

# THE GEOGRAPHIES OF THANATOURISM

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the geographies of thanatourism, a form of travel where tourists encounter places associated with death, disaster and the macabre. The paper seeks to encourage geographers' engagement with thanatourism to strengthen the credibility of the discourse, which has been criticised for lacking theoretical rigour and empirical evidence. Three key avenues of exploration are proposed, namely, the commodification of death, the spatial tensions at thanatourism sites and the emotional and affective geographies of gazing on commodified death. Contemporary and historical examples of thanatourism sites and practices are included throughout the paper to illustrate some of the key questions discussed in the field at present. The paper concludes with a brief note on the potential pedagogic value of utilising thanatourism to illustrate key geographical concepts.

## INTRODUCTION

Describing an early encounter between a tourist and a Parsee burial in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, the great American author Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, captured an early example of 'thanatourism' in action:

So far as is known, no human being, other than an official corpse-bearer—save one—has ever entered a Tower of Silence after its consecration. Just a hundred years ago a European rushed in behind the bearers and fed his brutal curiosity with a glimpse of the forbidden mysteries of the place. This shabby savage's name is not given; his quality is also concealed. These two details, taken in connection with the fact that for his extraordinary offense the

only punishment he got from the East India Company's Government was a solemn official "reprimand"—suggest the suspicion that he was a European of consequence. The same public document which contained the reprimand gave warning that future offenders of his sort, if in the Company's service, would be dismissed; and if merchants, suffer revocation of license and exile to England.

Twain (1897, pp. 211)

Defined as travel to encounter death (Seaton, 1996), thanatourism, also termed 'dark tourism' (Foley & Lennon, 1996) is an ancient practice. As long as humans have travelled for leisure, they have travelled to watch death and see cadavers and relics; as borne witness by Roman Gladiatorial games, which attracted crowds from around the Empire (Stone, 2006), medieval European pilgrimages to Christian relics of death sites (Seaton, 2009a), 19<sup>th</sup> century tourism and locals' visits to Parisian morgues which could attract up to 40,000 visitors per day (Scwhartz, 1995), or early 20<sup>th</sup> century Thomas Cook tours to the Great War battlefields (Seaton, 2009), for example.

The long history of tourist interest in death shows no sign of abating today. If anything, evidence suggests interest in consuming death is even increasing, as new macabre 'attractions' spring up with almost alarming regularity around the world. In spring 2014, for example, a Morbid Anatomy Museum opened in Brooklyn, New York, comprising a 4,200-square-foot museum housing artefacts 'at the intersection of death and beauty' (Huffington Post, 2014). Such anatomy museums are almost universally popular as attractions; Gunther Von Hagen's infamous *BodyWorlds* exhibition, which displays real human bodies, plastinated into theatrical poses, has attracted thirty eight million visitors since its opening in 1995, making it the world's most popular touring exhibition (Body Worlds, 2014).

Tourist interest in death extends far beyond anatomy, however. Consider for a moment battlefield and disaster sites, genocide camps, cemeteries, fright museums and assassination locations. Although these places are primarily associated with death, suffering and grief, they equally exist as some of the world's most visited tourist attractions. Herein lies the novelty of thanatourism

research; tourism is not 'supposed' to be associated with death. To use the old tourism marketing cliché, it is an industry supposed to be about sun, sand, sea, surf and sex. Why would anyone choose to spend their holiday time consuming as morose as death?

Despite this immediate paradox, it is clear that death is a major visitor attraction worldwide. Tourism to the largest World War II Nazi extermination camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau in southern Poland, for example, grew to almost one and a half million tourists in 2012, up from approximately a third of that figure in the 1990s (Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, 2013). The camp dominates dark tourism literature with authors interested in tourist motivations, experiences and impacts (see for example Biran, Poria & Oren, 2011, Miles, 2002, or Stone, 2006).

Beyond Auschwitz-Birkenau, other large scale human-made atrocities are desirable locations for tourists to visit; the memorials to the victims of the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima are two of Japan's popular attractions with national and international visitors (Siegenthaler, 2002). The consumption of human caused disaster sites beyond conflict also exist. The remains of Reactor 4 at the nuclear meltdown site in Pripyat, Chernobyl in the Ukraine, for example, attracts visitors with regularity, despite fears concerning personal safety and radiation poisoning (Stone, 2013).

These thanatourism sites persist as visitor attractions around the world with various site specific issues dominating local agendas. The remains of Pompeii with its volcanic ash covered skeletal remains, for example, is visited by two and a half million tourists annually and is 'pillaged by treasure hunters [and] overrun by tourists' (National Geographic, 2014). These visitors, as Mark Twain (1869, pp. 333) once wrote, come to gaze upon the remains 'mortal terror' and 'wild despair'. In response to the volume of visitor numbers, site management at Pompeii have drafted a rescue plan, entitled 'The Great Pompeii Project' to urgently conserve, maintain and restore the site.

The wide range of sites documented in this article have been collectively considered for almost two decades under the umbrella 'thanatourism' or, more popularly, if arguably quite sensational and emotionally laden, termed as 'dark tourism'. Considering this diversity of sites, consumption of death by tourists is thus situated on a spectrum, located as educational, authentic

and history centric at one end and synthetic, entertainment focussed and inauthentic at the other (Stone, 2006). Auschwitz-Birkenau would, for example, be located at the educational and authentic end, while entertainment focussed sites, such as the 'gory and gruesome' London Dungeon, one of London's popular paid tourism attractions (London Dungeon, 2014), would be located at the other.

This article seeks firstly to explore some of the geographies of thanatourism, particularly focussed on how geographers could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of tourism landscapes of death. Secondly, the article suggests how geographers could utilise the interaction between tourists, tourism and death to teach core geographic principles, such as place, consumption and commodification.

### THE GEOGRAPHIES OF THANATOURISM

The term 'thanatourism', takes its root from the Greek, 'thanatos', to describe tourism to places which are primarily associated with death. This form of travel is also termed 'grief tourism', 'the heritage of atrocity', 'morbid tourism' and, most frequently, 'dark tourism', the terminology which has dominated tourism publications on the phenomenon over the past two decades.

Thanatourism, however, is the term of choice for this paper, as it appears more neutral in outlook than the value laden 'dark' tourism, which has been posited as containing pejorative connotations (Seaton, 2009a). Whatever the term, exploring tourist sites of death has flourished as an area of enquiry for the past two decades, with contributions coming from across the social sciences, particularly tourism and sociology, with some relatively limited interest from geographers.

To date scholars have sought to use thanatourism primarily as a lens to study wider human relationships with death and dying generally and commodified death specifically, to use the most Marxist terminology. This work has provided theoretical constructs and models which variously present thanatourism attractions as representing new moral spaces for an increasingly secular society in the western world (Stone, 2009), present death as being an Oriental 'Other' to be consumed by tourists (Seaton, 2009b) and present thanatourism as being a postmodernist reflection of society's relationship with death (Lennon & Foley, 2000), revolving around the media, replication,

duplication and commodification of death for tourist consumption. Various models (Stone & Sharpley, 2009) have emerged from this work, albeit largely from a sociology perspective, examining the relationship between tourism and death generally, as opposed to tourism and places of death specifically.

Somewhat secondly to the sociology of thanatourism, several researchers have explored the local, national and global politics of the commodification of particular places of death. In particular this work has focussed on the quandaries involved in commodifying death, examining the impact of the commodification of death on affected local populations, such as war victims, Holocaust survivors or relatives of those deceased in a tragedy and, recently, work has focussed on the individual, exploring the emotional responses made by tourists when encountering places of death (e.g. Iles, 2011).

Some of the earliest research in the field situated thanatourism simply as a form of niche tourism, alongside, for example, ecotourism, heritage tourism or adventure tourism. While situating thanatourism in such a manner is not absolutely without merit, from a managerial perspective perhaps, later publications began to challenge the niche situation of thanatourism (e.g. Stone, 2012a & Seaton, 2009a) to explore the deeper questions surrounding the tourism industry's exploitation of death. As such, tourism scholars, who have generally attempted to develop a critical foundation to their discipline anyway (Bianchi, 2009), deconstructed thanatourism, reassembling it to incorporate discussion of authenticity, ontology, secularisation, sequestration, congruence, ethics and geopolitics, among other concepts.

As Mark Twain's words at the opening of this paper illustrate, inadvertently perhaps, yet eloquently and provocatively, there are many geographies to the consumption of death; performance geographies, historical geographies, landscape studies, cultural studies and semiotics, to name but a few. I suggest here that geographers can make critical contributions to how we understand the commodification and consumption of death. Three potential areas of inquiry are suggested; namely *The Commodification of Death*, *Spatial Conflict at Tourist Deathscapes* and

*Thanagazing*. Each area of inquiry is presented below, with discussion on why, how and where geographers can contribute.

### The Commodification of Death

Modern living is bombarded with being offered the opportunity to consume death. Whether it is the plethora of daytime television advertisements selling funeral insurance or the prevalence of reality TV shows focussed on celebrities' dying moments, it is hard to avoid noticing the commercialisation of death. Commodified death sells TV programmes, films, video games, music and newspapers. Likewise, death is used to promote destination attractiveness. Some of the world's best known tourist attractions are infamous primarily because of the commercialisation of death which has occurred.

Lennon & Foley (2000) observe that following a notorious event where death occurs, if entrepreneurial activity occurs, it can kick-start the commercialisation of death. As time passes and the event begins to become a memory, death becomes transformed from a scar into a memorial into a product. Soon narratives evolve, guided tours of the site are provided, souvenirs are sold, photographs are taken and cash registers ring. Commodification occurs. Somewhat ironically, even the final resting place of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery has been commodified, appearing as it does on Trip Advisor, and being visited by those on guided tours of the graveyard (Figure 1).

Preservation and creation of memory at sites of death and disaster seems intrinsically linked to tourism and commodification. Consider, for example, tourism to Nazi extermination camps in Poland. Auschwitz-Birkenau, where 1.1 million died between 1942 and 1945 receives around one and a half million visitors per year as previously stated. It is a heavily commodified site; dozens of guided tours exist, provided by private companies from Krakow, Katowice and further afield. Some of these companies offer tours to other local heritage sites such as the nearby Salt Mines, but many are not specialists in the field. One company specialises in stag party events, advertising 'Quad Biking in the Morning then Visit one of the world's most haunting museums Auschwitz', (Bennett,

2013), who astutely observes that history has become trivialised at the camp (Figure 2). Clearly however, it is a major draw for tourists.



Fig 1: Tourists at Karl Marx Grave, Highgate, 2012

However, when we contrast Auschwitz-Birkenau's visitor numbers to tourism at the one of the lesser known camps, Chetmno in central Poland, for example, which receives only 50,000 visitors per year (The District Museum in Konin, 2014), yet also had large numbers of victims, (numbers debated, but estimates have ranged between 152,000 and 350,000, The District Museum in Konin, 2014), we can clearly see the influence of commercialisation.



Visitor numbers to both cannot be so simplistically compared of course, given the spatial organisation, scale issues, local tensions, site architecture, geopolitical concerns and ownership conflict at the sites, which helped the camps drift more into, or out of, memory respectively. Yet the point remains; Auschwitz, reshaped, remoulded and commodified, retains its notoriety today somewhat through its commercial function as a visitor attraction. Chelmno, on the other hand, is significantly less exploited, arguably neglected, forgotten and even unknown to many international tourists.



*Fig2: Spatial Conflict at Tourist Deathscapes*

The consumption of commodified death unfolds in 'deathscapes'. Although the suffix 'scape' is arguably somewhat overused in contemporary geographical writing, Appadurai (1990) proposes 'scape' simply as a lens to help explore contemporary social processes. Thus, a 'deathscape', could be defined as a place where interaction between society, death and bereavement is intensified. Deathscapes have the capacity to create particular spatial geographies of the dead for the living, which geographers Maddrell and Sidaway (2010) posit, can be emotionally fraught, heavily contested, both socially and politically, and potentially places where public and private emotions intersect. Deathscape researchers frequently examine spectacular sites; battlefields, cemeteries,



morgues and exhibitions, but deathscapes are equally capable of unfolding in mundane spaces; home, public places or places of worship.

Geographers can contribute much to teasing out the relationship between tourism and death. As the sole anthropological constant, the universality of death and its resulting impact on landscape – whether on architecture, ecology, topography, rituals, education, governance, etc. - is undoubted. When a deathscape is consumed by an outsider, thanatourism occurs. Inevitably, conflict follows consumption at many sites, and particularly those with contested histories.

A clear example of this type of conflict between commercialisation and victims is occurring at the World Trade Centre in New York, following the September 2011 plane attacks and subsequent creation of a memorial centre with a gift shop. ‘Families infuriated by ‘crass commercialism’ of 9/11 Museum gift shop’ writes *The Washington Post* (Phillip, 2014), referring to the availability of key-chains, iPhone cases, soft toys, bookmarks, fridge magnets and miniature toy fire engines.

Further to this, thanatourism deathscapes are not always spatially or temporally distinct or unusual places. The French cemetery, Père Lachaise, for example, oft visited by so-called dark tourists (Seaton, 2009), is used as an urban park by Parisians. Similarly, Ground Zero in New York is a busy commuter walking route, while the ground above the Führerbunker, where Adolf Hitler met his final moments in Berlin, is at once visited by tourists and locals looking to park their cars in the yard above the ruins. Thanatourism sites therefore are not all one dimensional theme parks created purely for those interested in death. The sites exist in their own right and serve everyday functions, existing as places where local people get on with their lives. Recognition of multiple deathscape functions - and subsequent exploration of the mundane in thanatourism, especially using an archaeological and spatial approach to interrogate the multiple meanings of a site - would reveal much concerning the fluidity and evolution of the consumption and commodification of death.

Thanatourism often occurs at exceptionally difficult sites, where death has occurred within living memory. Earthquake locations (e.g. in Chengdu, following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake: Biran, Liu, Li & Eichorn, 2014) shipping disasters (e.g. to the Costa Concordia sinking site in Italy: Stone,

2012b), tourism to war sites and battlefields during ongoing conflict (Seaton, 2009), genocide sites (e.g. at some of the memorial sites in Rwanda: Friedrich & Johnston, 2013 or in Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina: Simic, 2009) have all attracted tourists in recent years. These particular examples could be classified as 'raw'. Raw, because the death site may be on a transformation journey evolving from wound to scar to memorial, while it may also still be surrounded by victims (or perpetrators) yet to recover from the tragedy.

When this rawness is considered, one must begin to question the ethics of either commodifying or consuming death in this manner. How do local populations feel about their loved ones becoming the focus of the tourist gaze? More importantly perhaps from an ethical and philosophical point of view, how would the dead themselves feel about their location of dying, their final resting place, or even their physical corpse remains becoming a tourist attraction? Authors have sought to discuss ethics, yet, to date little has emerged in terms of constructing theoretical models which untangle the fluid relationship between the dead, the survivors, the tourists, the place and those who commodify the tragic event. Such a model is needed to better understand the fluidity of thanatourism places. Geographers could contribute much to modelling these stakeholders against discussion on the ethics, morality and even sustainability of the thanatourism.

#### Thanagazing

Finally, geographers could contribute much to our understanding of the emotional and affective geographies of consuming death. Thanatourism essentially constitutes a gaze on death; a gaze which is configured by entrepreneurs and the state who create signage and symbols which are subsequently consumed by tourists. When people see a sign for landmines in Sarajevo, for example, what they capture in their gaze is 'the troubled Balkans', or when they see a torture rack on a prison tour they see 'medieval barbarity'. The gaze on death, or 'thanagaze', is directed towards execution sites, battlefield scars, war ruins, burial sites and, as per Urry & Larsen's tourist gaze (2011), has often been marketed, modified and managed by tourism professionals. The gaze on death will be

further mediated by the tourist's personal values; value systems, religious beliefs, education, age, upbringing and personal interests will all influence how a tourist views a death site.

Recent literature has seen a greater interest in the effects of gazing on thanatourism landscapes on the individual, but much remains to be studied. As tourists move through sites associated with death their imaginations are stimulated; memories, doubts and expectations may be awakened by encounters with death. The tourist may respond with sadness, anger, humour, humiliation, among many other emotional possibilities. Sensuous reactions may equally be stimulated, but we know little as yet concerning how thanatourism sites affect the body; sight, smell, touch, sound and taste could all be potentially stimulated at thanatourism encounters. Possibilities for empirical research in this area are wide ranging; tourists can smell a replica bomb at Eden Camp, for example, touch military weaponry at Khmer Rouge sites in Cambodia, kiss relics of the crucifix in churches around Europe, or hear survivor testimonies at a number of Holocaust camps. Thanatourism could even be an embodied experience where a performance is physically consumed by tourists. Smokers are sermonized into quitting their habit in BodyWorlds for example (Maienschein & Creath, 2007). Such an encounters must be intimate, potentially stimulating the senses, yet such how death tourism experiences become embodied remains largely understudied to date.

Further to this, the motivations of those who commodify death need to be further interrogated. Often posited sensationally in the media as 'sick' or 'deviant' (Stone & Sharpley, 2013), there is emerging evidence in the literature that classifying those who commodify death as unsympathetic – whether victims, the state or private profit making entrepreneurs - is a classification based on weak foundations. Evidence points towards the cathartic value of interpreting conflict for outsiders (Causevic & Lynch, 2011), the presentation of death sites as a means of legitimising political struggles (McDowell, 2008) and, potentially as a development tool to help a local population come to terms with death (Friedrich & Johnston, 2013).

This paper suggests a number of avenues where geographers can make contributions to thanatourism discourse. Given the emergence of a more critical foundation in discipline of tourism generally (Bianchi, 2009) and the need for more scholarship in the thanatourism niche, specifically (Seaton, 2009), geographical perspectives on thanatourism will greatly enhance its credibility as a subject area, strengthen its theoretical underpinnings and contribute to the breadth of site and population specific knowledge on newly emerging sites. At the very least, the relationship between tourism and deathscapes is likely to capture the geographical imagination.

To conclude the article however, I would like to briefly discuss my experience of teaching thanatourism. I have delivered thanatourism lectures and workshops on core geography and tourism undergraduate and postgraduate modules for almost a decade, with student reaction to the subject material being almost universally positive. Some of my colleagues teaching the subject in other universities in the U.K. and internationally have reported equally positive responses to the subject. Teaching thanatourism has even been well received in high school classes, where, although it often receives a few nervous giggles, it seems to spark interest in geographical ideas. Even the quieter, introvert students seem ready to engage and discuss their experiences. As such, many of the teachers have readily adopted the material for future use or particular local projects.

I believe, largely based on student reaction to thanatourism, that there is potentially great pedagogic value in the topic and that it is especially useful to teach the core geographic concept of 'place'. This is primarily because of the diversity of interactions between humans (i.e. tourists, entrepreneurs & victims) and the physical world of death (i.e. resting places or memorials) that occur at tourist deathscapes. Interactions between tourists, entrepreneurs, victims and the dead humanise, or dehumanise, the ground inhabited by the dead, making the place 'interesting' or 'different' from others. As such thanatourism can provide excellent material for case studies, seminars and project work, or to illuminate specific concepts related to place and space.

Secondly, there is perhaps also an argument that consideration of the geographies of thanatourism may help stimulate good citizenship and encourage individual ethical responsibility

from an early age. This is partly due to the difficult nature of the sites and events discussed and partly due to the absence of ethics and morality in many school and undergraduate curricula. In an increasingly secular society, thanatourism may represent one of fewer opportunities where students critically consider death and society's relationship with death. To fully exploit this potential, I have brought students on many thanatourism site visits, including to war cemeteries, battlefields and museums.

Overall however, the value of using thanatourism to illustrate such concepts lies perhaps in its novelty factor. My personal experience is that the unusualness of the topic can make geographical theory engaging, memorable and, for some, potentially filled with personal meaning. Many students can relate to the material, having visited sites with parents, friends or as part of a school tour. Discussing their experiences has often proved moving, rewarding and almost always raised excellent opportunities for discussion.

#### IMAGES

Figure 1: Tourists at Karl Marx grave, Highgate Cemetery, London, 2012

Figure 2: The relative absence of tourists at Chełmno extermination camp, Poland, 2013

Figure 3: Tourists clamber on the gas chamber remains at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland, 2008

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