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RESEARCH LETTER

Desiring the dark: ‘a taste for the unusual’ in North Korean tourism?

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Desire is a continuous force, fundamentally eccentric and insatiable, yet insufficiently explored in tourism studies. To examine desire in tourism to ‘unusual’ places of darkness and danger we propose four interpretations of this psychoanalytic concept: desire as recognition, ‘object’ cause of desire, desire for novelty, and desire for fantasy. Initial empirical evidence drawn from analysing online mass-media accounts of tourists in North Korea suggests that tourists access desire when travelling to such a country portrayed as one of the most reclusive, dangerous and feared in the world.

Keywords: desire; North Korea; psychoanalysis

Introduction

Desire is a continuous force, fundamentally eccentric and insatiable. In Freudian psychoanalysis *Wunsch* (translated either as wish, or desire) is an impulse towards fulfilment of an unconscious wish (Freud, 1938). In Lacanian work *désir* is ‘desire of the Other’ (Lacan, 1977a; Lacan 1977b), mostly linked to the object that causes it rather than the object that would seem to satisfy it (Sheridan, 1977, p. viii). While desire is a complex concept and this assessment necessarily cursory, we would like to propose four psychoanalytic meanings that could be employed in tourism studies to understand tourist desire *for* and *in* places of darkness and danger.

First, desire as recognition refers to ‘a fight for pure prestige’ of risking ‘biological life to satisfy *nonbiological* desire’ (Kojève, 1977, p. 41 emphasis in original) following Kojève’s reading of Hegel’s human desire (*Begierde*). Second, desire as ‘*qua* Other that the subject desires’ (Evans, 1996, p. 38) pointing to an ‘object’ as cause of desire because an Other desires it. It is maintained that in Lacanian psychoanalysis ‘[d]esire, strictly speaking, has no object’ (Fink, 1995, p. 90), so the object of desire is the cause that brings desire into being. This desire does not pursue satisfaction but ‘its own continuation and furtherance: more desire, greater desire!’ (Fink, 1995, p. 90). Third, desire for new, for something else, connected to lack; it is not desired what one already has and is, but what one lacks. It is most often a lack which brings about desire. Desire is metonymy for ‘lack of being whereby the being exists’ (Lacan, 1977a, p. 29). Lack of being (*manque à être*) translated either as ‘want-to-be’ or ‘want of being’ is different from lack of having (*manque à avoir*), which is connected to demand. Desire represents the link between need and demand (Burgin, 1992). Fourth, desire for fantasy whereby fantasy corresponds

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with the mental image of a desired object considering ‘the total context and activity in and through which the object may be attained’ (Burgin, 1992, p. 85). These four proposed routes to interpreting psychoanalytic desire in tourism are by no means the only ones, nor are they fully comprehensive and neatly contoured taxonomies of desire; they are tentative arrangements of the many directions that undulate and sometime overlap.

Our aim in this paper is to assess whether these explications of desire could provide useful insights into understanding tourism to North Korea, a country reported to be one of the most feared in the world and which recently prompted the US State Department to issue its strongest travel warning in years (Fisher, 2013; Whitehead, 2013). In this respect we examine online travel reports from 12 magazines and newspapers including: *Business Week*, *CNN Travel*, *Huffington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Time Magazine* which have been published between February 2013 and April 2014 when news about North Korea intensified. Whether it was the country’s third nuclear test; a famous basketball player’s friendship with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un; the execution of Kim’s once powerful uncle; imprisoned Christian missionaries and US journalists; or a detained and later released US war veteran, these reports have dominated popular ‘western’ mass media and seem to have sparked discussions about tourism in North Korea (e.g. Cheng, 2013; Express World, 2014; Golgowski, 2013; Mundy, 2013; O’Carroll, 2014; Thorsell, 2014). It is our intention with this letter to examine such debates from an academic perspective as we propose psychoanalytic interpretations of desire to understand this current tourism issue. The 20 articles we collected are too numerous to analyse in full in this brief note, but we acknowledge that these mass-media sources originate in and re/present ‘western developed world’ views of North Korea as dangerous, secretive and unique. These sources are outspoken when it comes to North Korea and tourism in the country. As they are well-known global/international media outlets, it is considered that they adhere to higher standards of quality journalism and reporting practices. Our method of analysis follows an interpretive reading of psychoanalytic desire in the media sources.

Tourism, desire and North Korean darkness

Dennis Rodman may be the highest-profile American tourist to visit North Korea. But thousands of others have ventured to the reclusive nation in the past two decades. And travel opportunities are gradually increasing for foreign visitors with a taste for the unusual. (Clark, 2014, para. 1)

[T]he State Department updated its North Korea travel advisory with a warning about the risk of ‘arbitrary arrest and detention’. Their advice for would-be adventurers: don’t go. . . . The irony is that bad news from North Korea often deepens people’s desire to visit. Despite this year’s [2013] nuclear standoff and, now, the detention of an American grandfather, the tourist sector is thriving. (Rauhala, 2013, para. 1)

Drawing on sources mentioned in the introduction, our argument is that tourists, mostly coming from western, economically developed countries, are not deterred by ‘bad news’ about North Korea, but seem to be even enticed by it. These seem to spike tourist interest in the country with some travel agencies experiencing ‘an enormous leap in the number of holidaymakers travelling to North Korea, with numbers doubling in the last three years’ (Paris, 2013, para. 12). This increased interest in North Korean tourism points to *desire for novelty*, for something that cannot be experienced in other places. Novelty in this context is understood as the quality of being ‘unusual’ and unfamiliar, whereby desire is arguably intensified by local restrictions of movement placed upon tourists in a dark place like North Korea.

Travel to ‘unusual’ and dark places of potential danger – danger-zone tourism (Buda, d’Hautessere, & Johnston, 2014) – is part of a wider niche of tourism to places of death, disaster and atrocity coined dark tourism and/or thanatourism. Dark tourism has caught the attention of both the academic world and that of the wider public (Seaton, 2009). Tourism to areas of ongoing political turmoil is briefly mentioned in the literature of dark tourism as an extreme and bizarre form of travel, its protagonists, danger-zoners, are considered to be ‘in the vanguard of dark-tourism’ (Lennon & Foley, 2000, p. 9).

Dark seems to be the denominator describing North Korea, after all ‘[t]he news out of Pyongyang keeps getting darker’ (Winter, 2014, para. 1), and the country seems to be in a status of continuous socio-political turmoil. A prime example of this form of dark portrayal is the iconic satellite picture of North Korea by night (see Figure 1). This image (motif) has been often used by US officials, such as the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in official briefings, statements and interviews. It shows how this ‘dark hole subjectivity’ shapes imaginative geographies of what is also regarded as the most isolated place on Earth (Shim, 2014a). Depicting the country in absolute darkness, this image motif – North Korea as dark hole – continues to be popular and circulated widely (see Chosun Ilbo, 2010; Klein, 2011).

As our proposed types of desire resist strict compartmentation, it can be maintained that travelling to a dark destination such as North Korea can also be interpreted as seeking *desire as recognition* by another, that is desire to have one’s own desire recognised by others. Thus, desire to visit North Korea represents a certain value which is transacted as recognition or prestige. In this respect an American tourist, in his search for prestige, compiled a list with 20 things he learnt while in North Korea and published it online (Urban, 2013). The list, complemented with comic and sarcastic cartoons between two high-level North Korean government officials, also includes a defying message ‘haha you can’t get me cause I’m back home now and I can say all the things I wasn’t allowed to say when I

Figure 1. NASA satellite image taken in 2012 of Northeast Asia by night. Image courtesy of NASA/Earth Observatory.

was in your country' (Urban, 2013, para. 8). This prestige seems to be bestowed upon those tourists who desire to lift the veil of secrecy that the outside world imagines to exist in North Korea, defy and challenge existing rules, and are thus capable of risking 'life in a fight for *Recognition*, in a fight for pure *prestige*' (Kojève prestige, 1977, p. 41 emphasis in original).

Travelling to North Korea out of enticement with (experiences of) danger and darkness refers to 'object' *cause of desire* and points to that what the subject desires from another's perspective. In a North Korean tourism context it is reported that the arrest of a US war veteran did not deter tourists. On the contrary, as one tour operator stressed 'when things like this happen, we see a surge in interest' (Rauhala, 2013, para. 7). The 'object' desired because another desires it is illustrative in the example of an American tourist who decided to visit North Korea after being told by two other tourists that such a trip is not what is 'expected and that going there had much more value than [it is] ever imagined, both for the traveller and for the local people' (Wandering Earl, 2013, para. 3).

Tourists in North Korea also mobilise *desire for fantasy* to conjure imaginations of dark, forbidden and possibly dangerous activities and locations. Fantasy supports desire; the relationship between them is a riveting one. Freud first discussed fantasy in connection to day-dreams and it was initially spelled 'phantasy'. This has led some authors to argue that fantasy usually refers to conscious day-dreams, and phantasies to unconscious psychological activities. The active and dynamic nature of the conscious and unconscious, however, often blurs the boundaries between fantasy and phantasy (Kingsbury, 2004).

In popular belief, and earlier studies in tourist motivation (Dann, 1981) fantasy is often viewed as a wishful scenario, as an illusory product of imagination, which contrasts with reality. Such a view is contested in psychoanalysis since reality is not just 'out there', presenting itself in an 'objective' way, but is discursively re/constructed. Fantasy is a complex concept of 'articulation of both the subject and its unconscious desire in a shifting field of wishes and defences' (Burgin, 1992, p. 87). In tourism studies desire and fantasy speak of tourist imagination and invoke exotic images of holiday places and activities (Kingsbury & Brunn, 2004) but which are nonetheless symptomatic of more complex unconscious processes. Desire does not seek satisfaction and tourists in North Korea remain in a perpetual state of corroborating fantasy with the reality on the ground. In this respect one Australian tourist likened his tour in North Korea to the film *The Matrix*: that is, only during incidental glitches, cracks in the 'artificial' and 'simulated' reality can tourists encounter the 'real' North Korea (Whitehead, 2013). Freud maintains that the real is not opposed to the fantasised and desired, but are intimately intermeshed in a 'psychical reality'.

Conclusion

In this paper we suggested four psychoanalytic views on desire as possible routes for understanding tourism in dark and unusual places. In order to illustrate desire for darkness, we discussed experiences in North Korea of tourists who originate mostly from Anglo-American and western European countries. In doing this we do not maintain that desire is 'specific' (only) to North Korea, desire can surely be related to other locations, whether of turmoil or not. Yet, there seems to be a peculiarity when it comes to (desiring) North Korea. This, we argued, has to do with the (assumed) knowledge gap about North Korea. For many, not only in the 'west', but also in the 'rest', North Korea seems mysterious, isolated and unknowable, something that makes it a 'global other' of the contemporary age. In this way, this (imagined) mysteriousness contributes to enhancing desire towards North Korea (Shim, 2014b).

Potential future research concerning North Korean tourism could also investigate motivations and experiences of tourists originating in neighbouring countries such as China and South Korea as these countries aggregate the largest number of international tourists to North Korea. For even though Chinese and South Korean tourists receive a different, but not necessarily a more conciliatory, treatment by local authorities, this kind of tourism is likewise imbued with desire and fascination about the 'dark hole' of contemporary geopolitics.

Within a tourism context, it can arguably be assumed that places and people of North Korea are expected to be available for discovery, entertainment and visual consumption for foreign tourists. While this is reminiscent of voyeuristic viewing practices known from zoological parks, the narrative of discovery – since it is the tourist who is 'exploring' and 'discovering' the country – renders North Korea a fantasised and desired place which is stripped off agency, history and spatiality. We wish to invite researchers to consider desire and other allied psychoanalytic concepts such as drive, fantasy, *jouissance*, voyeurism (Buda & McIntosh, 2013) for example, as starting points from which to further examine tourist experiences in 'unusual' places portrayed as dangerous and hostile.

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