

Book review

Tourist Attractions: From Object to Narrative

By Johan Edelheim
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It is not often that the cover of an academic text book brings a smile to a child or even an adult. The cover photo on the book of a giant banana certainly caught the attention on my eight-year-old great niece. She wanted to visit this giant banana, and to post a photo on her Facebook page. This desire to visit tourist attractions is the key to what this book sets out to explore, just what are the different meanings we attribute to attractions, and what are the psychosocial and social drivers behind the decision to visit tourist attractions.

This book is published by Channel View under their "Tourism and Cultural Change" theme, by the Series Editors Robinson (University of Birmingham) and Phipps (University of Glasgow). The aim of this book series is to explore "the complex and ever-changing relationship between tourism and culture(s), and by focussing on the 'ways that places, peoples, pasts, and ways of life are increasingly shaped/transformed/created/packaged for tourist purposes'".

Although the author takes a full page to describe the aim of this particular book, it aims are multiple though not complex, and include: exploring the relationship between tourism and culture through tourism attractions; challenging the existing approaches in the management of attractions; exploring attractions through a cultural studies perspective; raising awareness of the hidden political power inherent in popular culture. In a sense the main aim of the book is to describe the meaning of tourism attractions through a mixture of linguistic hermeneutic phenomenology, from the viewpoint of one tourist, the author!

The book is written by one author, and in the best sense of the phrase, it is a reflection of the author's personal thoughts and discussions of his intellectual journey to understand the various meanings of attractions. In the different sections in the book, he moves easily between theoretical discussions and highly personal insights into the meaning of attractions. He also clearly wants to share this journey, and while the book is written from his personal experiences, this journey takes us through some nine chapters, is thoughtful and insightful.

The book is divided into three sections: "Tourist attractions"; "Deconstructing tourist attraction"; "Constructing tourist attractions", with three chapters in each section. The first section explores issues around defining, managing and maintaining attractions, and how and why attractions should be studied. It also introduces a number of alternatives to current methodologies and interpretations of attractions. The second section covers through two major case studies how to "read" attractions through the use of different markers. How tourists "consume" attractions both pre-trip and during the trip experience. The final chapter in this section suggests a number of narrative techniques and examines how the hegemonic messages are common in heritage attractions. The third section explores how attractions are constructed by discussing how they are experienced, and how phenomenology has been used in developing our understanding of tourism studies. It explores how tourist identities have been studied and their links to authentic performances. The final chapter examines the importance of memories, where narratives, performances and experiences intersect. It was really helpful that each chapter ended with summary conclusions of the main discussion points, as this helped the reader to reflect on the issues discussed.

The author takes you on his journey of nine chapters through two case studies from New South Wales, Australia, which he uses to illustrate the theoretical issues raised in these chapters. The first case study is about the

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Bushranger/bandit Captain Thunderbolt who is buried in an old gold mining town close to Uralla. The second case study is about the appeal of the concrete "Big Banana" and its associated attractions at Coffs Harbour, which reflects the main agriculture crop of the region. Although by focussing on two case studies this may seem as restrictive, it is in fact very helpful, as it focusses the debate on the theoretical issues explored by the book, while at same time helping to clarify the theoretical issues. It also helps in the discussions that the writing style adopted by the author engages the reader in almost personal one-to-one discussions, through the use of the full names of other authors. This makes you feel you are participating in a debate with other authors, as does the author's adoption of the first person as his chosen writing style.

What was very interesting is that the book starts with a prologue that asks the question "So what is wrong the old way" of looking and understanding tourist attractions? This prologue explores the author's personal reasons for writing the book, such discussion are often missing in tourism research studies, but they help the reader to understand the author's underlying thinking processes. The book ends with an epilogue, which suggests that the new ways exploring attractions as outlined in this book, should be seen as complementing, rather than overturning the "old ways", and also suggests a number of areas where further research could be useful.

It is difficult to make any serious criticisms of the book, as they are probably a failing on my part, and not the author's fault. From almost the first page, tourism attractions are noted by the abbreviation of "TA" rather than using the full words, I found this more of a niggle, than a fault. It also would help if the author had produced a glossary of the psychosocial terms used in the book, which the reader could refer back to when reflecting on the discussions. When the term was first used,

it was clearly explained, but sometimes it would appear later in the book, and if you were not conversant with the term, its meaning would sometimes be unclear. There is also some unnecessary duplication in the background description of the two case studies, which distracted from the discussion of the issues.

Perhaps the book is best described as though provoking, and while appealing to tourism researchers, it should also be of interest to attraction operators as well as destination management organisations. On a cursory glance, the book from a tourism futures perspective may be perceived as having a limited appeal. However, what it does achieve is to challenge our thinking processes by questioning through a very clinical perspective, how we think about tourism and tourist attractions. Such processes are core to thinking about the future, and questions how we know, what we know, and how should we interpret the knowledge, we think we know. This is key process in the development of future studies.

Finally, in terms of a recommendation, the book was an enjoyable read, which provided very deep insights into how tourists and managers use, perceive and understand attractions. On first reading, I was worried that the book would be very technical, and would be an intellectual challenge, at the border of my knowledge. This was unfair, as the author clearly explains the many complex issues he raises and discusses. This is not to suggest the book is an easy read, it was both challenging and enjoyable, and this is what a good book should accomplish. Although the book could not be described as essential reading for tourism futurologists, it should certainly find a place on their bookshelves.

Brian Hay

Brian Hay is a Professor of Tourism at the School of Social Sciences, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, UK.