



Hell is other people? An existential-phenomenological analysis of the local gaze in tourism

Philipp Wassler^a, Ksenia Kirillova^{b,*}

^a Bournemouth University, Department of Tourism & Hospitality, Dorset House D125, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB, UK

^b School of Hotel and Tourism Management, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 17 Science Museum Rd., TST East, Kowloon, Hong Kong

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Tourist gaze
Existentialism
Local gaze
I-thou
Tourist experience
Touristesque
Social connections
Sociality

ABSTRACT

The “Gaze” is a complex and overarching phenomenon comprised of diverse “Gazers” and “Gazees”. This paper adopts an existential-phenomenological perspective to understand tourists’ lived experiences of being gazed upon by local people. Based on thirty experiences collected from interviews with ten participants, we show that experiencing the “Local Gaze” exposes the tourist as Sartrean “Tourist-esque”: an inauthentic experienter of positivity, discrimination, alienation and self-consciousness. Moments of true human connections are at best ephemeral. Through an existentialist lens, the study questions the possibility of authentic host-guest relationship in tourism and argues that to maintain hopes for an authentic relationship, the concepts of “Gaze” and – perhaps even of “Tourism” – need to be transcended.

1. Introduction

Tourism has been defined as a “way of seeing”, where experience is staged by businesses and subsequently consumed by tourists (Larsen, 2014). Inspired by the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s (1963/1973) concept of medical gaze, Urry (1990) conceptualized this visual practice as the *Tourist Gaze*, a socially and technologically patterned and learned way of visual consumption.

The predominance of the visual sense for touristic consumption has been contextualized to an ever-increasingly globalizing society in Urry’s second version of the book (2002) in which he argued that, through the advancement of technology, the “gaze” has become more complex and overarching. While originally proposing that the world is merely gazed upon by the tourist, the *Tourist Gaze 3.0* (Urry & Larsen, 2011) discusses the power of the objectifying gaze of the Gazees. Maoz (2006) had suggested earlier that, rather than a linear gaze, there is an intricate *Mutual Gaze* between tourists and local people; a more complex reality where different gazes affect and feed each other.

As a result, follow-up studies on the gaze made advances in highlighting some of its complexities. Drawing upon Pernecky (2012) and Urry (1990), Huang, King, and Suntikul (2017) highlight that the gaze can be conceptualized as a personal construction (constructivist and romantic), but also as embedded in social interactions (constructionist and collective). This mirrors a further distinction between the “exotic other” which is being gazed upon in a Foucauldian display of power

(e.g. Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; McGregor, 2000) and a gaze which is more complex, intertwined, negotiating and reciprocal (e.g. Maoz, 2006; Zara, 2015). Additionally, following wider sociological trends in the tourism field, as highlighted by Cohen and Cohen (2017), there are calls to acknowledge further realities which are likely to play into the formation of the gaze. Scholars have called for more awareness regarding embodied experiences with a particular focus on emotions, such as empathy, engagement, shame and discomfort (Frazer & Waitt, 2016; Gillespie, 2006; Tucker, 2016). Others have drawn attention to different types of emic experiences such as non-visual sense perceptions, ranging anywhere from smells to visceral senses (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013; Agapito, Valle, & Mendes, 2014; Jacobsen, 2014; Rakić & Chambers, 2012).

The embodiment of the “gazer” also presupposes that the tourist does not merely gaze upon the other as a Foucauldian spectacle behind bars (Urry, 1990), but also carries personal baggage which is open to be observed, judged and also “gazed upon”. This is evident in recent studies where race, class and gender have been shown as important in forming tourist experiences (e.g. Brown & Osman, 2017; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Spracklen, Laurencic, & Kenyon, 2013); partly through being exposed to the objectifying gaze of local onlookers. In particular, this *Local Gaze*, has been shown to be perceived as “harsher” than the guests’ gaze upon the hosts (Tasci & Severt, 2016). Accordingly, it can be assumed that, even if considered from an emic stance, the gaze embodies a power dynamic between the self and the other (Urry &

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: pwassler@bournemouth.ac.uk (P. Wassler), ksenia.kirillova@polyu.edu.hk (K. Kirillova).

Larsen, 2011) and may be reflective in nature, enabling the tourist to gain a clearer sense of the self (Huang et al., 2017), or to reinforce pre-existing stereotypes (Bruner, 1991).

While existing research on the gaze in tourism allows theorizing the gaze as complex, embodied and experiential, the above review highlights over-reliance on the power relations in the gaze. Other hardly considered issues, such as meaning (lessness), existential alienation, freedom, impeding death and dangers are also essential aspects of how tourists experience destinations (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2017a, b; Vidon & Rickly, 2018; Xue, Manuel-Navarrete, & Buzinde, 2014) and tourism actors (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015; Gössling, Cohen, & Hibbert, 2018). We thus argue that the existing conceptualizations alone cannot help understanding how the experience of the gaze unfolds and what it means for tourists. Subsequently, this study seeks to extend existing literature by understanding how the *Local Gaze* is emically lived by the tourist through building on theorizations of human sociality introduced by the 20th century existentialist philosophers Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Buber, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Existentialists have long highlighted the importance of human sociality (Zahavi, 2012), theorized the extent to which interpersonal encounters can and should define the human existence (Buber, 1923; Sartre, 1943, 1989), and speculated about how human sociality functions in a shared lifeworld, particularly through embodiment (Heidegger, 1927/1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Heidegger, for example, argued that humans are intrinsically bound through *being-with-the-other* in a shared world (*being-in-the-world*), in which total self-ownership is impossible. Here, the tourist finds him/herself bound in a human body which is simultaneously interpreting and is interpreted, acting as the subject and object of perception (Koo, 2015; Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Sartre (1943) adds the potential hazard of reducing an individual completely to a *being-for-others* through the gaze, as expressed in his famous quote “Hell is other people” from the 1944/1989 play “No Exit”. In Sartrean terms, ontological existence of “things” (e.g. tables, chairs) is termed a *being-in-itself*. Human consciousness, however, is seen as destined to be reduced to a *being-for-others* because it cannot simply “exist” in the same sense as “things” of the physical world and has the capacity to reflect and distance itself from onlookers. The concept of *being-for-others* suggests that *being-in-the-world* with other human beings and being exposed to their perception can reduce a being into an object; which is gazed upon and judged by others (*being-in-itself*). As the pinnacle of existing knowledge concerning human sociality, interpersonal relationships and encounters, these and other existential notions such as Merleau-Ponty’s *intersubjectivity* and *embodied experience*, Buber’s *I-Thou* relationship and Heidegger’s *lifeworld* well lend themselves to the investigation of the *Local Gaze*.

Motivated by the need for a complementary perspective on the gaze and emic understanding of how the gaze is experienced, this research aims at examining human sociality embedded in the *Local Gaze* through the lens of existential philosophy. As a consequence, this study adopts an emic perspective to phenomenologically understand a tourist’s lived experience of the *Local Gaze*. The research questions thus concern the phenomenon of the *Local Gaze* as experienced by tourists and ask (1) How does the experience of the *Local Gaze* unfold for tourists? and (2) What does the lived experience of the *Local Gaze* mean to tourists? Adopting an existentialist lens, this study hopes to enrich the theoretical understanding of the *Local Gaze*, host-guest relationships, and the tourist experience as a whole.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Gaze in tourism

Building off Foucault’s idea of medical gaze, Urry (1990) proposed the concept of tourist gaze to understand “socially and technologically patterned and learned “ways of seeing” in tourism, which provide a

reaffirmation of how a destination differs from home” (Larsen, 2014, p. 305). Urry argues that gazing upon seemingly ordinary elements of a destination frees tourists from routine, and allows experiencing a sense of the extraordinary; in which the gaze is typically seen as a form of visual consumption (Urry, 1990). The gaze can also be understood as a construction on the part of a tourist, which is mediated by specific representations, such as guidebooks, films, promotional materials, co-constructing and reinforcing the gaze (Huang et al., 2017; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Similar to the dominating power of Foucault’s medical gaze - when a doctor evaluates a patient, tourists are believed to exercise power and judgment when gazing at locals. Reflecting the power dynamics in a typical tourism scenario, the tourist gaze orders and regulates the relationship between gazers (tourists) and gazed (locals), as a relationship between “self” and the exotic “other” (Huang et al., 2017).

According to the above conceptualization, the tourist gaze has provided theoretical grounds for empirical research, interrogating the guest-host dynamics in tourism (e.g. Huang et al., 2017; McGregor, 2000; Robinson, 2014; Zhang & Hitchcock, 2017). Although it is generally shown that guidebooks and other media selectively draw tourists’ attention to those destination features that more effectively realize the “authentic exotic” other (McGregor, 2000), in the analysis of second-generation Chinese migrants traveling in China, Huang et al. (2017) found that tourists were rather looking for similarities, in order to establish a greater connectedness with the ancestral homeland.

Urry (2002) re-considered the role of the visual gaze in tourism consumption, among other aspects, and argued that the gaze is in fact more complex and overarching than just being a linear relationship. The gaze has become an embodied, all-encompassing, experience that is no longer exclusively Western or belonging to tourists. For example, Everett (2008) looks at food tourism as a non-visual tourist gaze. Zara (2015), who initially focused on gazes of Hindu travellers in tourist sites of Varanasi, India, concludes that “there are often sites of multiple and multifarious gazes, where different visual legacies interact and merge, making a real distinction between “tourist” and “host” difficult to define” (p. 41). This echoes Maoz’s (2006) earlier proposition that the tourist gaze inescapably influences and is influenced by the *Local Gaze*. The locals’ own construction of tourists as the exotic “other,” and the term “mutual gaze” was coined to symbolize the interrelationship between the two gazes (Maoz, 2006). The above inspired Urry and Larsen (2011) to develop a relational take on the gaze, termed as gaze 3.0, as “[t]he eyes of Gazers and Gazed are likely to meet, however, briefly, each time the tourist gaze is performed” (Larsen, 2014, p. 308). The gaze 3.0 also discusses how neither gazers nor gazed are passive and can exercise power over each other through the gaze. Jordan and Aitchison (2008), as well as Brown and Osman (2017), for example, show that female tourists, especially solo travellers, are acutely aware of the objectifying sexualized and controlling gaze of local men. The objectifying power of the gaze can be also self-directed as in the case of selfie-taking (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016). Chhabra (2010) demonstrates that locals (the Amish) internalize the tourist gaze with mixed reactions, which could be characterized as “negotiated reciprocity.”

In summary, the existing research has progressed from understanding the gaze as one-directional (tourist to local) to its conceptualization as multi-directional and encompassing various modalities. Despite the recent recognition of the gaze as also constructivist (Huang et al., 2017), the overwhelming number of studies investigate the gazer-gazed social relationship in terms of power dynamics, particularly when it comes to the categories of gender and social class. Although valuable, we argue that a supplementary perspective that recognizes the very humanness of actors in tourism and, by extension, their sociality is necessary to understand additional realities contextualizing the gaze, such as emotions, empathy, embodiment, as well as a uniquely human concern for meaning. An existential-phenomenological lens, to which we turn next, provides not only the appropriate ontological and epistemological apparatus, but also valuable

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/11262980>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/11262980>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)