemed “not worthy” or “bad” are excluded from the new society, often as the direct mechanism from the integration and creation of a specific political system. As they mention, violence and strife often are seen as the bringers of dystopia where a new era of extreme violence and extreme solutions act as answers to the “problems” of prior society. This can, of course, be likened to Nazi Germany’s Final Solution where Jews were seen as the harndoers to German society, and their extermination was seen as the needed precursor to the ultimate glory of the Third Reich. The Third Reich is inclusive of Montevideo’s (2012) vision of dystopia, which includes totalitarianism, triumphalism and dehumanization. These may be accompanied by anarchy and paranoia – both of which were found in various locales during WWI in Europe.

Very little has been written about dystopia in the tourism context, yet the topic has appeared in recent literature. Rofe (2013) likens rural branding in some specific places as rural utopias and some “darker” rural areas (where tragedy has occurred) as dystopias where a “sinister, threatening and insular landscape is evident” (p.263). Rofe (2013) uses the South Australian area of Snowtown, a rural landscape made famous by the horrific “Snowtown Murders” and its ensuing uptick in tourism activity. Outside of a dark tourism context, Belk (2000) describes Las Vegas as a type of dystopia whereby “resorts jointly participate in a theatrical farce meant to infantalize their adult patrons by creating a fantastic liminal time and place” (p. 101). Both Belk (2000) and Rofe (2013) use the term “dystopia” as the opposite of “utopia,” and interestingly, this work contrasts with earlier ideas of utopia and consumption where there is a belief that utopian ideas and themes encourage the consumption of entertainment products (Dyer, 1977). Moreover, this literature suggests that entertainment products, in an effort to be acceptable and liked by target markets, should have a healthy degree of utopian elements (Jameson, 1979). Similarly, the discussion of utopia in specific consumption contexts is something that has been present in the literature in recent years, with generalizations ranging from it being a liberating force that promises a brighter future (Maclaran & Brown, 2005) to a place where consumers can flourish in a grand community (Kozinets, 2002), and a universe where all races and creeds are welcome (Kozinets, 2001).

3. Dark tourism

Dark tourism, as well as its theoretical underpinnings and existing typologies, are well covered in the existing literature. Foley and Lennon (1996) and Lennon and Foley (2000) conceptualize dark tourism, a phenomena often steeped in heritage tourism, and its interpretation as being dependent on media as well as engagement with the challenge of rational behavior and order. In this respect, the educational aspects of heritage, remembrance and commemoration become blurred with commercialization (Sharpley, 2009). With this in mind, Sharples (2009) presents a typology that examines the combination of dark tourism consumption and supply. Here, Sharples (2009) categorizes specific dark tourism experiences into one of four specific quadrants that range from “pale” to “dark” depending on how the experience(s) relate to the extent to which the interest in death is operationalized in tandem with the direction of the supply. This typology builds on Sharples (2005), which moves the literature forward in the understanding of dark tourism from a consumption perspective. This follows up on the earlier work by Lennon and Foley (1999) that examines the role of replication (and its interplay with authenticity in artifacts) and simulation in dark tourism experiences, noting that simulation is one of the prime concerns in the tourism activity.

Subsequent to the development of dark tourism typologies and conceptualizations, scholars have been opening up the realm of inquiry to examine more nuanced variables in the tourism experience. Heuermann and Chhabra (2014) discuss the importance of ethics in dark tourism management as it relates to authenticity. Hartmann (2014) also examines management and its integration with dissonance.

Recently, Stone and Sharpley (2013) have delved even further into the overarching realm of dark tourism ontology with their work that models dark leisure experiences and the reconfiguration of morality within secular society. This model traces morality and moral orders through communicative spaces and dark leisure experience to an inevitable reconstruction and reconfiguration of morality. We utilize the role of morality and its integration into the political realm as part of the basis to inform our conceptualization.

Stone and Sharpley (2013) address the recent criticism regarding dark tourism, taboo, and its rapid ascent in society. They address the notion that some find that dark tourism is in poor taste, is deviant, and occurs as a result of questionable morality in our global society. They respond to this criticism by positing that deviance occurs from engaging in taboo activity, and that this taboo activity is rooted in unconscious guilt. As well, this deviance is insulated from our “psychosocial-life worlds by mediating institutions of religion and
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