Dark Visitor Attractions

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ABSTRACT

Dark visitor attractions are the physical manifestations of dark tourism. Although comprising a range of built, natural and cultural places, this paper emphasises their identification and classification. Addressing the need for balance between content delivery and commercial activities, this paper explores interpretation as both a means for classification and a challenge for operational management. It also presents an overview of the different interpretation approaches in order to demonstrate how DVAs differ by reasons of interpretation, regardless of their inherent characteristics. Finally, this paper emphasises the importance of creating engaging experiences through the acceptance and adoption of technological innovations.

Keywords: Dark visitor attractions, dark tourism, heritage tourism, interpretation, visitor experiences
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Dark visitor attractions (DVAs) are the physical manifestations of dark tourism— a subset of heritage tourism and based on the packaged representation of historic death, tragedy or macabre events. Whether in-situ or purposefully constructed, DVAs occur as a result of the intentional exploitation of dark heritage through tourism activities. Underpinned by strategically designed interpretation agendas that rely on commemoration, education and/or entertainment, DVAs provide audiences with opportunities to engage with dark heritage in an effort to promote deeper appreciation and understanding. While it is possible to define DVAs as tourism places that represent dark heritage, DVAs have largely been addressed as sites or attractions associated with death, tragedy and the macabre. DVAs can be defined as places associated with and representative of past tragedies, death, and macabre events, which provide cathartic, educational, and/or enjoyable visitor experiences through varying interpretation agendas for tourism purposes (Wyatt, 2019).

DVAs are similar to the wider range of heritage visitor attractions (HVAs). They are both symbolic of historic events and comprised of tangible and intangible resources that encompass a wide range of built, natural, and cultural spaces. Under both public and private ownership, DVAs include buildings; towns; natural environments; museums; historic houses; castles; archaeological sites; industrial places; defunct spaces; military places and battlefields; memorials; monuments; visitor centres; and themed attractions. As a result of this diversity, DVAs have become the most visited attractions in some cities throughout the world (Tarlow, 2005). Such popularity is dependent on visitor motivations, which can include reasons related to a need for understanding; enlightenment; compassion; empathy; repentance; identify-building; self-discovery; morbid curiosity; and/or special interest. Visitation to DVAs may also occur as a result of personal or heritage connections; recommendations; group travel itineraries; serendipitous excursions; or because the DVA is considered a ‘must-see’ attraction.

Much of the differences between DVAs are underpinned by their interpretation— a strategic effort, encompassing both process and activity, with the aim to educate and inspire audiences about topics through provoking and engaging experiences that employ a variety of practical methods and media (Wyatt, 2019). Some DVAs promote commemorative interpretation, which generally encompass a memorial, space for quiet reflection, and the recognition of victims (e.g., Lockerbie Garden of Remembrance, Lockerbie, UK; Jeju 4.3 Peace Park, Jeju Island, South Korea). These experiences are often designed through collaborations with survivors and historians. As temporal distance grows from the represented event, these experiences often undergo fundamental changes that lead to the inclusion of educational exhibitions and/or visitor centres.

DVAs that take on educational interpretive agendas often seek to educate audiences through interpretation in order to teach valuable lessons that may help to prevent such tragic circumstances from being repeated in future. These experiences (e.g., Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site, Dachau, Germany; Salem Witch Museum, Salem, US) generally encompass static exhibitions with artefacts, text panels, and photographic and filmic imagery. In some instances, (e.g., Tallin Legends, Tallin, Estonia; Museum of Medieval Torture, Prague, Czech Republic), educational experiences may also encompass guided tours, staged scenes of period-inspired props and mannequins, sensory stimulation technologies, and/or re-enactments. DVAs that use these more engaging techniques are often observed as crossing the entertainment boundary and creating more edutainment type experiences.
DVAs that promote edutainment interpretation will promote one of two agendas— to educate and create appreciation through more interactive and entertainment-based methods (e.g., Titanic Museum Attraction, Branson, US; Battle of Bannockburn Museum, Stirling, UK), or to educate and entertain audiences through more fun-centric and innovative methods (e.g., the Gravedigger Ghost Bus Tour, Dublin, Ireland; the Amsterdam Dungeons, Amsterdam, Netherlands). In either case, edutainment experiences encompass the manipulation of costuming, props, speech, behaviour, lighting, sound effects, graphic imagery and sensory stimulation, which are all rooted in performance theory.

With some DVAs (e.g., McKamey Manor, Summertown, US; ghost hunting tours, worldwide) the educational element is completely removed, and the experience is purely for entertainment. These experiences are not typically history or heritage related and instead seek to shock and thrill audiences through overstimulation techniques and scare tactics. As these DVAs often require visitors to sign waivers acknowledging the potential for physical, mental or emotional harm during the experience, their audiences are generally adrenaline driven, motivated by their personal interest or morbid curiosity.

The initial recognition of DVAs can be traced back to the formal conceptual development of dark tourism in 1996. However, given their vast diversity, numerous classification models were developed to help identify them. A popular classification model is Stone's (2006) Darkness Spectrum—a scale which helps to identify DVAs by their perceived level of darkness as a result of their inherent and organisational characteristics. According to the Spectrum, DVAs are considered darker if they have a lower tourism infrastructure and reflect a stronger sense of authenticity supported by a history centric, commemorative agenda that is delivered through commemorative or educational interpretive methods. These DVAs, which are generally not purposefully created and usually representative of more recent events, differ from DVAs situated at the lighter end of the spectrum, which tend to be purposefully created with a higher tourism infrastructure. These lighter DVAs (LDVAs) are more often heritage centric and deliver edutainment experiences underpinned by commercialisation.

Underpinning the Darkness Spectrum is the recognition that darker DVAs may slide towards the lighter end of the spectrum as a result of growing temporal distance from the represented event, changes in interpretive methods, and the media-induced public desensitisation of death. It is important to also recognise that the inherent and operational characteristics used to determine a DVA’s darkness are not fixed. Some in-situ DVAs actually promote a commercial tourism infrastructure (e.g., The Real Mary King’s Close, Edinburgh, UK), and some purposeful built DVAs actually commemorative and concerned with historical accuracy (e.g., U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington DC, US). Thus, figure 1 demonstrates how DVAs may instead be classified by only their interpretation agenda, regardless of their inherent characteristics (e.g., location originality, temporal distance).

Figure 1 – DVA classification by interpretation
Similar to HVAs, DVAs are challenged by a variety of management and operational factors that relate to access, conservation, visitors, stakeholder roles, budgets, maintenance, and operational structures (Leask, 2016). However, unlike HVAs, DVAs are further challenged by their association with death, tragedy and/or macabre events. There is a need to establish a balance between the nature of the content and the nature of the commercial business. Ethical concerns regarding this balance are generally raised when commercialisation becomes more prominent with the inclusion of visitor centres, cafes, or the use of edutainment interpretation.

The use of edutainment interpretation at DVAs is highly debated. These experiences are often criticised as being driven by commercial exploitation and Disney-inspired design strategies, lacking any sense of authenticity and generally unconcerned with matters of facts and historical accuracy. Yet, studies have shown that edutainment experiences can deliver fact-based narratives and these DVAs are in fact concerned with historical accuracy (Wyatt, 2019; Wyatt et al., 2020). In addition, these experiences have shown to be effective methods for retaining audience attention and promoting deeper learning experiences (Oren & Shani, 2012). They have also been found preferred among dark tourism audiences (Ivanova & Light, 2017).

The heritage tourism industry is increasingly competitive and DVAs exist as a niche form within it, relying on visitor motivations in order to remain relevant. It is not a secret that audiences are becoming more experience-driven, influenced by technology and mass media. Although more DVAs are offering co-created and experiential experiences (Magee & Gilmore, 2015), there are many that continue to resist the shift towards experience-scape. This resistance will prove even more challenging in the coming years since technological innovations, particularly those developed in response to COVID-19, have proved beneficial for the success and continued business of many attractions within the wider heritage tourism industry. While there will always remain concern for balance between content and commercialisation, DVAs must accept and adopt more engaging and innovative interpretation methods.

References: