

## THEORIZING TOURISM: BRIDGING THE VIRTUAL-REAL-DICHOTOMY

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### **Abstract**

Theories of Tourism are induced by the scientific project of rationalizing human behaviour. Thus, they constitute an act of rational integration, of archiving tourist phenomena into our pool of rational knowledge. We suggest that tourism has to be regarded as an act of integration as well and that, quite generally, explanations for theories of tourism and tourism itself build on the same pillars, as both result from modern ambitions of control and exploitation. This hypothesis accounts for tourism in so far as tourism takes control over and exploits certain realities in order to give flesh and bones to the dreamlike utopias of modern, consumerist societies, in which tourism is generated as a constant desire. Phases of tourist development and types of tourist interests only vary in the way, in which they reflect various changing constituents of modern societies such as mass media, individualization and so on. Applied to contemporary societies this hypothesis suggests, for example, that pictures chased by tourists with inevitable digital cameras are prefigured in a virtual space, which is designed along consumerist imperatives in these respective societies. Tourist experiences, then, have to be considered as acts of experiential integration, of archiving the Real into the Virtual. In this paper we contend that the interplay between tourism and modern control and exploitation and the virtualization of contemporary society is central to an understanding of tourism. Especially new virtual phenomena like Web 2.0 applications (e.g. travel-blogs) and the increasing popularity of designing one's holiday online indicate a virtual-real dichotomy and demonstrate the necessity to bridge this dichotomy in theorising tourism.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Virtual-Real-Dichotomy, Cyberspace, Web 2.0, Grounded Systems Theory

## Introduction

Nowadays, there is little doubt that we have to accept virtuality as our destiny. This has interesting consequences for any theory of tourism and thus for traditional concepts of tourism studies as well. Authenticity, as discussed and criticized in many works, has to be re-conceptualized in this context and turns out as anything else but an empty or useless category. In our approach, the term oscillates between the authentic appearances of the non-virtual in the virtual and the total colonization of the non-virtual by the authentic virtual: “What some people experience as authentic is often considered as alienated by others: one individual’s true experience is another’s kitsch and vice versa. In most cases, there is no generally accepted way to tell the authentic from a fake.” (Aramberri, 2001, 740) Our distinction not only enables an approach encompassing various tourist types but the acknowledgment and perception of different authenticities in the tourist experience. The authenticity of an African national park experience, for example, can be evaluated according to its correlation to virtual fantasies: the closer the park experience gets to the virtual fantasy, the more authentic it is. Yet this doesn’t preclude that some tourists may experience the park’s authenticity in opposition to the virtual fantasies, which they are able to deconstruct. In any case, tourist experiences of the real, as experiences *in loco*, are increasingly, as we are going to argue, reintegrated into the virtual fantasies through the very recent possibilities of ICTs<sup>94</sup>, either in forms of critique or worship. Thus traditional constituents of the tourist gaze are extended: “People linger over such a gaze which is then visually objectified or captured through photographs, postcards, films, models and so on. These enable the gaze to be endlessly reproduced.” (Urry, 1995, 133) Tourism consequently has to be analyzed as the constant process of reintegrating the real into the virtual. The concept of authenticity helps to understand this process more properly and specifies, what actually is reintegrated: How does the real taste?<sup>95</sup>

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of our theoretical and methodological starting point, which lays the basis for our empirical study.

## The Modern Tourist As A Scientist

As the real of any tourist experience is always determined by the virtual, we have to speak of reintegration.<sup>96</sup> We perceive, in this paper, the rational reintegration of experience into a pool of knowledge as a phenomenon, which has been fundamentally accelerated during the course of modernity. The rule of rationality is expressed not only in the nowadays dominant science-paradigm, which subdues the whole world of our experience to the scientific gaze but, yet in an even more chaotic and unpredictable way, in the economic organization of contemporary societies as well. Tourism, in this context, has been legitimized by ahistoric arguments, such as the invocation of exploration and curiosity as eternal characteristics of the *conditio humana* and, more recently, by claims to guarantee the economical sustainability of tourist destinations, in order to provide capitalism with the possibilities to exploit the enormous profits promised by the tourist gaze. All tourist developments occur, by the way, quite in parallel to the scientific gaze

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<sup>94</sup> Information and Communication Technologies

<sup>95</sup> The aesthetization of everyday life within capitalist societies as a matter of taste has been analyzed most prominently by Featherstone, 1991. In our opinion, tourism is an important extension of aesthetization processes and, thus, taste is an important issue.

<sup>96</sup> The most thoroughly analysis of how the virtual is shaping the real is so far provided by Baudrillard, 1994.

and, just as former explorers, the modern tourist is a scientist as well: an archaeologist in Greece, a biologist in the Amazon or an anthropologist in the Himalayas.

The parallels between tourism and science turn out to be central aspects for our understanding of the real-virtual dichotomy: both the tourism industry and the academia provide various forms of knowledge (as reintegration of experience). The intention of both is to control the world in which we live in accordance with capitalist modes of economic organization. Thus, just as science, tourism has begun to incorporate a hope of salvation for the poor, stressed and unprivileged, which is, ironically, articulated by the tourists themselves. Yet, what distinguishes tourism from science, is its explicit stress on aesthetics, as authenticity is not a question of truth but rather of taste.

### **Shaping the Tourists' Taste**

What determines taste regarding tourist activities is a question, which requires careful differentiation and cannot be outlined in detail right here. General sociological approaches towards the issue of taste within tourism might start from class-based concepts (such as Bourdieu, 1984), alterity-based theories (as in Friedl, 2004) or others. Which approach towards taste finally is chosen also depends on the chosen typologies: fordist tourism vs. post-fordist tourism, alternative tourism vs. normal tourism (backpacks vs. suitcases), post-tourism vs. tourism and so on. The endless endeavour: ecological tourism, cultural tourism, agricultural tourism, virtual tourism, space tourism... "A tourist's situation, knowledge, and skills regarding travelling and the online space contribute to effective search" and to the formation of taste (Pan/Fesenmaier, 2006, 813).

What has been shaping tourist tastes/gazes at least since the beginnings of mass tourism is the ever growing tourism industry generating fantasies about leisure, beauty, adventure and so on. "An array of tourist professionals develop who attempt to reproduce ever new objects of the tourist gaze." (Urry, 1995, 133) The contemporary tourism industry provides a fantasy for almost every taste, which is increasingly differentiated due to the dynamics of individualization and consumerism (cf. Bichler/Schmiderer, 2006). The way the tourism industry gains its profits is to provide the knowledge of how making those fantasies real, which the industry itself has assisted to shape within a framework of general social and cultural dynamics (be it Thomas Hook or Lonely Planet).

### **The Influence of Cyberspace On Tourism**

ICTs have assisted the tourism industry not only in its knowledge management, but also in generating virtual, multi-media fantasies. "IT facilitates mass customization of products: towards the supply chain, complex and flexible bundles of tourism offerings can be configured; towards the customer, knowledge management tools enable individualized marketing. As a result, good quality can be produced at a reasonably low price." (Werthner/Klein 1999, 1) So the question is: How are current changes within the organization of cyberspace affecting the tourism process conceptualized in terms of authenticity? We claim that especially new Web 2.0<sup>97</sup> applications (such as travelblog.org) diversify tastes within the realm of tourism. Web 2.0 is based on technologies, which allow an integration of a variety of tools and applications that are easily

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<sup>97</sup> The term Web 2.0 was created by Tim O'Reilly and his working group at O'Reilly Media; see for example O'Reilly's article: "What is Web 2.0".

accessible, interconnected and interactive. The so far passive user is becoming an active, constitutive and distributive producer, who shares and exchanges information openly and free of charge in order to make knowledge available to all, to collaborate equally, to foster collective intelligence, so that everyone benefits. Therefore the term Web 2.0 describes a fundamental change in which power, influence and social status are eroding, as well as occupation, gender, age and ethnicity. In the first twenty years of the practical existence of cyberspace it was primarily characterised by an information providing function, in the sense of one-to-many communication, whereas through Web 2.0 cyberspace is becoming a more and more egalitarian space created and shaped by the users themselves. Individual cognition processes mainly produced Web 1.0, contrary to that, Web 2.0 emerges out of communication processes. New forms of interaction, such as blogs, chats, instant messengers and bulletin boards increasingly eliminate pure information consumption (cf. Bichler/Raffl, 2007). Howard Rheingold subsumes these applications under the term “technologies of cooperation” (cf. Rheingold, 2002).

Such services, which allow for a prosperous multitude of tastes, moreover reintegrate tourist experiences in the most participatory way available in our times. Every taste can be (potentially) represented, every experience can be (potentially) reintegrated, the opposing forces of authenticity are reassessed, but negotiated. “Indeed, the incredible growth in online social networks tools and blogs is clearly in response to the perceived control by the producers. (...) As contemporary marketing strategists suggest, there is a substantial need for destination promoters to recognize that their search for control of information has created a world lacking in trust and seeking authenticity through dialogue.” (Pan/Fesenmaier, 2006, 826) In our research we are looking at the ways the real-virtual dichotomy is bridged by various tourist types.

### **Empirical Analysis – Methodology**

What we intend to outline in this paper is how shifts in the virtual organization of tourism are cementing tastes in a post-modern manner, how touristic knowledge turns participatory and how the term reintegration is able to constitute a coherent theory of the rapid changes within contemporary tourism.

The social-technical developments central to current changes within tourism pose a series of critical issues indeed, which have to be studied:

- What is the actual degree of participation?
- What is the actual degree of differentiation?
- What is the effect on the tourist performance of different tourist types?
- Which forms of authenticities are prevalent?
- Which strata of society are involved?
- What are the possible implications for tourist destinations?

For describing and analyzing the virtualization of tourism we employ a method currently developed by the *eTheory* Unit at the ICT&S Center of the University of Salzburg that combines Grounded Theory and Systems Theory (Grounded Systems Theory). Grounded Theory is a qualitative method for producing theories that has been developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (cf. Glaser/Strauss 1967, Strauss/Corbin, 1990). Data concerning a certain phenomenon, topic, or field is systematically analyzed and integrated into a theory. The creation of a Grounded Theory is a dynamic, iterative, inductive-deductive process that combines data and theory and runs through several iterative loops where data and theory are reconsidered and reshaped.

Grounded Theory is therefore not generated *a priori* and then subsequently tested. Rather, it is,

“[...] inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory should stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (Strauss/Corbin, 1990, 23).

Grounded Theory hence can be considered as an evolutionary method, the theories produced by employing the Grounded Theory method develop gradually. The selection of data for analysis (theoretical sampling) just like the construction of theory is a continuous, evolving process. The applied method also takes into consideration systems thinking grounded in empirical data and theoretical approaches that will be synthesized. Thus basic concepts of Systems Theory such as social systems, complexity, nonlinearity, emergence, information, self-organization, self-reproduction, systemic environments, openness and systemic evolution will lay the basis for the study (cf. Flood/Carson, 1993, Fuchs, 2007).

The study will focus on four different Web 2.0 applications: [www.stepuptravel.org](http://www.stepuptravel.org), [www.travelblog.org](http://www.travelblog.org), [www.travellersconnected.com](http://www.travellersconnected.com), [www.couchsurfing.com](http://www.couchsurfing.com). The participants will be acquired online. Methods used in this project include content and discourse analysis, quantitative online surveys and qualitative interviews.

## Conclusion

In this paper we formulated a research framework for studying the impact of virtualization on tourism by using Grounded Systems Theory. Employing such a method should help to bring to light how the ongoing shifts in the virtual organization of tourism are cementing tastes in a post-modern manner, how touristic knowledge turns participatory and how the term reintegration is able to form a coherent theory of the rapid changes within (post-)modern tourism. This topic, as well as the proposed methodology, might be fruitful for professionals in- and outside academia. For example market researches, of course, will find huge fields for their digging activities on the rapidly growing Blog-domains, even more so, if those domains continue to be commercialized. “They can produce better suited products and identify the respective segment for them. Better prepared and structured information as well as its improved and more targeted distribution leads to more transparent and easier decision making on both sides.” (Werthner/Klein, 1999, 10) Nevertheless, centralized strategic planning of (sustainable) tourism will be getting harder in times of post-modern tourist tastes/gazes and new spaces for local initiatives and civic engagement might thus be opened up. We thus hope to prepare a ground for further research.

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