

Dark Tourism in Estonia: Is the Medium Still the Message?

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Abstract

Dark tourism has been defined by Stone as “the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” (2006: 146). Dark tourism continues to grow in both supply and demand, as well as the number of academic and industry studies in order to advance knowledge on the topic. Dark tourism has been the focus of television programs, movies, books, and social media, as well as the more traditional tourist sites and attractions. But what impact does the medium have on the success of Dark tourism? The focus of this study applies the famous words, and works, of Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (McLuhan, 1964) within the context of Dark tourism. This research utilizes the context of Dark tourism sites within the Republic of Estonia to examine this perspective.

Key Words: *Dark tourism; Media; Messaging*

Track: *Tourism Marketing*

1. Introduction

A Google Scholar search of the term Dark tourism will result in over 1,300 publications in the first decade after the term was coined by Lennon and Foley (2000) in their book of the same name. The subsequent decade from 2011 to 2020 resulted in another 10,000, and since the Covid pandemic, another 3,000 (scholar.google.com). But what has been the reason for such a growth in interest and research on the topic? Common explanations include the fact that visiting a greater number of dark sites and attractions has become much easier to do than in the past (Sharpley & Stone, 2009), to the novelty and cross-disciplinary nature of the topic (Carrigan, 2014), to the changing nature of the world, with an increased interest in other countries, peoples, and their culture (Vejlgaard, 2021).

Another reason for the increased interest and study of Dark tourism has resulted has been based on the supply of the ways in which tourists can learn about and experience the topic. Over the last century and a half, tourists could virtually experience foreign lands through newspapers, guidebooks, radio, television, the internet, and social media, and virtual reality (Mascho & Singh, 2013). Thus, the supply of Dark tourism content was ever increasing, and demand increased as well, resulting in increased consumption of dark sights, attractions, entertainment, and educational content (Stone, 2006).

Thus, this research focuses on a linkage of the two constructs of interest, dark tourism, and the media. Furthermore, this study utilizes as its guiding framework one of the most highly quoted aphorisms, “The Medium is the Message” (McLuhan. 1964; 1967) to place the growth in dark tourism within the ever-changing range of media in which to experience this tourism niche. To best trace and analyse this growth, a geographic region, the Republic of Estonia was selected to serve as an exemplar of the changing nature of dark tourism. As a country that returned to independence in 1991 after a half century of forced incorporation into the Soviet Union (Kasekamp, 2017), Estonia provides a suitable context for understanding the growth of Dark tourism from both a supply and demand perspective.

The study begins with a brief overview and background of the legacy of the work of Marshall McLuhan and the impact his work has had on media studies, with a focus on the different types of media and mass communication. The next section integrates McLuhan’s work within the context of Dark tourism in Estonia, through a comparative analysis of two Dark tourism sites/attractions. Implications are discussed as to how media may or may not impact the future of Dark tourism interest. The paper concludes with contributions from this study, and areas for future study.

2. Media type and growth of dark tourism

Marshall McLuhan was a Canadian born academic and Professor, who became one of the most well-known communication theory and cultural anthropology experts of his time (Coupland, 2010). His work spanned many areas, but it was arguably his observations on how people interact with different forms of technology, and different types of media, that proved prophetic as newer forms of communication emerged (Lamberti, 2012).

One of his enduring, and arguably most famous, insights, was first publicly mentioned during a 1957 conference of radio broadcasters (Fitzgerald, 2001). The essence of the five words, was that it was not just the message that was being communicated, but rather the communication took on meaning based upon the medium that was used to convey that message. The fact that the “medium is the message” maxim on face value make sense, helps to explain its continued use (a Google search of the phrase results in over 1.7 million hits). An additional, and lasting contribution of this work was that it continued to hold true for forms of media that never existed during McLuhan’s lifetime (McLuhan died in 1980).

The application of the “medium is the message” has served as the framework of study in varied fields of inquiry. With respect to tourism research, McLuhan’s work on the *global village* (McLuhan, & Powers, 1992), received attention by Debeş (2011), and a study by Getz (2019), examined event planning within the context of social responsibility and environmental sustainability and how the communication of these types of events should be embedded within social marketing. Anastasiadou and Vettese (2019) invoked the metaphor in terms of how souvenirs may have a lessening effect on the educational value of heritage sites. With respect to Dark tourism and McLuhan, Huey (2011), in her study of the Vienna Kriminalmuseum (Vienna Criminal Museum), invoked McLuhan’s metaphor with respect to how the museum displays criminal artifacts behind glass. Huey (2011) studied how the placement of artifacts in this fashion, within a Dark tourism context, highlighted how the curators view their visitors, in this example the framework of sublime, or kitsch.

In terms of media type, varied forms have evolved to produce content on Dark tourism. In addition to new Dark tourism sites, and attractions, a number of books were published on the topic (see Stone et al. 2018), commercial movies that overtly focused on the topic were released (i.e. *Dark Tourist*, *Chernobyl Diaries*), while other films were analysed from a Dark tourism perspective such as the Rwanda genocide (i.e. *Hotel Rwanda*; *Shake Hands with the Devil*), and the Holocaust (i.e. *Life is Beautiful*; *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*). Television programs that were directly related to the subject such as Netflix’s *Dark Tourist*, and those

that related to aspects of Dark tourism such as *Ghost Hunters*, and *Cities of the Underworld*, became quite popular (Krisjanous 2016).

Media that came into existence beyond McLuhan's lifetime, such as websites and other social media, devoted to Dark tourism, also grew (see www.dark-tourism.com, dark-tourism.org.uk, Instagram account #darktourism). Numerous YouTube videos exist on the topic, as well as blogs and podcasts. Dark tourism sites have been incorporated into video games, such as the Chernobyl disaster in *Call of Duty 4* (Goodpaster, 2020), and even a virtual reality app that allowed the user to experience what it was like to be in one of the World Trade Center towers during the attacks of 9/11 (Smith, web).

McLuhan referred to different media type as cool or hot (Fishman, 2006). Cool medium, examples included television, film, and the telephone, which were categorized as a low-definition medium as they required the individual, the receiver of the message, to be involved mentally and emotionally to make sense of what was being communicated (McLuhan, 1964). The interaction of people within a cool medium must often fill in the blanks of what was being shown, described, etc. to make sense of the message. McLuhan's alternative category was hot medium. This would include radio, photography, publications, and lectures (with more current equivalents being podcasts, blogs, and tweets). These forms of media, would be called high definition, as the receiver required little involvement (McLuhan, 1964). The receiver could be devoid of emotional involvement, and mentally did not have to fill in the blanks in making sense of the medium (Gordon, 2010).

McLuhan's classification of media type can thus be related to Dark tourism, due to the topic's focus on death, and violence. The receiver, or consumer of a Dark tourism attraction or site, would understand the concept of death and violence, but the level that the site itself conveys these concepts, would be shaped by the medium itself. For instance, during the Vietnam War, there were numerous newspaper articles written that included statistics about the number of deaths and injuries. Reactions to those publications were muted, in contrast to when video evidence of the violence and tragedy began to be shown during nightly news telecasts, resulting in changed public reactions and opinions (Achenbach, 2018). The subsequent creation of museums such as the Vietnam Military History Museum in Hanoi, and responses by Americans that visited those sites, further highlighted the role that the medium of education or communication of the Vietnam War changed again (Laderman & Rosenberg, 2009).

3. Dark tourism in Estonia

The number of tourism related sites, museums, and memorials in Estonia that can be classified as Dark, has mirrored the growth, and interest, in such attractions in other countries. What was common to Estonia, as was the case in other former Soviet states, would be the number of Dark tourism attractions that related to Estonia's forced incorporation into the USSR (McKenzie, 2022). In terms of the darker, Dark tourism sites (Stone, 2006), many of the earliest post-Soviet museums related to the atrocities and hardships experienced by those who lived through the period (Sharpley & Stone, 2009).

3.1 Vabamu

Estonia's Vabamu (Freedom in Estonian) Museum of Occupations and Freedom (www.vabamu.ee) opened in 2003 as the Museum of Occupations. Although the museum focused on both the occupation of Estonia by Nazi Germany from 1941-1944, most of the collection related to the Soviet occupations in 1939-1941 and 1944-1991. The establishment of the Museum was founded by a private donation from Estonian diaspora (Haven, 2011). Although a privately run facility, there was official support for the museum from the Estonian government (Tamm, 2013). The museum was not without controversy, particularly from Russia, which called the museum a tool for propaganda by the Estonian government (Burch & Zander, 2010). This view was also shared by large ethnic Russian population living in Estonia (Author, field notes, 2007).

The visitor experiences at Vabamu, can be aligned with McLuhan's categorization of the aforementioned types of media such as cool and hot. The museum provided visitors with educational opportunities to learn about the period and included a selection of authentic historical pieces from the Soviet period. The use of such cool media as film documentaries and newsreels could also be judged to elicit different emotions. A question arises as to if the same emotions would be experienced by those with direct knowledge of the period (i.e. cultural, linguistic, or familial ties to the respective country), versus those visitors who would previously know little about the specifics of the period.

Alternatively, hot medium such as remembrance videos by those that had direct experience during the occupation period, and personal guided tours, would create different experiences for the visitors. These differences could be more pronounced if a guided tour was provided in the local language (Estonian), the Russian language, or a neutral third language such as English or French. Similarities and differences would be further highlighted by the types of souvenirs that are available for sale at the museum (McKenzie, 2018). In terms of the use of more modern forms of media, in addition to having their own web site, Vabamu also participated within other forms of social media. A resulting question would be related to what

degree the existence of Dark tourism sites and attractions, based upon the use of different forms of media, relates to the degree of darkness of the attractions themselves.

3.2 Estonian statue park

While it could be argued that there was little controversy within the ethnic Estonian population, in Estonia itself, and its diaspora population, for the creation of the Vabamu museum, this was not the case for the subsequent opening of attractions that took a more nostalgic or irreverent look at the Soviet period. In the capital city Tallinn, there exists a sculpture garden with statues from the Soviet period. The statues placed in the park had been abandoned behind a branch of the Estonian History Museum (Ajaloomuuseum, web) until they were curated into a sculpture garden which opened in 2018. There existed less controversy over these statues within Estonia, as noted by the focus of the attraction on the facts and history of the statue and accompanying detailed plaques. There were concerns raised by members of the Estonian ethnic Russian population, as well as from Russia itself (Haukkala, 2009). There were also general issues raised with these types of museums as to their intent, with the most well-known, being Grūto Parkas, or *Stalin World* in Lithuania (Macomber, 2008).

An examination of the different language websites of the Estonian Statue Park, contained descriptions of the features and purpose of the park. When compared to each other, insights as to how McLuhan would describe the political aspects of different media (Roncallo-Dow & Scolari, 2016; Golding & Murdock, 1997) were revealed. To examine the potential for political involvement in these attractions, a text analysis of the websites was made (Law et al. 2010). There were multiple websites of the information that described the content of the park, English, Estonian, Russian, and Finnish. To conduct a comparative analysis, the Estonian and Russian language texts were translated into English using Google Translate and compared with the English descriptions. Although there can be inherent limitations of utilizing such tools as Google Translate, as noted by de Vries et al. (2018) for rough translations, to understand the major gist of a text, limited difference in applicability for analysis results.

The Estonian, and Russian, English Google Translation descriptions had a consistent message across the three languages in terms of the features of the park (the Finnish language site was not analysed), as well as highlighting the fact that the statues were created by Estonian sculptors. Minor, but potentially political terminology described the statues as *discarded Soviet monuments* for the English version; *demolished monuments* in the English translation of the Estonian version, while the English version of the Russian description

translated as *unnecessary monuments*. In order to determine if these found differences were simply a result of using the Google Translation software, an Estonian, English, and Russian speaking academic colleague was asked to evaluate the Google Translate versions. There was confirmation as to the similar content, and accuracy, of the three versions.

The inclusion of the term *Soviet* in the English version to describe the monuments was telling. Was that term used because the Museum believed that only the non-Estonian/Russian speakers (i.e. English speakers) would potentially be unaware that the statues were from the Soviet period? Or was it for some other reason. The latter question may be relevant as there was a second notable difference discovered in the analysis of the descriptions. The English description stated that the statues were from *a dark period when the Republic of Estonia was under Russian occupation*. While in the English translations of the Estonian and Russian descriptions, the phrase, *when the Republic of Estonia was occupied* was used, excluding the overt use of the term *Russian occupation*. Again, an explanation may be that Estonian and Russian speakers would be most aware of this historic period, while other visitors may not. The further, potential critical difference was that the term *Russian occupation* was used, not the arguably more precise term *Soviet occupation* (Carpenter, 2018). This narrative builds on lengthy tensions between Estonian and Russian speakers in Estonia (Green, 1997).

In brief, as noted by Rooney (2014), there exists the reality that statues and monuments do not always maintain the artists' intent. The statues at the Estonian Statue Park were no longer being displayed in their original context and purpose. Unlike statues in more traditional museums where statues fall into categories such as art, history, education, or all three, the statues in the Estonian Statue Park have been repurposed. Within the context of the work of McLuhan, one can suggest that the form of the communication, in this case a statue, has not changed, but the medium in which it was now being depicted creates a new, different, message.

4. Discussion, conclusions, and future study

A potential limitation of the study would be that the findings of the self-selected sites may not extend to other environments, but they do help to serve as a template for studies of a similar nature. Additional forms of Dark tourism such as remembrance museums, cemeteries, and themed tours, could provide a venue for future studies of this nature. The application of the work of Marshall McLuhan in this analysis also provides a voice for wider use of divergent fields of study in Dark tourism research. The fact that Dark tourism represents a cross disciplinary field of inquiry, would benefit from incorporating multidimensional streams of thought.

One must also put the timeframe of this study within the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Estonia utilized the pretext of the invasion to remove additional memorials from the Soviet period (Henley, 2022), regardless of the nature of their original creation and intent. The reality may be, from a Dark tourism perspective, that ultimately one may see a growth in Dark tourism, particularly Soviet related tourism, as the demand for these sites and attractions will still exist, but the visitation of such sites in Russia itself would be eschewed.

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