

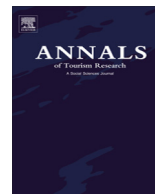


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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/atoures



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Moving bodies and the staging of the tourist experience

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 December 2014

Revised 9 September 2015

Accepted 28 September 2015

Coordinating Editor: J. Tribe

Keywords:

Staging

Movement

Guiding

Spatialization

Emplacement

Regulation

ABSTRACT

This article looks into guided tours as an exemplary kinesthetic consumption experience and focuses on the work of tour guides as influential agents who participate in the tourism staging of the destination. As opposed to the overwhelming emphasis placed on the discursive construction of tourist places, my analytic lens is the moving body and its manifold engagement with the surrounding space. Grounded on fieldwork at a National Military Park, I provide insight into three clusters of strategies of body-space staging: spatialization, emplacement, and regulation. I also extend existing knowledge on the staging of tourist experiences by theorizing the construction of a tourism stage as an aggregate of three overlapping and intertwined staging modes: communicative, material, and body-space.

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Introduction

Spaces “are planned with the greatest care: centralized, organized, hierarchized, symbolized, and programmed to the nth degree.” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 59).

We should approach landscapes as open and produced through particular mobilities and movements, paying attention to the embodied mobilities by which we inhabit, traverse, and view the landscape. (Merriman 2009, p. 139).

There is probably no better illustration of Lefebvre's (1991) assertion in the first epigraph than the staging of tourist places which have been seen as stages where tourist experiences take place (Edensor, 2000a, 2001). As such, tourist destinations are “staged-managed,” in order to provide a

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certain understanding and to delineate the activities that are supposed to take place there (Edensor, 2001). Tourist places, therefore, are not passive outcomes of some more serious economic activity, but rather, they are intentionally created as tourist destinations (Hughes, 1998). They are purposefully staged and their construction has a strategic intent. As deCerteau (1984) argued, official meanings are embedded in the landscape through hegemonic practices or “strategies.” But how are tourist places staged as such? The grounding premise of this paper is that the staging of tourist places has been overwhelmingly conceived as a discursive formation, leaving untapped the productive potential of bodily presence, movement, and interaction with the surrounding space.

The production of meaningful places has a long history in the social sciences. Since Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977) conceptualization of place as a human creation invested with meaning, a large number of scholars have widely acknowledged that (meaningful) places are never prefigured, ontologically given, and objective entities but are social constructions (Cresswell, 2004; Young, 1999). Language is central in this process and in this sense, a tourist place can be seen as a discursive formation (Saarinen, 1998; Stokowski, 2002). Most prominent among discursive formations is the place narrative (Bruner, 2005; Chronis, 2005, 2008a, 2012a). Through narratives and other rhetorical techniques, localities are staged as tourist destinations and are communicated through guidebooks, advertisements, brochures, and other media representations (Hughes, 1998; Young, 1999). As Arnould, Price, and Tierney (1998) pointed out, it is through “communicative staging” that an otherwise unassuming space is transformed into an attraction.

Insightful as these theoretical developments are on the role of discourse and verbal articulations for the staging of a tourist place, they do not do justice to the productive contributions of tourists' bodily participation and their movement in space. And here is where the second opening epigraph comes handy. For, we should also consider the “embodied mobilities” of the people who are engaged with the particular place (Merriman, 2009, p. 139). While embodied performances have been acknowledged in tourism scholarship (Coleman & Crang, 2002; Crouch, 2001; Haldrup & Larsen, 2006), mobility has been a secondary concern (Cresswell, 2001, p. 24). deCerteau (1984) has foreshadowed the productive potential of movement by theorizing walking as an act of “enunciation” that pedestrians use to appropriate space and provide their own meaning. Nevertheless, walking for him was strictly seen as a resistive “tactic,” overlooking the possibility that people's trajectories in space can be strategically used for the hegemonic design of meaningful places.

Accordingly, my purpose in this paper is to theorize the role of the moving body and its employment by service providers during the staging of a tourist place. I look into guided tours as an exemplary kinesthetic tourist experience and I focus on the work of tour guides as influential agents who contribute to the staging of the destination through strategic guiding. Rather than discrediting the role of discourse and narrativity, my analysis aims to complement existing scholarship by showing that the strategic use of the body is intertwined with discursive techniques in the purposeful construction of a tourist place. A caveat should be made here that potential insights of this study can be less relevant for certain types of tourism where the role of the body differs, such as climbing, skiing, and skydiving or forms of tourism where directed, narrated movement is less important.

Strategic guiding

Tourism scholarship is informative about the role of tour guides as culture brokers or mediators (Cohen, 1985; Feldman & Skinner, 2014; Gelbman & Maoz, 2012; Katz, 1985; Macdonald, 2006). Acting like “alchemists,” they have the power to (re)enchant places by infusing them with stories (Wynn, 2011). Guides' power for place-making is very artfully discussed by Feldman (2007) in his study of Israeli guides who participate in the transformation of a highly contested terrain into “Bible Land.” Their variegated role in cultural mediation has been more recently discussed in the form of negotiating national imaginaries (Das, 2014), mitigating conflicts with local communities (Kábová, 2014), and constructing notions of authenticity (Cohen, 2014; Ypeij, 2014) through a panoply of technologies and techniques.

There is a fleeting acknowledgement in the above literature of bodily performances (Cohen, 2014; Skinner, 2014) and other non-linguistic ways of producing meaning (Brin & Noy, 2010; Salazar, 2010).

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