

HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE? A SARTREAN ANALYSIS OF THE LOCAL GAZE

Abstract

Tourism has often been defined as a linear “way of seeing”, where tourists gaze upon the world in order to consume it as a tourism product. It is now largely understood that “the Gaze” is more complex and overarching, comprising of diverse “gazers” and “gazees”. This paper adopts a Sartrean perspective through building on the concept of “being-for-others”, where human consciousness is brought to light through being gazed upon by an outlander. Accordingly, this research aims at understanding the lived experience of tourists of being exposed to the Local Gaze as a “being-for-others”. An emic perspective is adopted through a methodology and method grounded in the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology. Eight participants were recruited through experience-based, purposive sampling and interviewed in-depth. Findings show that the look of the Other increases tourists’ self-awareness and reflection, confronting them with the existential question of being in the world. This results in a struggle of meaning making through the Sartrean concepts of sadism, masochism and indifference, which makes an authentic relationship between the tourist and the toured ephemeral at best.

Keywords

Tourist gaze; local gaze; being-for-others; phenomenology;

Introduction

Tourism has been defined as a “way of seeing”, where visual experience is staged by business and subsequently consumed by tourists (Larsen, 2014). Inspired by French philosopher Michel Foucault’s concept of medic Gaze, John Urry (1990) conceptualized this visual practice as “The Tourist Gaze”, a socially and technologically patterned and learned way of visual consumption. The predominance of the visual sense for touristic consumption has been contextualized to an ever-increasingly globalizing society in Urry’s second version of the book (2002), where it is argued that through the advancement of technology the “Gaze” has become more complex and overarching. While originally proposing that the world is merely gazed upon by the tourist, the “Tourist Gaze 3.0” (Urry & Larsen, 2011) discusses the power of the objectifying Gaze of the gazees. Maoz (2006) had proposed earlier that, besides a linear Gaze, there is an intricate “Mutual Gaze” between tourists and local people; a more complex reality where different Gazes affect and feed each other.

The Local Gaze in particular has been associated with tourists’ feelings of shame and discomfort. Gillespie (2006) associated it with the embarrassing moment when a photographer realizes that a photographee is gazing back at him/her. Female tourists were found to be particularly aware of the objectifying and sexualizing Gazes of local men (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008). Tasci and Severt (2016) found the “Local Gaze” to be “harsher” than the guests’ gaze upon the hosts. However, what living through this experience of being gazed upon by locals is like and means for tourists, is not understood. More specifically, how tourists understand and experience the Local Gaze has not been sufficiently addressed in literature.

To amend this gap, this study builds on the concept of “being-for-others”, proposed by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1943). Sartre terms the ontological existence of “things” (e.g. tables, chairs) “being-in-itself”, while human consciousness is termed as “being-for-itself”. Contrary to the former, a “being-for-itself” can reflect and distance for itself. However, consciousness does not “exist”, as it is not a physical object like a table or a chair. “Being-for-others” is a third structure introduced by Sartre (1943), arguing that being in the world with other human beings and being exposed to their Gaze can reduce a “being-in-itself” into an object, which is gazed upon and judged by an outstander. This not only raises a human’s awareness of being exposed to “the Gaze”, but also reduces individual freedom of giving meaning to the world and itself.

Accordingly, this research examines the lived experience of tourists of being exposed to the Local Gaze as a “being-for-others”. In other words, this study aims at understanding a tourist lived experience of the Local Gaze phenomenologically. The primary research question thus concerns the phenomenon of the Local Gaze as experienced by tourists and asks (1) what does the lived experience of the Local Gaze mean to tourists? Secondary research questions will further help to focus the research and include (2) what is the experience of being of objectified as a tourist by the Local Gaze (3) how does the experience of non-visual objectification (e.g. verbal, physical) unfold for tourists?

Conceptual Background

Sartre’s (1976) *being-for-others* relies on the fact that, as human beings we are continuously confronted with the physical and mental presence of others, and this can lead to diverse effects on the relationship with our own being. On the one hand, we can get to know who we are through being gazed at by other people; on the other hand, being looked at and judged by the other can reduce us to an observed and judged object – a “being-in-itself” (Daigle, 2010). For Sartre, this onlooker does not have to be physically present, as the mere thought of being objectified by another might cause feelings of pride and shame. Cox (2009) highlights that this can be a traumatizing experience that can compromise meaning-making abilities and undermine the sense of freedom and self-control.

For Sartre (1943), the existence of the self is entirely meaningless until the self can be perceived through being aware of the other – “a seeing-myself because somebody sees me” (Lavine, 1984). In return, the ego may attempt to re-objectify the onlooker to regain control (sadism), while others may reduce themselves to nothing but an object for the other (masochism) (Sartre, 1943). A third attitude is that of indifference, where one rejects objectification by viewing others merely as obstacles and functional objects. This typically results in individual isolation and a strong sense of alienation (Detmer, 2009).

It is thus assumed that there is a complex experiential subject-object relationship involved in “the Gaze”; or the individual awareness of being “gazed-at” by the other. This study subsequently opts for an emic approach, defining “the Gaze” as a tourist’s lived experience. The chosen methodology and method are as a consequence embedded into the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, which is commonly defined as the study of appearances (Stewart, 1990).

Methodology and Method

Methodologically, the study is based on the principles of phenomenology. Phenomenology is not a monolithic theory or research approach, but rather a manner of approaching human experience – how things are perceived and appear to our consciousness (Donohoe, 2017; Langdrige, 2007; van Manen, 2014). German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is commonly cited as the father of phenomenology and his philosophy was further developed by several of his followers, among which Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is arguably the most prominent. As such, phenomenology is primarily rooted in philosophy in terms of origins and goals and is only slowly been recognized as an array of research methods (Giorgi, 2009; Todres & Holloway, 2004). Nonetheless, phenomenological research is continuously evolving and ranges anywhere from technoscience to ecstatic-poetic phenomenology (van Manen, 2014).

This particular study is embedded in the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is particularly interested in understanding how lived experiences are interpreted and understood. According to Pernecky and Jamal (2010), this is based on a realist ontology (world and nature can be assessed through *being-in the world*), hermeneutic epistemology (understanding is reached through dialogue between researcher and participant) and interpretive/dialogic methodology (the researcher seeks to interpret/understand lived experiences). Although there is not step-by-step procedure to hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, the following section outlines the method derived from its' philosophical underpinnings.

Consistent with the above methodological stance, the study adopted a qualitative approach based on individual interviews. Data collection was performed in November 2016 – December 2017, and participants were recruited following experience-based purposive sampling. The criterion for inclusion was having an experience of being gazed upon by locals during travel. Eight participants were recruited through researchers' personal network and snowballing technique. Out of eight participants, five were female; the age ranged from 30 to 63 years old; and educational background varied from a high school diploma to a PhD degree. Each of the seven participants originated from a different country, representing North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. The sample in phenomenology, however, is not a participant but an experience. Since the participants had reflected on more than one instance of the experience in question, the final sample size consisted of 21 relevant experiences.

Data were collected by means of in-depth interviews in person (2 interviews) and via Skype (5 interviews), in English. Participants were first asked to recall an experience of being gazed upon by locals during travel, as lived through. They were asked to describe the context (where, who, when) and their reactions (thoughts, feelings, sensations) to each of the recalled experiences. Then, the interviewer and a participant jointly explored what such an experience meant to the participant, how and why it was interpreted at the time of its occurrence and also made sense of later. Two layers of analysis (descriptive and interpretive) were applied to each gathered experience. First, four steps of Giorgi's (2009) analytical method were followed. Second, the data regarding the meaning of an experience were analysed by the interactive method suggested by Van Manen (2014).

Results and Discussion

The results are reflected in the essential structure of an experience of a Local Gaze, its sense-making, and are discussed in relation to Sartre's concept of *being-for-others*. First, it became evident that an objectifying Local Gaze is not limited to gazees who are local residents and often include the Gazes of other tourists within a destination. The Russian participant Marina summed up her experience visiting a Black Sea resort in Russia: "You go there to get sun, to look tanned so I was kind of jealous of all those people that looked so nicely brown and I was so white. So when people looked at me, I didn't want to be looked at. (...) I wanted to become tanned, like them. They didn't say anything. They just looked at me and I was like 'Oh gosh! They know I just arrived here'." In the Sartrean analysis, the Gaze of other tourists allowed the participant to become not only the object for evaluation for others but also the object of self-evaluation. Consistent with existential theorization regarding the role of the Other in individuals' achieving self-awareness, tourists as well as local residents are capable of producing an objectifying Gaze. In response to this Gaze, the participant resorted to what Sartre calls "masochistic" attribution as she became resigned to her objectification by the Other.

Second, expectedly, much of experience of an objectifying Local Gaze is contingent on visual dissimilarity (in terms of race, ethnicity, and clothing) between a tourist and destination residents. Such a Gaze is often interpreted as an act of genuine curiosity about a tourist, as in the case of the US tourist Jessica who, on her visit to rural India, was asked to pose for photos with local teenagers: "They had an interest in me. They wanted to know about my life, where I was from." On the other hand, labelling a tourist as an outsider also brought about the sense of alienation and an acute self-recognition as a privileged imposter. This is best illustrated with the narrative of Ana, a Mexican-native who travelled to a southern region of her country for cultural tourism: "We're not blonde, we have dark hair but we are white so people in Mexico call you *güera*, which literally means *blonde*. That always kind of shocks me because I know I'm Mexican, but some people in Mexico perceive me as a tourist. You know and it's a distinction that they make you feel different even though you're from the same country." Yet, she makes sense of this as "the way you look (...) gives the clues about where you are from...in a certain way it gives away the kind of privilege I have." In Sartre's existentialism, one cannot become aware of one's own objective characteristics (such as own appearance or privilege) without the objectifying Gaze of others. In the tourism context, this means that Local Gaze provides the necessary, yet at times uncomfortable, perspective for tourists to have a more complete understanding of the self.

Third and related aspect of the experience of the Local Gaze is the view of a tourist as a money source, which evokes reactions ranging from resignation to anger. All participants recalled experiences of being overcharged for goods and services, hustled, or being sold subpar products. For example, as a Hindi speaker, the Brazilian tourist Andres witnessed a local shop assistant asking his boss how much he should charge "the white guy," whereas a Hong Kong-native Irene was overcharged at a local market in South Korea, despite her proficiency in the Korean language. These experiences were interpreted by participants as ingrained in the discourse of tourism as a means for economic development, the situation in which tourists are naturally perceived as revenue-generating objects. Because the tourists in this study did not want to be classified as conventional mass tourists, this type of Local Gaze was experienced as unpleasant and disturbing. The participants resisted the objectifying Local Gaze by showing indifference,

and as they refused to label themselves as typical tourists. In Sartrean terms, such an attitude does not allow them “to ground their being in relation to the Other”.

Fourth, experiencing the Gaze of the Other involves awkwardness, embarrassment, and frustration when tourists’ reactions and emotional responses do not fit within the local context such as culture and way of life. One example is from Jessica who spotted a dead child left by a creek in rural India. In horror, she drew the tour guides’ attention to the body. The guides, two local men, assured her that this is “something one does not usually worry about”. The incident caused the participant to feel alienated, “very weird and disturbed.” The participant reflected on becoming aware of her attitude towards death as grounded in her North American culture, which was challenged by the Local Gaze. The incident also reminded her that she is a temporary outsider in the visited community.

Conclusion

Involvement and the presence of the Other is typically seen as a desirable component of a quality tourist experience. Meaningful interactions with local residents are believed to help achieve cross-cultural understanding (Raymond & Hall, 2008), intercultural sensitivity (Kirillova, Lehto, & Cai, 2015), and even peace (Durko & Petrick, 2015). A Sartrean view on the Local Gaze, however, suggests that the hopes for truly meaningful and authentic relationships between tourists and the toured are at best ephemeral and at worst utopian. The look of the Other is necessary for tourist self-awareness and self-reflection to occur, yet it leads to objectification of tourists. In response, tourists turn into a mode of being-for-others that embodies either masochistic tendencies such as when tourists accept or become resigned to objectifications of the Gaze or the strategy of indifference such as when they ignore “the look.” Both mechanisms, according to Sartre, underlie inherently inauthentic relationships that are doomed to failure. Therefore, any tourist experience that involves the presence of the Other is paradoxical, the perspective from which supposedly mutually respectful and culturally sensitive encounters in tourism can be critiqued.

Following up on the main research question of this study, it is thus suggested that the Local Gaze, the being-for-others deeply confronts tourists with existential questions on their own being in the world. This can manifest itself in various ways. Typically there is a struggle of meaning making, - Sartre’s notions of sadism and masochism, where tourists experience an inner struggle to negotiate their identity. This can manifest itself in deliberate attempts to reposition themselves as different from the stereotypical tourist types, an increased awareness about ethnicity, race and nationality, and a sadistic longing for authenticity. The Local Gaze manifests itself as an intense experience of objectification and heightened sense of self awareness, where personal identity is constantly negotiated among tourist and locals, but also tourist and fellow tourists.

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