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Moving with the Times: Visual representations of the tourism phenomenon

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Research Notes

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Within the social sciences the past twenty years or so have been marked by an explosion of interest in writing and research on aspects of visual culture. This upsurge of interest in the visual has profoundly influenced the field of tourism studies where the role of the visual in understanding the phenomenon of tourism has been gaining momentum as a focus for research and debate. Increasing numbers of articles, books and book chapters are exploring the relationship between visuality and tourism. Conferences focusing solely on the visual within tourism studies are illustrative of the extent to which tourism academics are engaging with the visual whether as technology, as a form of evidence or as methodology for example, *Tourism and Photography: still visions-changing lives* (Sheffield Hallam University UK, 2003), and *Glancing, Glimpsing Gazing: tourists and tourism in a visual world* (University of Brighton UK, 2007). Such moves to embrace the visual suggest that Pritchard and Morgan's (2003) lament that the visual is a neglected area of research can no longer be said to describe the status quo.

In focusing on tourism, research and visual culture my intention is not to go over territory that has already been explored. Hence I will not be discussing issues of interpretation and analysis or the ethical considerations associated with the generation and use of visual materials. There are many excellent sources available on all these aspects, such as Bellour and Penley (2000), Monaco (2000), Banks, (2007), Pink (2007) and Rose (2007). My intention here is rather to move the focus of discussion forward by considering how the rise of electronic journals such as the

Journal of Tourism Consumption and Practice open up exciting opportunities not just in terms of the publication of research that includes a visual element but also in terms of the nature and form that research might take. This latter aspect has considerable significance for the future of tourism research and the knowledge it may produce about the role of tourism in understanding the social worlds in which we live. However, in order to move forward it is useful to have an idea of where one is moving from and so what follows is a brief illustrative foray into the ways in which tourism researchers have and are currently embracing the visual.

Significant early studies of photographs (Chalfen, 1979) and postcards (Albers and James, 1983), arguably the most iconic visual objects associated with tourism, brought the visual as a focus of investigation to prominence. A further push in terms of the significance of the visual for tourism came with the publication of John Urry's book *The Tourist Gaze* (1990). Although not about visual research this book highlighted the importance of 'seeing' for interpreting and understanding tourism and tourists. In so doing it paved the way for what can be described as the visual turn in tourism studies as illustrated by the work of such as Crang (1997; 1999), Lingis (2002), Burns (2004), the contributors to Crouch and Lubben (2003) and Crouch *et al* (2005), Nicholson (2006), Palmer and Lester (2007). In addition, visual methodologies have been brought to the attention of tourism academics through publications such as the aforementioned Pink's *Doing Visual Ethnography*, Rose's *Visual Methodologies* and Bank's *Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research*.

Within tourism research the visual has been employed as both data and evidence. The postcard and the travel brochure are perhaps the most obvious illustrations of the visual as evidence. For example, Dann (1988; 1996) and Pritchard's (2001) work analysing the content of travel brochures while for postcards the work of Mellinger (1994), Edwards (1996), Markwick (2001), Pritchard and Morgan (2003) and Burns (2004) are highlighted. Visual data can be generated by the researcher in the form of photographs, films or images, as illustrated by the work of Larsen (2005:417) who refers to his ethnography of tourist photographic behaviour as a form of documentary

photography '…my particular way of observing photographic performances is structured around photographing "photographing tourists"'.

While tourists' photographic practices can unknowingly provide the focus for investigation tourists may also be active participants in the generation of visual data through techniques such as Visitor Employed Photography (VEP). This technique was utilized by Haywood (1990) when researching visitor experiences of urban tourism, by Larsen (2006) when considering the influence of commercial photography on tourist photographic behaviour and by Garrod (2008) who focused on resident and tourists' perceptions of a Welsh seaside town. While Haywood and Garrod asked their 'volunteers' in advance to take the pictures that they later analysed, Larsen approached visitors he had observed taking photographs and during on site interviews asked for examples of the pictures that had been taken. Garrod meanwhile supplemented his use of VEP by asking his participants (residents and tourists) to maintain a 'photolog' detailing their reasons for selecting each shot. A further extension of VEP is the technique known as photoelicitation. Here, photographs are employed as research stimuli within semi-structured interviews to encourage participants to express and explore deeply held feelings, attitudes and beliefs (Heisley and Levy, 1991; Westwood, 2007).

Whilst postcards and photographs have been a feature of the research landscape for nearly thirty years, it is only in the past few years that tourism researchers have actively embraced and engaged with the visual in ways other than as illustrations for the written word. Part of the problem is the fragmented and compartmentalised nature of academia (Feighey, 2003). Such a situation mitigates against interdisciplinary cooperation, such that tourism scholars and tourism departments tend not to engage with the conferences and networks of other fields and disciplines where visual research maybe more deeply embedded; for example cultural studies, cultural geography, sociology and anthropology. Indeed, a quick search in the *Journal of Visual Culture* (published by Sage) using the search terms 'tourism', 'tourist' and 'travel' yielded few articles none of which were by academics of tourism -

although see the article by the philosopher Alphonso Lingis (2002) which offers a reflection on the ecstasy of vision in relation to Petra.

A significant extension to the above illustrations is the move to embrace film and television as both forms of evidence and as 'texts' capable of analysis and interpretation. Monaco (2000) provides an excellent framework for analysing films in terms of the spatial and temporal aspects of a film's production, referred to respectively as *mise-en-scène* and *montage.* Rose (2007: 51-5) provides a very useful overview of the key stages of Monaco's analytical framework, while Burns and Lester (2005) offer a concrete example of how to employ the framework within tourism studies. As for television, Hanefors and Mossberg (2002) explore what is communicated to viewers through the content of travel shows by analysing six Swedish travel programmes. Similarly, Palmer and Lester (2007) analyse scenes from the film *Cannibal Tours* to examine the role of the filmmaker in constructing a particular narrative of and about tourism and tourists. Films and videos generated by tourists themselves, home movies if you like, can also be analysed along the same lines indicated above.

The use of moving images in tourism research whether commercially produced films, documentaries, television programmes or 'home made' videos produced by tourists could be seen as a constraint when it comes to disseminating the outcomes of research to the academic community. This is because experience to date shows how difficult it is to get even still images included in books and journal articles. Primarily because production costs and the challenges of obtaining copyright clearance can deter the publisher and the academic from including images alongside textual analysis. Although the situation is changing, and things are certainly better with regard to the inclusion of images within books, there are still journal articles that do not include the very images upon which the discussion is based (see Pritchard and Morgan, 2003; Tribe 2008). Even when images do accompany an article such images are mainly reproduced in black and white, colour images being too costly to include.

Such a situation brings me to a key advantage of journals such as this one since electronic publishing removes the cost considerations faced by publishers making it possible to include not just a wide variety of visual images but also images in full colour. The images accompanying an article do not have to be the focus of the research as is the case when discourse analysis is applied to postcards, films or photographs. The images maybe included for illustrative purposes only such as maps and charts. Whichever is the case there are now a variety of databases from which images can be obtained for research purposes. In the UK, for example, the Image Enriched Learning in Tourism project (IELIT) resulted in a library of tourism focused digital images for non-profit educational use and research. More general websites that academics will already be familiar with are Google image search and the archives of the Life magazine (accessible via Google).

More significantly, the move to electronic journals opens up exciting opportunities in terms of the very nature and form that research might take. It is possible to include moving images, for example film clips from videos or as clips downloaded from sites such as *youtube*. Copyright laws, reproduction rights and ethical considerations still need to be taken into account but the shift to online publishing enables tourism researchers to be more imaginative about the type of research undertaken and the way in which the results are disseminated. Hence sound, interactive media and photo essays can all be accommodated by ejournals and in this respect tourism studies should explore other subject areas and disciplines that also seek to influence the 'what' and 'how' of research in response to the possibilities offered by electronic publishing.

For example, geographers interested in media launched the ejournal *Aether: The Journal of Media Geography* in 2007 not merely to fill what they see as a void in the discipline's focus (Lukinbeal *et al* 2007) but also to provide authors with an alternative publishing outlet '[w]e want color, we want sound and animated video…the types of research that….are often forced into a compromise by the constraints of normative publishing' (Craine *et al* 2008: i). An interesting video article

entitled *Point of Purchase Perceptions: Selling Products with Place* by Mustoe (2008) illustrates the editors' aspirations for *Aether.* In the article, a short textual rationale is provided for the accompanying video presentation, which is then accessed by the reader clicking on the hyperlink included in the text. Obviously access to this article or to any journal whether print based or electronic is limited to subscribers although even in this respect the arrival of free access journals further stretches the normative codes of publishing.

Ejournals are, however, capable of doing much more than including a range of visual media they can profoundly influence the form of knowledge generated and the methods by which that knowledge is obtained. Tribe (2008) offers an innovative illustration of such possibilities in an article entitled *The Art of Tourism*, where he introduces the '….novel method called "virtual curating"' as a means by which the field of tourism can be advanced theoretically and methodologically. Virtual curating involves the virtual collection and analysis of works of art that in someway represent or have a bearing on the world of tourism. 'The researcher assumes the role of a tourism art curator and the output is a display of works organized into viewing galleries supported by an exhibition guide' (Tribe 2008:926). Tribe's article, his 'exhibition', is divided into themed galleries containing hyperlinks to specific works of art accompanied by a brief 'guide' indicating the significance of the particular artwork. In this way he aims to offer a 'thick description' of the phenomenon of tourism '…by intermingling text and image to provide a reading that goes beyond the restrictions of text…and the limited explanatory power of words' (Tribe 2008: 941).

Interestingly, however, Tribe's innovative intentions are hampered somewhat by the restrictions imposed by his choice of publication a text based journal the *Annals of Tourism Research*. Although it must be said that Tribe (2008: 925) is fully aware of and acknowledges the limitations he faces he nonetheless offers a fascinating and significant challenge to what he refers to as the status quo of tourism research '…journals no longer need to be totally text bound and technological innovations offer ripe opportunity for multimedia experimentation and cutting edge research….'.

Following this line of thought textually liberated journals such as the *Journal of Tourism Consumption and Practice* can allow academics direct access to films and images not generated by researchers but by other individuals and groups with intentions ranging from marketing to documenting day trips and family holidays. Archives exist that provide academics with access to a range of images and films some of which have direct relevance for tourism studies. For example, the Screen Archive South East based at the University of Brighton, UK includes many tourism related images and films that can be accessed for research purposes. Two clips are included here by way of illustration; Windows Media Player and a good broadband connection are required to play the clips.

The first clip entitled *At the Sign of the Ram and Gate* relates to a publicity film to promote the town of Ramsgate and is accessed by clicking on the following still image (Plate One)

Plate One: At the Sign of the Ram and Gate – 1957 (Ramsgate Publicity Committee)
(Source: Screen Archive South East)

The second clip, also a publicity film is entitled *Sands of Time.* The film's synopsis, which appears on the Screen Archive South East webpage states that it is about a

young American man who '…..writes a letter to a vicar he met during his stay in East Sussex. Back in America he recalls the places he visited; his letter forms the spoken narrative over the images'. As before, the film is accessed by clicking on the following still image (Plate Two, below).

Plate Two: Sands of Time – 1949 (Council of Hastings)
(Source: Screen Archive South East)

There are numerous other films in the collections held by the Screen Archive South East that can be used for research purposes. In particular the home movies referred to above documenting family holidays, business trips and day trips, which were donated to the archive provide a fascinating glimpse into the role of tourism in the creation and maintenance of social relationships.

Electronic journals can further challenge the status quo of tourism research by stimulating innovation in terms of the relationship between tourism and performance. A relationship highlighted not just by academic researchers (Desmond 1999; Edensor 2000; Coleman and Crang 2004; Larsen 2005; Weaver 2005) but also by the work of photographers such as Martin Parr. Here, researchers should consider some of the techniques employed by academics working in areas such as the performing arts and design studies. For example, it would be interesting to see what

might emerge by the bringing together of sound, movement and vision to explore the spaces and places of tourism in relation to the performative behaviour of the people that inhabit them. The outcomes of such research could include not just films but also visual collages where a variety of images could be juxtaposed to create their own visual narrative. The possibilities do not end there as researchers could produce a film wherein they 'perform' their research findings and the subsequent 'publication' is viewed electronically. Interestingly, one of the conferences mentioned previously included a 'presentation' from researchers who acted out the results of their research in the style of a theatrical event.

At the beginning of this article I said that my intention was to move the focus of discussion forward by considering the influence of electronic journals such as this one on the nature and form of visual research in tourism. The above discussion can only touch upon the exciting opportunities on offer as a result of the move into electronic publishing. Nevertheless I hope the ideas presented here will stimulate not just further debate but actual innovations in the pursuit of how what we know about the world can be informed by our understanding of the phenomenon of tourism.

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Useful websites

Image Enriched Learning in Tourism (IELIT) - www.tourismimages.org.uk

Life Magazine - http://images.google.com/hosted/life

Screen Archive South East - http://sasesearch.brighton.ac.uk/

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