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Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:

Tzanelli, R (2023) Gaze: Tourism. In: Jafari, J and Xonggen, X, (eds.) Encyclopedia of Tourism. Springer. ISBN: 978-3-319-01669-6.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01669-6_260-2

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Gaze – tourism

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The concept of the “gaze” informed disparate forms of human apprehension of natural and social environments in modern theory. It was methodologically wedded to hermeneutics, semiotics, and (critical) discourse analysis to organize theories of cognition. The roots of this mono-sensory apprehension (vision) of reality can be traced in Western ocularcentric practices, essential to debates that enveloped modernity.

In tourism analysis, the “gaze” refers to the discourses and practices of seeing in tourism contexts as well as to ways of knowing what is being looked at. Originally framed by Urry (1990) through Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse, the prison and the medical gaze, it concentrated on tourism systems, institutions, and visitor economy. Subsequently, “gazing” came to encompass the ideas of interpretivism, thereby prompting theorists to also examine host and guest behaviors (Tzanelli 2018).

Originally, it was maintained that ways of “seeing” destinations informed transitions from individual travels performed by early modern “Grand Tourists” to organized tourism. The division of the gaze into romantic and solitary, and mass or budget, further refined the focus of rituals and processes of modernization (Urry 1990). It was argued that mediated versions of locations generated “markers” of places in the form of images (MacCannell 1976), with their corresponding linguistic properties of tourism (Dann 1996). Later, it was argued that the tourist’s “second gaze” ignores or opposes market vision (MacCannell 1976), with the suggestion that tourism professionals and tourists are endowed with agency that produces alternative worlds of tourism (Hollinshead and Suleman 2018).

The original attention on gazing rather than performing has been the subject of criticism from various constituencies, including postcolonial and feminist studies. Such criticisms perceive the emphasis on gazing as a tool of domination, rather than a heuristic device. Scholars speak of the presence of a “mutual” or “oppositional gaze” between hosts and guests that grant localities with forms of agency (Tzanelli 2018). Such criticisms highlight how as opposed to the “tourist”, the “tourist gaze” invites explorations of the ethics and aesthetics of hospitality in situ, as gazing produces knowledge about others in cross-cultural contexts.

The emphasis on gazing has influenced three decades of research into global tourism. It has enriched conceptions of the “tourism system” and fed into new subfields such as those of media (especially film or cinematic) tourism, whereas it has also partially formed the basis for the new tourism mobilities paradigm. However, subsequent critics never explicitly considered if the tourist, the colonial and the male gazes share eidetic properties (are qualitatively the same) or just display structurally similar properties. Critical tourism studies debating the role of new technologies in framing tourism and the new forces of neoliberalism are yet to resolve this question.

See also: discourse, imperialism, language, media, system

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