



# Producing Extreme Metal festivals: An analysis from Lacan's gaze



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The study employs Lacan's thesis of gaze to examine Extreme Metal festival producers.
- In-depth interviews are conducted.
- The findings reveal that festival producers deal with contested roles and voices.
- Implications of festival operations and Lacan's thesis are discussed.

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## ABSTRACT

By employing Lacan's theoretical framework of gaze, this study provides a narrative analysis to examine the managerial experiences of the producers for Extreme Metal festivals. Specifically, it explores meanings and struggles of tourism festival making that connects individual subjectivities and politics of culture production. As such, it offers a broad conceptual framework merging the Lacanian gaze into tourism research and MacCannell's theory. The findings reveal that festival producers are constantly dealing with various contested roles and voices, revealing in-depth psychological complexities situated within managerial experiences. Meanwhile, the process of festival management must be seen as significantly influenced by the mechanism of cultural offering that the producers attempt to assert and define through the festival space. Finally, implications related to the greater realms of psychoanalytic insights and their potential connections with tourism management are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

This study examines managerial experiences of producers for Extreme Metal festivals in Europe by considering Lacan's framework of gaze. In tourism scholarship, the analytic concept of gaze is firstly and most famously discussed by Urry (1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Accordingly, tourism provides the specific context through which the gaze is generated; tourists possess the gaze and, in turn, the locals and destination society are held as gazed objects. Urry's theory enables us to view tourism as practices of power relationships along a fundamental logic of *seeing* and *being seen* (Cheong & Miller, 2000; Crang, 1997; Ryan & Gu, 2010). Other philosophers, such as Lacan (1977, 1981), instead of confining *gazing* and *being*

*gazed upon* to certain concrete roles, depicts gaze as a universal condition for all beings, which fundamentally shapes our ontological ground for knowing. More importantly, the idea of power is not negated in Lacan's thesis, but circulated through an internal split of the gaze: an actual look as well as a large, uncanny gaze, which we continuously struggle to recognize. It is this split between actual gaze and larger gaze that is haunting, demanding, and providing possibilities to locate meanings and subjectivities (Lacan, 1977).

In this study, Lacan's gaze constitutes an intriguing lens to examine the makings of Extreme Metal festivals. Extreme Metal is a form of dark tourism and leisure activity whose artistic radicalism and underground scenes invoke intense debates from musicians as well as festival participants – “Extreme Metal teeters on the edge of music” (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p.25). The phenomenon of Extreme Metal events and its offering of transgressive, dark experiences have intrigued discussions from a variety of fields (Kahn-Harris, 2002, 2007; Phillipov, 2006b; Podoshen, Venkatesh, & Jin, 2014;

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Spraklen, 2006; 2014). Festivals of Extreme Metal, in particular, constitute a concentrated space to present counter-hegemonic rituals, as radical aesthetics along with transgressive themes keep stirring up feelings of aggression, anger, violence and brutality (Weinstein, 2000). Meanwhile, a primary focus in studying Extreme Metal events, and dark tourism in general, is through the milieu of consumption (Lennon & Foley, 1999; Podoshen, Andrzejewski, Venkatesh, & Wallin, 2015; Stone & Sharpley, 2008; Stone, 2006), seeking to examine tourists' emotional and psychological encounters with subjects of "death, disaster and atrocity" (Buda & McIntosh, 2013, p. 216). However, experiences in producing and creating dark tourism - complexities and depths involved in this process - have been rarely discussed. Such lack can be critical to advance the development, design and marketing of dark tourism, considering various forms of struggles are involved in providing cultural experiences of counter-narratives to the appropriated mainstream aesthetics and values.

In the particular context of Extreme Metal festivals, regardless of their relative cultural and economic autonomy, they are subject to a socio-economic process where culture is represented, packaged, and sold (Kahn-Harris, 2007). That is, on one hand, festivals enable the Extreme Metal culture to take an identity in-the-making in the phenomenological sense. On the other hand, making festivals inevitably submits the delivery of culture to an institutionalized planning process which considers evolving market demand, internal hierarchies of music development, and so forth. How to enable festival operations to be practiced along the radical identity of the art genre thus presents a persistent question, which keeps contesting and destabilizing the "identity, commitment, consistent distinctiveness and autonomy" (Hodkinson, 2002, p. 29) of Extreme Metal.

As such, the experiences of individuals who play primary roles in operating and promoting Extreme Metal festivals provide a particularly intriguing discourse to be examined. Within this study, they are self-identified as festival producers, considering their dual roles in managing the business while serving as culture brokers for Extreme Metal. Two perspectives from Lacan's thesis of gaze must be emphasized in exploring their roles and identities. Firstly, Lacan's gaze proposes that the act of looking itself results in gaze as the scene looks back and identifies the visibility of the subject, which in turn asserts the agency of the gaze as within the subject himself/herself (Dash & Cater, 2015). In this sense, as the producers reflect upon the music festivals, it is the subjects themselves that are brought to the critical forefront of the gaze, with perpetuated desires and haunted lack (Lacan, 1977) in relation to festival operations. Furthermore, it must be noted that Lacan's emphasis of a split between the actual vision and a larger gaze has been adopted by scholars in an array of fields to connect to a wider analysis of society and its impact on human conditions (Hansen, 2012; Wilton, 1998). That is, by exploring the duality of gaze, it gives visibility to complex subjectivities and struggles of festival producers situated in the split, thus enabling more fundamental propensities which give meanings to the festival operations to be revealed.

With this in mind, this study employs a narrative inquiry approach to examine experiences of festival production by interviewing individual producers of Extreme Metal festivals in Europe. Specifically, the analysis contains two major research objectives: a). To interpret the larger gaze circulating festivals by focusing on the extraordinary operational procedures taken by the producers; b). To delineate struggles and contestations rooted in the duality of gaze, in searching for individualized and meaningful space underneath the ordinary fabric of festival operations. In so doing, it seeks to make multiple contributions to tourism knowledge. To begin with, by examining festival producers who struggle to negotiate with socio-economic forces to provide dark tourism experience and

assert identities through the festival space, it provides a response to Stone's (2011) suggestion that new paradigm of dark tourism research needs to explore "fundamental interrelationships between dark tourism and the socio-cultural condition of society" (p.324). Further, much event management research implicitly takes a corporate view and examine the business operation/commercial performance of events, whereas the present study focuses on nonprofit, independent festivals, an area that has been understudied. Finally, as MacCannell (2001) proposes, nuanced psychological complexities from Lacan's gaze enables tourism analysis to be deepened. While Lacan's theory has been theoretically discussed (Dash & Cater, 2015; MacCannell, 2001), this study is an attempt to bridge theory and practices by connecting Lacan's gaze to specific context, subjects, and tourism managerial experiences.

## 2. Gaze and tourism: from Urry to MacCannell and Lacan

Urry's (1990) gaze theory has been intensively discussed and studied in tourism (see e.g., Brohman, 1996; Maoz, 2006). One powerful premise of Urry's gaze is that it is not a natural product of atomized individuals, but a scopic regime (Foucault, 1973) which depicts a process of social construction. Meanwhile, Urry's gaze metaphor has also drawn criticism (see Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 190 for a summary). Of particular relevance to this study are two challenges. Firstly, its uni-directional tendency prescribes an asymmetrical formation of power in privileging the tourists (Brohman, 1996; Maoz, 2006). Secondly, its exclusion of agency over-determines the subjectivities of tourists (Gillespie, 2006; MacCannell, 2001). It is, as MacCannell (2001) believes, Urry's gaze reveals too much a reliance on Foucault's medic gaze, "if we go to Satre, Merleau-Ponty or Lacan, we will get a very different version of gaze" (p.28).

In comparing the approaches adopted by Foucault (1973) and Lacan (1977, 1981), two major analytic points need to be made. First of all, one major difference resides in the dialectics of the visible and the invisible and their relationship to power. Foucault's (1973) articulation takes the belief that while the inside of the patient's body is invisible to the patient, the clinical gaze sees through it. This medic gaze is thus mighty and powerful, due to its procurement of vision. Lacan (1977, 1981), however, avoids the absolute construction of visibility and invisibility by elaborating a split of gaze. That is, what appears as a familiar gaze is composed of, on one hand, an actual physical gaze; on the other, a phantasmic gaze, which is associated with desires and powerful truths underneath the appearance. It is this larger gaze that structures and gives meanings to what is actual and visible, with the illumination of a schema of ideology (Hansen, 2012). Following Lacan, MacCannell (2001) proposes a second gaze to Urry's tourist gaze: a larger gaze that highlights the unseen while disrupting touristic representations with doubts and incompleteness.

Secondly, Lacan believes that the concept of gaze not only depicts the action of looking, but also the gazed object which functions as a source of self-scrutiny. As such, gazing is a process where a conscious look directed outwards is transformed into a self-consciousness in relation to the scrutiny of an externalized anonymous Other – switching from *I look to I am looked at* (Krips, 2010). Such self-consciousness then produces an internal anxiety in relation to the scrutiny of an externalized Other. Embedded is a proposition that power does not unambiguously arise from the privilege of gazing, where gazing also means to receive gaze and it is the gazing subject that is "caught, manipulated and captured in the field" (MacCannell, 2001, p. 30). In this sense, to relate the possession of gaze to a universal group of individuals – often believed to be tourists who purchase the experiences - is an overtly simplified approach. Instead, following Lacan, we are inspired to

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