

In Love With the Darkness: Topophilia and Thana-Tourism

Abstract

We draw from forty-two walking interviews undertaken with dark tourists at some Europe's darkest sites to examine the potential for Topophilia. In doing so we contribute to the literature by revealing five topophilic domains (1) Infatuation (2) Transformation, (3) Enchantment, (4) Atmosphere and (5) Bonding ceremonies that create, forge and cement attachment to dark sites and a love of them. Additionally data indicates that some sites take on a sense of home offering privacy, limited intrusion and a sense of security. Critically the study enriches our understanding of dark tourists, dark sites, place centred knowledge and we identify both the cognitive and affective elements that underpin place attachment, and indeed love for dark sites. We additionally introduce the concept of 'Dark Utopia's, sites that encapsulate dark tourists experiential needs.

500 Word Overview

Recent studies on the subject of dark tourism (Seaton, 2022) have focused on aspects of moral blindness (Thomas, 2024), rituality (Sun and Lv, 2024), emotional engagement (Sigala and Steriopoulos, 2021), motivations to visit (Min et al., 2021) and over commercialisation (Chen and Xu, 2020). Dark tourist sites or 'black spots' (Rojek, 1993; Királ'ová and Šperková, 2024) are often associated with personal feelings of sadness and pain (Zhang et al., 2023) due to the tourists 'sightseeing in the mansions of the dead' (Keil, 2005, p. 479). Consequently, individuals struggle having been exposed to these sites (Zheng et al., 2018) and grapple with the horrors of natural and manmade suffering (Peštek and Šošić 2022).

However, people's relationship with space and spaces are saturated with emotions and this has been captured via the lens of Topophilia. Topophilia has been defined as "the affective bond between people and place or setting' (Tuan, 1974, p. 4). Places can provide an array of feelings including comfort, safety, and a sense of origin (Kauko, 2003). Topophilia has invariably been associated with human habitats, urban spaces (Anderson and Erskine, 2012), 'lively' and community-based environments (Al-Mendilawi and Essa Al-Saaidy, 2024) with forays into sacred places (see Masiola, 2023), sports stadia (see Grundlingh, 2022) and environments decimated by natural disaster (see Sarkar et al., 2023). However, the aim of this research is to explore potential Topophilic bonds at dark tourism sites.

To answer this aim, multiple mini ethnographies were undertaken over a two-and-a-half-year period at the following dark sites across Europe (1) Nuremberg, (2) KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, (3) Kraków-Plaszów, (4) Sachsenhausen, (5) Oradour-sur-Glane, (6) Normandy American Cemetery Memorial, (7) Le Cambe War Cemetery, Normandy and (8) Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. 42 walking interviews were conducted across the eight sites. A content analysis was undertaken using several rounds of coding including descriptive coding, emotional coding and versus coding.

Data revealed that Topophilic intention is predicated on feelings of infatuation, enchantment, perceptions of atmospherics, feelings of personal transformation, individuation and homosocial bonding. The data reveals that some dark tourists have a mental capacity to analyse dark sites

beyond traditional emotional reasoning and develop affective bonds as sites elicit positive emotions with this validity and associated reasoning seemingly paradoxical and a theoretical dislocation. The ability to interpret the emotion and profundity of the sites into favourable behavioural outcomes that improve sense of self is a unique finding and we expand literature related to Topophilia, dark tourists and dark sites as a consequence. However, these emotions seem distanced from the moral characteristics of the sites and articulated emotional bonds lacked an explicit concern for those who perished and this will need to be empirically examined.

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