

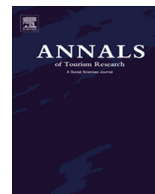


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# Tourism as practice of making meaning



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### ABSTRACT

In this paper we attempt to investigate how the semiotic construction of touristed landscapes “works” in tour owners’ ideologizing of the representation of Romania as an ecotourist destination. A semiotic framework of tourism as meaning-making practice is proposed on account of the theory of meaning as well as on cultural geography theories approaching landscape. The paper also addresses the ecotourism ideology as background to our study. The semiotic analysis frames the study of signs on levels of significance, along with the theory of intertextuality. The research corpus shows how the embodied experiences, practices and performances shape the significances we attach to objects and how tourism is meaning made by multiple actors, both tourism promoters and tourists.

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## Introduction & Background

Under the umbrella of what Tribe terms “new tourism research” (Tribe, 2005, p. 5), in this study we look at the intertextual relationship that exists between landscape elements (primary text), websites (secondary text), and visitor books (tertiary texts) to examine both the creation and circulation of meaning and the ways in which anticipated and lived experiences shape the semiotic construction of sites which Cartier (2005) describes as “touristed landscapes”.

Drawing on cultural geography and semiotics, we examine the creation of touristed landscape through both the websites of two ecotourism companies and the actual entries made by tourists in the onsite visitor books. The paper highlights the relationship between tourism and landscape. It defines tourism as a meaning-making practice in which the meanings that actors attach to places arise

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from the ways in which they engage in the tourist experience. The anticipated experience is marked by the ways in which ecotourism companies employ ecotourism ideology for their marketing, and the lived experience is marked by tourists after their interaction with the place (landscape).

The background to our study is ecological tourism (ecotourism). Ecotourism ideology shifts the focus from simply “gazing” (Urry, 2002), which works in the ideology of dominant Western cultures (see also MacCannell, 2011), to “memorable interpretative experiences” (The International Ecotourism Society [TIES], 2015), which works in the ideology of the new moral tourists (Butcher, 2005), who “may actually desire a closer interaction with ‘hosts’, and may even wish to learn something from the cultures they visit” (Wilson & Ateljević, 2008, p. 101). Our research also draws on the works of Fennell (2005), Honey (2008), Wearing and Neil (2009), and Newsome, Moore, and Dowling (2013) in approaching the ecotourism theory and practice.

The aim of this research is to investigate the meanings actors in tourism attach to places and to see how these meanings serve to sustain the ecotourism ideology and mark Romania as an ecotourist destination. The research question that underpins our study is: How does the semiotic construction of touristed landscapes “work” in the tour owners’ ideologizing of the representations of Romania as an ecotourist destination?

This research is grounded in the notion that landscape reading is an active practice and meaning is made through embodied experience and performance. By bringing semiotics to the fore, we add a semiotic model to the “performative turn” literature to illustrate the way meanings are (re)created intertextually along the chain of tourist experience.

The semiotic construction of touristed landscapes involves multiple actors, namely tourism promoters and tourists. Tourism promoters (re)construct the signs of a place for the purpose of building a particular experience of a particular destination. Tourists, in their turn, (re)construct the signs, supplying them with significance based in their own experience. In order to get at the tourist experience this research looks into the ways in which tourists wrote about their experiences in the visitor books at the two sites under consideration. The semiotic model proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1994) enables us to see how meaning emerges from our interaction with the elements of landscape we come into contact with. We also rely on the signifying systems advanced by Roland Barthes (1972) in understanding the evolution of signs on levels of significance, and the endless signifier-signified interplay.

Peircean semiotics in tourism studies was pioneered by MacCannell (1999) and Echtner (1999) and recently has been revitalized by Metro-Roland (2009, 2011), Lau (2011, 2014) and Knudsen and Rickly-Boyd (2012). Peircean semiotics enables us to more closely enquire into the way tourists make sense of the objects they come into contact with. As Metro-Roland (2009) remarks in her invitation to “meet” Peirce: “Peirce’s semiotics provide the philosophical foundation for addressing epistemological issues involved in being a tourist and interacting with the world outside ourselves” (p. 278). Peirce’s (1994) scheme sign-object-interpretant (Peirce: CP 1.339, see also Fiske, 2002) highlights one of the underlying themes of this research, which is actually the tourist experience. We will revisit this in the methodology section below. (References to Peirce’s writings are based on the convention among scholars to cite from the *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* by volume number and paragraph number, preceded by ‘CP’.)

In attempting to address the practice of making meaning we have analysed the websites and physical copies of visitor books of two ecotourism sites in Romania, Equus Sylvania and Mihai Eminescu Trust. The paper interprets the results in terms of the literature on landscape, practice and embodiment. We endeavour to substantiate our contribution in terms of how meaning is actively created through physical involvement with the objects. We also look at how the making of meaning relates to the ideologizing of Romania as an ecotourist destination.

### *Engagement with landscape and meaning making*

Research into landscape, embodiment and practice or performance is indebted to phenomenology. Pile and Thrift (1995), Cresswell (1996, 2003), Thrift and Dewsbury (2000), Nash (2000), Tuan (2001), Cosgrove (2003), Lorimer (2005), Wylie (2007) are among the leading advocates of this frame of reference in landscape studies. Essentially, phenomenology has provided “a people-centred form of knowledge based in human awareness, experience and understanding” (Pile, 1996, p. 50) and has

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