
Book Review

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Virtual Dark Tourism: Ghost Roads

by: Kathryn N. McDaniel

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The confusion revolving around the term dark tourism is not otiose, as well as the criticism this emerging segment has received over the recent years. No less true is that if dark tourism seems to be very hard to grasp, 'virtual dark tourism' is harder. This is the main goal of K. McDaniel, a Professor of History at the Marietta College, who edits a fresh and innovative book on virtual dark tourism. The book is divided into four sections (which are formed in 15 chapters). The chapters are gathered to keep the same common-thread argument. The first section signals to the literacy and fiction novels where death is centred as the main protagonist player. From the Lovecraft's legacy to Connie Willis or Cornelius Ryan, the section looks to draw the fictional landscapes of dark tourism in the ink of seminal authors and writers. Not in vain, this section is entitled *literary journeys*. The fact is that these imaginaries pasts are re-elaborated to interrogate the present as McDaniel acknowledges in her prefatory introduction. In the hands of brilliant fiction writers, authors who take part of these chapters toy with the belief that writers have the capacity to transport readers in fictional times and cultures, alluding to the tragedy as a key factor that helps them to interpret their own present life. To some extent, this is a type of virtuality, which associates to the human power of imagination.

The second part centres the influence of the film industry to portray vicarious trauma and atrocities committed in the pastime. For some reason, as the chapter dedicated to the *Game of Throne* showed, the fictional events as they happened in the film not only are extrapolated by real facts but also determine our own behaviour in the here-and-now. In this respect, virtual dark tourism merges with the real world. Far from causing a disrupting effect, disasters enhance the social cohesion leading the society toward the consolidation of identity. The traumatic event is remembered to inspire the emotionality of global audiences, paving the ways for a unified sentiment of empathy for the other's suffering.

The third section (internet tours) discusses the importance of the internet, which plays a leading role as an articulator of experiences, sensations and anxieties. The three chapters forming this section deal with sensitive issues such as Rwandan genocide, Katrina hurricane and the resulted devastation in New Orleans and Haiti earthquake. Although the methodologies of each chapter really vary, the section delineates the contours of a new argumentation, where the role played by the media, photography

and game simulation in order to construct the allegory of disaster is evident. For the authors' viewpoint, virtual dark tourism reproduces 'meaningful experience' through the engagement with real disasters.

The fourth section, at least for this reviewer one of the best of the book, examines the interactive games, which recreate fantastic cosmologies, as a fertile ground for next approaches and research. As Juliane Schlag puts it (in her chapter dedicated to surviving the Colonial Blizzard and its connection with native peoples), games are far from solving the traumatic past of the exploited ethnicities but it betters the positions of users interested in creating a necessary synergy to learn the lesson.

The present book reminds the needs of overcoming the current criticism around dark tourism. In fact, as the editor overtly said, virtual dark tourism resolves partially the limitations and contradictions of dark consumption. One of them consists in the distortion some dark sites offers respecting to the real past. Though dark tourism gives a lesson to society, sometimes when the message is commoditised the remembrance would be far from history. As McDaniel observes, the literature, film, internet site and games start a travel internalising in the users the possibilities of being there (without vulnerating the rights of natives). Secondly, dark tourism suddenly emerges without any type of planning or caution for the local life. Virtual dark tourism is regulated to protect the identity and the mourning of community. What is more important, virtual dark tourists are not directly involved in a travel (gazing or possessing others) but only can grasp the experience by reading a book or watching a TV documentary. This leads the editor to assume that virtual dark tourism allows more virtuous and ethical experiences because the consumed narratives are carefully designed. McDaniel argues convincingly that virtual dark tourism not only substitutes the physical travel, which permits an obtrusive gaze but ignites a hot debate revolving memory, tragedy and the human condition (if not its vulnerability).

After carefully reviewing this manuscript, one might find that editor, as well as invited authors, attempt to present a high-quality work that discusses dark tourism from a new innovative angle. The technological breakthrough in Western civilisation ushered scholars and thinkers in reconsidering not only the essence of tourism but dark tourism. Although recommendable as a must-read book, *Virtual Dark Tourism: Ghost Roads* replicates the same ideological discourses that situate dark tourism as an anthropological attempt to engage with the other's pain. With a strong focus in the fields of heritage and identity, these approaches gloss over the figure of heritage as the symbolic touchstone of colonial rule and the rise of the western nation-state as a global project. Rather, for this reviewer and others scholars, dark tourism and virtual dark tourism still remain as an ideological dispositifs where the other's suffering becomes in a criterion of supremacy and entertainment. To this new world, we have named as 'Thana-Capitalism'. Far from being emphatic with the others, dark tourism reinforces old colonial stereotypes that mark the non-western alterity as inferior or simply culturally constrained to be excluded from the ideals of democracy and the promised benefits of free-trade (Korstanje, 2016, 2018). The sense of risk has been commoditised as a form of (morbid) spectacle that divides the 'chosen peoples' from the doomed ones.

References

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