

The dark side of the tourism - how the world's biggest tragedy became an attracti...

[Economics](#), [Globalization](#)



According to Cohen and Kennedy (2000), tourism can be seen as one of the most powerful forces when it comes to its ability in shaping and thus changing the World. Accordingly, Greenwood (1972) highlights how such industry can be considered as one of the biggest in terms of the scale of goods' flow, services and people. Moreover, in terms of economic growth and development, tourism is recognized as being not only one of the largest exporter earner and provider of foreign exchange, but also one of the sectors that provides more employment worldwide (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006).

Tourism, indeed, improves the economic development, but in addition to this, society, culture and the environment are also affected (Franklin, 2003).

Accordingly, the cultural and social impacts caused by the tourism are as important and relevant as the economical ones since their effects causes significant changes in terms of the lifestyle of a community along with all the economic benefits that economic growth can produce (Franklin, 2003). On this basis, tourism industry increase education, employment as well as cultural acceptance between people, therefore allowing them to overcome mistrust and preconceptions (Seba, 2012). It can be stated that the tourism industry, in turn, is being shaped and affected not only by the globalization phenomena but also by the evolution of advanced technologies (Franklin, 2003). Consequentially, such changes in technologies have played a fundamental role in the development of the tourism sector, creating a rise in the flows of goods, people and services across the globe at a lower cost for a greater number of people compared to the past century (Franklin, 2003).

However, there is a gap between the Global North and Global South that still continues to exist, whereas tourism causes an unequal wealth's distribution (Smith 1988). On the other hand, mass-tourism, over-tourism, culture's commodification and the loss of cultural authenticity within a country or tourist destination, represent one of the biggest impacts that tourism has on the society (Cohen & Kennedy, 2000). Due to this loss of authenticity, a growing number of travelers are engaging in different types of tourism which appear to be more captivating and authentic, the so-called thanatourism (Lennon and Foley, 2000).

Chernobyl as dark tourism

Accordingly, over the past decades, the interest in Thana tourism, the academical term for dark tourism, has increased sharply and has his origins in the mid-1960s presented as a new form of tourism that is becoming more popular among visitors from all over the world intrigued and fascinated by sites associated with deaths and disaster (Lennon and Foley, 2000).

Moreover, dark tourism is also considered a form of heritage tourism (Seaton, 2001) and some scholars refers to it as "atrocities heritage" (Beech, 2009). Furthermore, it has been found that the media plays a vital role in framing the tourism in such areas, more specifically in Chernobyl, where thirty years later after the most tragic nuclear catastrophe became one of the most visited places in Eastern Europe. As many states, Chernobyl is synonym of the worst history's disaster which caused the death of thousands of people not only when the explosion occurred but also many years after that in different countries around Europe; on April 26 in 1989, two explosions

occurred in the middle of the night while a group of engineers were engaging in a delicate security test.

The aim of the test was to verify if the cooling system of the reactor number four could still work in case of scarcity of electronic energy. However, the test went out of control and the explosion formed a cloud of radiation and a fire which burned for nine days causing the evacuation and abandonment of the area (The Chernobyl Gallery, 2009). Consequentially, Chernobyl and his surroundings could have only been visited by scientists and others for a very short amount of time until 2011, when the Government opened to touristic tours to anyone willing to spend about 80 euros for a one-day trip (The Telegraph, 2012). With regards to Ukraine, the tourism industry is flourishing every year and in 2017 this sector's total contribution in the GDP represented 1.5% and is predicted to reach 8% in 2018 representing the fastest growing industries from a country that is still recovering from the nuclear disaster and the financial crisis (Wikipedia). Moreover, even though Ukraine has a rich and important historical heritage, Chernobyl still represent one of the main reasons why travelers choose to visit the destination (CNN Travel, 2014). Accordingly, the numbers of the visitors increase each year (more than 10.000) as well as their interest in spending more than one day in the area, which actually led to the construction of a hotel in the proximities of Chernobyl. As stated by Stone and Sharpley (2008; p. 588): "The need to visit sites or unusual places connected 4 to tragedy or disaster results in a bigger, holistic picture of tourist motivation which results in the tourist gaze".

The tourist gaze in dark tourism

According to Lennon and Foley (2000), the seek for “remembrance” is nothing but a vital human activity that reinforces people’s links to their past, therefore, the ways in which we remember helps define people in the present. Furthermore, as claimed by Urry (1990), the tourist experience is identified by gazing at or viewing the environment. He later (2002) argued that tourists look at the environment with interest and curiosity and they are always in search for the “authentic” and unique experience when travelling. On these grounds, such tourist gaze can also be associated with the concept of dark tourism (Lennon and Foley, 2000; Urry, 2002). Additionally, Urry (1990), highlights five different forms of the tourist gaze and namely – romantic, collective, spectatorial, environmental and anthropological; each of these forms are driven by different motivations and interest based on the gazers’ background, social group as well as historic period (Gaya, 2013). The figure provides a detailed explanation of the concept outlined.

Tourism mobilities

As previously discussed, mobilities and the modernization of technologies are closely intertwined (Leed, 1991) and according to Tully (1999), in many areas of society, people are virtually “taught to be mobile”. In other words, in the 21st century, the development of new advanced technologies such as smart-phones and an overall greater use of social media used as information source, has enabled travelers to experience the destination prior to the starting of the actual journey (Hannam et al. , 2014). That is to say that,

Instagram for example has the power to influence one's choice of his next trip thanks to the fact that from the pictures of a place can seem very appealing, meanwhile TripAdvisor is a platform where people can give feedbacks about their experience after visiting a place, so people can gather information and have a glimpse of what they might experience during their trip.

In Chernobyl, what intrigues most the travelers is the city of Pripjat, the ghost-town not so far from the nuclear station where it used to be home for most of the workers and their families, now being labelled as the "Exclusion-zone", where people can only stay there for a few hours, given the fact that the levels of radiation are still high and therefore detrimental for the human body if exposed for an exceeding amount of time. For some it might look like the town has preserved his authenticity and never being touched by the human but the pictures below might suggest a different reality, since it is clearly visible that some details and aspects of the scenarios have been changed, including all the colorful graffiti that covers the walls, in order to highlight the tragedy and raise awareness among visitors. To some extent, it can be argued that those changes might be conceived as staged-authenticity (McCannell, 1973). In other words, tourists usually strive for unique and authentic places but they often seem to fail in such pursuit, mainly due to the creation of the so called "frontstage" by for example tour guides, which, modifying details are overall creating inauthentic environments (Dann and Cohen 1996). Furthermore, such staging can be also interpreted as being commodified, in a way in which objects and

environments are being changed in order to create a greater sympathy and an emotional reaction for the visitors' satisfaction (Greenwood, 1972).

Overall, it can be stated that such commodifications are employed by the tour guides, making sure that tourist's experiences are at the level of their expectations, although the only few residents left might have the feeling that they are just nothing else but objects. (Pezzullo, 2007). Furthermore, other examples of how social media and the internet are advertising tourism in this area, can be seen in the creation of special tours dedicated only to the passionate of photography, both experts or amateurs, which accurately documents the changes of Chernobyl over the year, through visual and extremely powerful images (The Chernobyl Photography). On these premises, it can be argued that the media plays a crucial role in the construction of the tourist experience in such areas as stated by Rojek (1993), who also suggested that this type of tourism is extremely bounded to the audio-visual media which makes it more interesting and tragic.

Accordingly, Sharpley and Stone (2008) claim that people nowadays can experience dark tourism virtually through the internet and television in an intangible form. Horror movies and videogames¹ are, for instance, very influential where people expect to experience extreme adventures and adrenaline. Accordingly, the brochures with the warning and tips that the tour guides give to the tourist before entering the zone states as follow: "Warning 1. Things you will and will NOT see. You will NOT see zombies, three head horses and other monsters. You WILL see something even scarier, evidence of the world largest technogenic catastrophe and face its magnetic

emptiness. A freaky and strange feeling that you won't ever forget. . . " (One World 365) S. T. A. L. K. E. R. : Shadow of Chernobyl is an open world first-person shooter video game by the Ukrainian developer GSC Game World, published in 2007 (Wikipedia).⁷ On these grounds, tour guides and the tour operators are the most important actors in visiting Chernobyl since they are the only people allowed by the government to enter the area and therefore visiting Chernobyl is only possible thanks to them (Chernobyl tour).

Furthermore, the majority of them are people who experienced the tragedy of the nuclear explosion first-hand, so they can be really engaged and turn into authentic story-tellers (Cohen, 1985).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the aim of this paper was to gain a deeper understanding of how influential the media can be in framing tourism in a delicate place like Chernobyl and the consequences that this can provoke on the society.

According to Di Chiro (2000) places like Chernobyl should be categorized as toxic tourism rather than dark tourism, since it is focusing more on the relationship between the environmental and social degradation. Accordingly, this can be also called "reality tours" where Pezzullo (2007) further claims that the main reason of this type of tour organization are in order to inform tourists and show them the real and irremediable impact of the nuclear energy on the locals and the surroundings. Those educational tours are not only made to observe and visit the place but can actually help rise strong, political and economic support in order to overcome environmental and social injustices within the destination.