

## **Tourist Objects and Objectives: Transformations in Material Culture of Tourism**

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Photo 1. National Museum of the American Indian (Washington DC)

*The Museum store sells not only postcards and slides but reproductions of pottery, fabrics, statuary, and jewelry. It handles books, uses greetings cards to popularize knowledge of the museum's holdings, and generally functions as a commercial publicist. (Quimby, 1978, pp. 171-172)*

*Through its material constitution and the reiterative effects of its culturally produced durability, it [material culture] becomes constitutive of desired and imagined subjectivities either nostalgic, futuristic or transformative [...] (Buchli, 2002, p. 9)*

## **Introduction**

This is a research sketch on “Constructing and understanding Tourism through Material Culture”, based on some ethnographic experiences on the Eastern United States coast.

## **Overview**

This is a project on how material culture creates tourism and how we can understand structures and processes implied in tourism industry and practices through the study of its materiality. The research draws on ethnographic fieldworks as participant observant and tourist in such different places as: Washington DC, New York City, St. Augustine (Florida), Hilton Head Island (South Carolina), Bluffton (South Carolina), Orlando (Florida) and Miami (Florida). We refer in this draft to the first three sites.

This multi-sited ethnography is justified by tracing observation on different types of tourism: museum tourism, urban tourism, historical tourism, ecological tourism, heritage tourism, entertainment tourism, and ‘sun, sea and sand’ tourism.

Photo 3. Indian traditional dwellings around the National Museum of the American Indian (Washington DC)

Nevertheless, this research is not organized in the idea of studying diverse forms of tourism and does not aim to differentiate among types of tourism, but it is mainly interested in how material culture shapes and is shaped within the tourism, as a whole. The different touristic sites provided us just distinct ethnographic material and different cultural perspectives.

This study relies on previous interests on alternative tourism (Vaetisi, 2006) and issues related to community, identity and tourism development in Southeastern United States (Vaetisi, 2008, ms.). If within these two cited works we were mainly interested in aspects such as the local-global relations, ideological constructions of nature and culture as well as processes and challenges of

urban development in association with tourism, in this study we are mainly focused on the material culture of tourism.

Photo 4. Statue of Liberty visited by tourists (New York)

We approach tourism largely from an anthropological perspective (Nash, 1996), considering its last decades alternative forms (Stronza, 2001) in search of recapturing values as history, nature and education (Eadington&Smith, 1992). We approach material culture considering the processes of economic/social/cultural/political/psychological/expressive needs through consumption (Miller, 1987; 1998) and the symbolic construction of identities and social lives that material objects provide (Dant, 1999; Berger, 1992) from a broad theoretical perspective (Buchli, 2004; Tilley, 2006).

Photo 5. "Statue of Liberty" in a live statue street performance (New York)

A specific theoretical approach of material culture is based on using the concepts of transformation and translation, seen as both 'processes of materialization' and 'artefact effects' (Buchli 2002): objects and objectives of tourist immediate use and industry seen not only in theoretical processual perspective but in their material transformation/translation as precise, contextual objects. This being in fact one of the first-hand ethnographic attitudes of the researcher: observing how objects appear and are represented as different material things, and subject of variation and change within the cultural contexts they refer to.

Our research is aiming to address the following aspects of material culture: architecture, urban landscape and monuments; homes, furniture, landscape and backyard objects; cloth; gadgets, souvenirs, iconic objects and art objects; ethnic, domestic and industrial objects; technology and design; food. For this discussion on transformation - architecture, monuments, gadgets, iconic objects and clothes were especially taken into consideration.

### **Motivation, working hypotheses and methodology**

After some ethnographic experience on studying tourism and the human subjects who interrelate in tourism, we asked ourselves which are the objects that create tourism. We adopted the material culture approach, considering that it can provide us further understanding on the way tourism is constructed.

Previous to this study we were aware but not very informed of the structural, semiological, ideological and habitual practices within tourism that 'tourism materials' provide. Although tourism-like subject-object interactions were theorized by such authors as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, William Raymonds or Pierre Bourdieu, they were usually neglected by tourism studies, which mainly considered tourism as forms of consumption of nature, history, folklore or slogans, in other words as forms of consumptions 'without materiality'.

Our hypotheses addressed some material objects of tourism in order to see how they are not only consumed but also created, displayed, ritualized or avoided. We asked about:

- how tourism is constructed through architecture, cultural artifacts and reproductions (Washington DC)
- how tourism is constructed through iconic monuments, urban landscape and gadgets (New York City)
- how tourism is constructed through clothes (St. Augustine, Florida)
- how those ideas, significances and values related to the constructions above experience transformations and translations in their material appearance.

We tried to understand these objects from the tourists' point of view and their immediate experience as tourists and their privileged questions in the situation of tourist. We mainly addressed these interrogations in first person, i.e. what/how to consume, to look at, to worship, to photograph etc. such objects and what/how 'to fit' in order to look like or to be treated as a tourist, etc. in relation to the objects among we were moving.

A critical methodology thus emerged, which tried to encompass not just prior and reflexive reactions but also structures, meanings, ideologies and habituses of behaviors, practices, and

values of the tourism-material culture relation.

Methodologically, we relied on the ethnographic theory of observing and understanding objects in their milieu, doubled by the critical anthropological theory of comparing and contextualizing data in socio-historical perspective in order to confer theoretical relevance. Opinions, intentions, events, practices and things of participant observation were, generally, the basic data of our interpretation. We also considered the relevance of visual description.

Photo 6. Tourists in casual clothes on the historical streets of St. Augustine

On the field we addressed a range of objects that each touristic site announced. We did not prescribe the existence of certain objects, nor of certain values or practices associated with certain place. Nevertheless we considered previous contexts in which, significantly, a range of objects and subject-object interactions were expected to emerge (as for instance an anticipated relation between objects illustrating an historic event and its use as physical object or iconic image of historical type of tourism). Technically we tried to describe the presence, to understand the role, as well as to implicate about the objects of tourism in their materiality. An anthropological approach of respecting people activity and perspective was considered as well.

The followings touristic sites with their objects were scrutinized:

*place, main touristic objective, materiality*

Washington DC museums, cultural & political symbols architecture, ethnic objects

New York City the city, urban and identity symbols urban monuments/ landscape

St. Augustine old city, open-air museum, fortress contemporary/historical clothes

### **Describing objects, interpreting data and some theoretical conclusions**

We tried mainly to compose an ethnographic report on how material objects of culture exist, appear, are utilized, and create tourism. Describing materiality provided us useful examples, understandings and interpretive material on how tourism, its related activities and interactions as well as the broader social-economic-cultural-political context do function, act and signify for further activities and interpretations.

Photo 7. Historical reenactments inside the fortress Castillo de San Marcos, in St. Augustine

One of the salient ideas when describing tourist material culture is that of transforming and translating materiality or observing the processes of material culture (Wissler, 1914; Merriam, 1969; Fischer, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989; Clifford, 1997; Salazar, 2005).

This draft focuses on this aspect, taking into approach the very transformative dimension of materiality. It is important to notice that some ethnographic descriptions relying on this idea are offering data for relevant socio-political interpretations considering the broader economic and cultural context, beyond tourism:

*Examples:*

(1) Washington DC: the 'National Museum of American Indian' architecture and collection – actual Indian architecture – Indian dwellings and objects around museum – Indian gadgets, reproductions, replicas and souvenirs (pottery, fabrics, statuary, jewelry, postcards, books) at the Museum shop.

(2) New York: the little green plastic statues of Liberty on the tables of street vendors and gift shops – the street artists in 'stone' clothes mimicking its immobility and majesty – the real pilgrimage Statue of Liberty – the advertised one (in humanitarian campaigns etc.) on street posters – the cartooned one (in political protests etc.) in magazines

(3) St. Augustine, Florida : tourist fashion and 'tropical clothes' – homemade old-fashion clothes in chic stores and art studios - ethnic (Spanish) clothes at the Spanish Quarter open-air museum - casual clothes of people walking on the streets of the old town – historical costumes of tourist entertainers and actors enacting battles on the castillo walls.

There exist a tourist ideology to a great extent constructed through material objects and discourses&practices surrounding these objects. Tourism relies much on these material objects and uses materiality to construct further symbols which to sustain the tourist ideology.

Ethnographic descriptions are able to portray the organization of such ideologies – ethnic cultures such as of Native Americans or Spanish conquistadors; political values and traditional icons such as 'freedom' or 'historical clothes' – as well as to compare between types and resources of tourist discourses&practices and therefore to deconstruct them. We thus aimed to provide critical interpretations on how tourism is constructed and consequently to confer greater relevance to understanding tourism and its materiality.

We can understand both these ideologies and tourism materiality precisely through transformations in material culture of tourism. These 'transformations' occur, as we can see, at a conceptual (and even ideological) level, but they appear in a very striking way for those who consume tourism and pay attention to its materiality. There are continuities (such as between the gadgets of the Statue of Liberty) and contrasts (such as between 'gunmen' costumes and tourists' clothes); there are 're-materializations' (such as the construction of a little-scale canoe in educational purpose) and 'de-

materializations' (such as the use of the image of the Statue of Liberty in posters and cartoons); and there are plenty of elements and references that interfere and invite us to ask about them while revealing deeper understandings.

## **Conclusions**

Describing transformations of material objects and material representations of political/cultural values involved in tourism is a way of understanding culture of both 'hosts' and 'guests' (and its global implications), and of both its materiality and its immateriality.

This ethnography also provide us information on how these transformations take place, various elements, aspects and dimensions of understanding transformation, and who operate these transformations and in what purpose. Historical, cultural and political imaginary; design, conservation and technological solutions; display, show and marketing techniques are all involved in a tourist industry where marketers, administrators, engineers, artists, educators, and tourists meet together. This web of activities, facts and relations is also a web of significance (Geertz, 1973) which indicates on a specific culture and its influences further than classical analyses on 'American material culture' (Quimby, 1979; Bronner, 1986; Schlereth, 1999) do.

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