

# Postmodernist Theory and its Relationship to Tourism Research

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**Abstract :** This article highlights the theoretical notion of Postmodernism and attempts to place Tourism research into the postmodernist frame of reference. This is achieved by a brief description of the theory and further development in section two which reviews the challenges of postmodernism to research in the tourism field. There is then an endeavour to intertwine the constructs of postmodernist theory and to illustrate how it can relate to the tourism industry and in particular contemporary tourism. Indeed, we argue that even though a number of authors have begun to chart the sociological dimensions of post-modern tourism they have done so without highlighting the definitions and structure of postmodernist theory. Examples are given in order to support the theoretical approach to research which we suggest in this paper and every effort is undertaken in order to argue that postmodernist research in tourism can be beneficial and fruitful for future directions. Consequently this article attempts to dispel some of the widespread bemusement concerning post-modern theories and post-modern tourism by reviewing some of the recent developments in the area and suggesting further research.

**Key Words:** Post-modern Tourism, Tourism Examples, theory, contemporary theory,

## Introduction

Postmodernism is a term that is used to describe multiple interrelated phenomena including: a 'philosophy' (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984); an 'aesthetic sensibility' (Jencks, 1987); and a 'cultural condition' (Baudrillard 1983, 1990; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1983, 1994). While there is no single definition of postmodernism there is an overall consensus that the post-modern condition is 'related to dramatic changes in the material and cultural dimensions of life, resulting from immense advances in production, distribution, communication and computer technologies' (e.g., Baudrillard, 1983; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1994; Lyotard, 1984).

In the cultural domain, discussions on postmodernism are centered on issues of meaning and representation. Post-modern culture is characterised as a landscape saturated with 'simulacra' and 'hyper reality' (Baudrillard 1983, 1988), 'spectacle' (Debord 1979), 'pastiche' (Jameson 1984), and 'self-referential' images (Fiske 1987) that communicate through a 'non-representational mode of signification' (Poster 1990) and in a non-linear,

'figural' fashion (Lash 1990). The saturation of culture with hyper real images and free floating signifiers detached from any grounding in reality proclaims the end of fixed transcendental meanings, truth claims and grand narratives. At the same time, the constant stream of images, plundered from their historical and social contexts only to be juxtaposed in a free-play of signifiers, erodes the social foundations of the stable coherent and centered modern idea of self. Postmodernism shatters all solid structures of social and intellectual life, and as Gitlin (1989) suggested, "is best understood not just as a style but as a general orientation, as a way of experiencing the world and our place, or placelessness in it" (p. 101).

The aesthetic sensibility emerging out of the post-modern condition is often viewed as arising from the market place. Postmodernism, it is argued, is the art-form of consumer culture, the expression of a schizophrenic, fragmented and aestheticised experience of everyday life in late capitalist societies (Hassan, 1980; Hebdridge, 1989; Jameson, 1984; Gitlin, 1989; Lash, 1990). In cultural works, the post-modern aesthetic is associated with a tendency toward depthlessness, repetition, fragmentation, irony, parody, pastiche, nostalgic, impulse, formal self-consciousness, and a mixture of forms, periods and styles. It is asserted that such an aesthetic invites a fascination with the immediate and the spectacular rather than with the contemplation of hermeneutic meaning, that it celebrates the surface rather than the depth, that it emphasises the discontinuity between signifiers while dissolving the signified, and that it erases the distinction between high culture and popular culture (Baudrillard, 1983; Jameson, 1984).

## **The Post-modern Challenge**

However, there are some challenges, which require noting, for example: postmodernism rejects the realist and modernist ideas of reality, meaning and representation. Realism assumes the existence of a fixed, uniform and objective reality that can be transparently represented (or, in semiotic terms, the equivalence between the signifier and the signified). Modernism challenges the assumption that a representation is a transparent reflection of reality, while retaining the idea that there does exist an underlying reality (or, in semiotic terms, the signifier is differentiated from the signified). Postmodernism challenges both of these assumptions. Reality, whether it is represented transparently or abstractly is viewed as a fiction, constructed and sustained only by its cultural representation, in semiotic terms, the distinction between the signifier and signified dissolves, as the signified no longer exists. In place of reality, postmodernism proposes hyperreality, that is, the endless referral signs to other signs. Instead of singular meaning it

introduces multiplicity, indeterminacy and free-play of signifiers.

Hyperreality is a term coined by Baudrillard (1988) to refer to the fact that the media saturation in our information society has made people, to a great extent, perceive and interpret lived experiences holographically, creating what he called 'persuasive fictions'. Filmic, photographic, and electronic representations have had a profound effect on the cultural narratives that shape people's identity, often creating feelings of anxiety and despair. In the current hyper real condition in which people are often presented with images and messages that represent norms of beauty, social interaction, and economic transactions that are not attainable in their own lived experiences, these moments of 'psychic disequilibrium' become part of life.

## **Postmodernism and Tourism**

It is generally proposed that the state of post modernity in tourism is characterised by three primary conditions: the spectacle (Debord, 1979); a hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1988); and a focus on the surface rather than depth (Jameson, 1984). A closer examination of each of these conditions in the context of tourism is therefore warranted.

In the 1960s, Debord was already writing about life in modern societies being experienced as an accumulation of spectacles. Debord (1979) argued the spectacle was producing social relations mediated by images and representations: "...the colonisation of more and more of these social relationships by the capitalist commodity form has meant that contemporary societies are increasingly spectacular" (p. 91). In a way, just like Harvey, Zukin and other political economists and critical geographers Debord saw the increasing presence of the spectacle as an expression of the development of strategies of capitalist accumulation. According to Debord, the spectacle is the uninterrupted discourse that the present order articulates about itself, a bit like a long eulogious monologue. In other words, the spectacle can be viewed as a self-portrait of power at a particular time.

Debord (1983) further argued that tourism has become increasingly concerned with spectacle:

"Tourism, human circulation considered as consumption, a by product of the circulation of commodities, is fundamentally nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal. The economic organisation of visits to different places is already in itself a guarantee of their equivalence. The same modernisation that removed time from the voyage also removed from it the reality of space". (p. 168)

Tourism sights, whether natural or man made, are spectacular. Some

sights are unique scenic attractions (e.g., the Grand Canyon, the Alps) or cultural attractions (e.g., Paris, Rome). Other destinations such as tropical resorts, world fairs or the Olympics attempt to outdo one another in spectacle. Here the tourist consumes the sign or representation not the actual sight.

On the other hand, some destinations emphasise hyperreality. Hyperreality is illustrated by theme parks such as Disneyland and Disneyworld where an idealised version of small town America is presented in Main Street USA, mechanical animals take the place of live animals on the jungle cruise, and fantasy characters come alive via costumed employees (Belk, 1991; Fjellman, 1992). Although hyperreality is a sterilised and romanticised presentation of a world free of problems it seems to be increasingly preferred to harsher tourism realities. In both spectacle and hyperreality there is a reliance on creating a presentation of images and surfaces lacking depth. From a semiotic perspective, in postmodernism signs come to refer only to other signs rather than 'real' referents in the object world.

Faced with the presentation of surfaces in hyperreal spectacles one reaction of the audience or consuming public is to search for authenticity in other times (nostalgia) and other places (tourism). The fragmentation of post-modern culture sometimes leads to the belief that in a simpler time and place things were, or are, more coherent and meaningful (MacCannell, 1976; McCracken, 1988; Urry, 1990). But while the search may start as a quest for authenticity it is quickly realised that there are only surfaces and illusions in other times and places as well. In one view, the quest then becomes a game of playfully allowing ourselves to suspend disbelief in the spectacles presented to us as tourists or heritage-seeker, while simultaneously realising that the performance, like those of Disneyland, is a fantasy. Rather than seekers after truth, we become hedonistic seekers of novelty and pleasure.

Feifer (1986) coined the term 'post-tourist' to describe the self-conscious contemporary traveller:

*"Above all, though, the post-tourist knows that he is a tourist: not a time traveller when he goes somewhere; historic not an instant noble savage when he stays on a tropical beach; not an invisible observer when he visits a native compound. Resolutely realistic, he cannot evade his condition of outsider". (p. 271)*

The following section extends on Feifer's (1986) notion of the contemporary traveller by discussing the concept of the contemporary tourist and its relationship to postmodern theoretical knowledge production.

## Contemporary Tourism

Urry (1990) elaborated on Feifer's observations in *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. He stated:

*"The post-tourist is freed from the restraints of 'high culture' on the one hand, and the untrammelled pursuit of the 'pleasure principle' on the other. He or she can move easily from one to the other and indeed can gain pleasure from the contrasts between the two. The world is a stage and the post-tourist can delight in the multitude of games than can be played". (p. 100).*

Urry (1990) developed the theoretical implications of Feifer's comments on post-tourism to illustrate "how postmodernism is ushering in some major new conceptions of what it means to be a contemporary tourist" (p. 93). Urry is most interested in the playfulness of Feifer's post-tourist, his delight in "the 'multitude of choice', his freedom from the 'constraints of high culture', and his awareness that 'tourism is a game', or rather 'a whole series of games' with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience" (p. 100). As both of these studies suggested post-tourism is a post-modern enterprise, a spatial practice socially and culturally infected. As Urry explained, "postmodernism involves a dissolving of the boundaries, not only between high and low cultures, but also between different cultural forms, such as tourism, art, education, photography, television, music, sport, shopping and architecture" (p. 82).

Urry (1990) indicates how in certain ways tourism has become "bound up with and partly indistinguishable from all sorts of other social and cultural practices..[so that] people are much of the time tourists whether they like it or not [and thus] the tourist gaze is intrinsically part of contemporary experience" (p. 82). Urry integrated this idea with material about emerging patterns of class structures in society, applying in particular, the ideas from Bourdieu (1984).

Urry (1990) advised against contemplating the feasibility of "the theory of tourist behaviour" (p. 135). What is required instead, he believed, is a "range of concepts and arguments that capture both what is specific to tourism and what is common to tourist and certain non-tourist social practices. The concept of the tourist gaze attempts to do this...[by] "categorising objects of the gaze in terms of romantic/collective, historical/modern, authentic/inauthentic" (p. 135).

Lash and Urry (1994) in *Economics of Signs and Spaces* have widened the debate on post-modern tourism. Unlike much current writing on postmodernism, Lash and Urry made connections between social institutions

and the fragmented culture of everyday life. Their point of departure was to argue that the global circulation of objects (commodities) is shadowed by the actual symbolic migration of hybrid subjects (people). The increasingly frantic transportation of subjects and objects melts the boundlessness of cultural traditions, replacing social structures with information formations. The modern economy, according to Lash and Urry, depends upon knowledge-intensive forms of production and aesthetic modes of consumption. Old-style manufacturing, in the West at least, had been replaced by a culturally coded service sector. As a consequence, in the new millennium the single largest item in terms of world trade will be international tourism. Lash and Urry further argued that the production of tourism is heavily reliant upon the semiotic aspect of the social and physical locations of those spaces to be visited.

Lash and Urry (1994) argued that the acceleration and internationalisation of capital has carved up our experience of space and time. These processes have led to an increasing sense of the depthlessness and disposable nature of modern culture. For instance, the development of new communications technology allows armchair viewers to travel around the world (via the Discovery channel) without ever leaving their lounge rooms. Ultimately then, this heralds what Lash and Urry see as the end of tourism. As a consequence, the post-tourist is constantly engaged with a dedifferentiated culture where consumer choice is paramount and identities are constantly being reworked.

Arguably, the most fundamental implication of the "end of tourism", as suggested by Lash and Urry (1994), is the unavoidable process of critical self-appraisal that it imposes on the tourism management discipline. Postmodernism, compels proponents of modern tourism management to re-examine their theoretical accomplishments and question their epistemological assumptions.

The postmodern tourism researcher must wade into uncharted territory for which there are no blueprints. All blueprints as 'grand narrative' are definitely suspect. This is laudable for scholarship but lamented by those who want security. Security we feel can no longer be an option in the current tourism research milieu. Indeed, we must take risks and branch out into the unknown and lead the field into uncharted waters through the experimentation and delivery of new theory that both informs and drives the profession.

It is therefore more than tempting to spend our energies mourning the passing of the good old days. Or more comforting still, we could ignore the imperatives of contemporary social theorising and continue to make forays

up abandoned intellectual gullies. Indeed, it would more lucrative and less troublesome to do so. Breaking with certainty is daunting and demanding for researchers, when we transcend the anti-positivist, anti-empirical impetus that has characterised modernism in the past we engage in research that is more challenging more controversial and more disturbing across ideological boundaries but filled with tension and uncertainty. We then push the boundaries of research and enhance our own thinking in ways that we previously could not have imagined.

Despite the strong support for adopting a postmodern approach to research Parson's (1994) identifies limitations of postmodernism applied to research. She claims that postmodernist researchers have surrendered reliability and 'bathed in the glow of detailed and accurate accounts of their research participants' lives' resulting in '...the absence of a true (valid) base upon which to construct social theory' (p. 23). She identified this as the 'crisis of legitimation'. She identifies a second crisis arising from the application of postmodernism to research as the 'crisis of representation'. This relates to the problems of defending representations of research participants as legitimate rather than merely as constructions of the researcher. This is a particular problem for research approaches that deliberately set out to take participants' stories through increasing levels of abstraction. Consequently, we need to be aware that postmodernism is not the panacea which solves all our problems but a set of theories which if utilized correctly can only further enhance knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

In endeavouring to emulate rigorous standards of research tourism researchers should be encouraged to take more methodological 'risks' and embrace more eclectic research approaches. Postmodern research approaches offer these opportunities. Moreover, if tourism researchers embrace postmodern thought it provides them with a theoretical framework to question the social, historical and political forces that play a role in shaping social reality.

The most fundamental implication of postmodernism is the unavoidable process of critical self-appraisal that it imposes on tourism research. Postmodernism compels tourism researchers to examine their theoretical accomplishments, question their epistemological assumptions and continually challenge the appropriateness of their methodological procedures. Through embracing such concerns the tourism researcher will increasingly identify dimensions of the reflexive nature of researcher and participant intersubjectivity and the reflexive moments of research interaction. Because

of their vantage point in interacting intensively at multiple levels and in an enduring way with people from all walks of life tourism researchers are well positioned to take up many of the challenges of the postmodern critique. By doing so they can integrate these challenges into the orthodoxy of current research methods and in their application in the field.

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