Postmodern Openings

'Empires' of Otherness in Tourism Advertising. A Postmodern Approach

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Abstract

In this paper we envisage disscusing tourism as a postmodern manifestation that involves cultural issues projected, in the consumerist society, through media. In the larger context of post-war international relations, we shall see different perceptions of Otherness, understood in terms of exotic destinations locating minor cultures. The peculiarities of tourism also lead us to examine its cultural paradoxes, further depicted in the light of sociolinguistic perspectives of tourism. The question is to determine to what extent has Otherness became an issue of cultural, linguistic and economic reversed relations and what role does media play in shaping identities at the level of the specific promotional language of tourism.

Keywords:

tourism, language of tourism, postmodernism, media, cultural studies, Otherness.

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1. Introduction

From Bauman's 'vagabond/tourist', the postmodern western traveller is already creating unprecedentedly political, economic and socio-cultural shifts on the global map, determining scholars to define tourism as a postmodern phenomenon, constituted within a varied theoretical frame that embodies *Otherness* in different understandings. Starting from the general view of *Otherness* as a cultural issue, the postcolonial aspect of tourism lead us to a multilateral perspective in the light of actual consumerism at a global scale. Thus, we aim at observing *Otherness* in the process of linguistic, cultural, economic and ethnic issues reflected in the promotional message of touristic destinations. We believe that this aspect can impact cultural understandings of *Otherness* and also influence quality of consuming, travelling, lifestyle etc.

According to H. K. Bhabha, postmodernism locates culture in a *beyond*, that charges opposite structures in a grammar of ambivalence and coexistence, as he states from the very beginning of his work *Locating Culture*: "it is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). Our living time is dominated by "the complex figures of *difference* and *identity*, *past* and *present*, *inside* and *outside*, *inclusion* and *exclusion*" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1, *our emphasis*). The author also asserts that postmodernism itself locates somewhere *beyond* temporal sequentiality or polarity. As a matter of fact, this fragmentary and ambiguous *beyond* becomes identifiable at the point of enunciation that orchestrates or is orchestrated in its own turn by post-war international power discourses.

As identity and particularly, cultural identity represents an important issue of nowadays debate among scholars, tourism plays an important role in shaping identities, as an act of group enunciation. Tourism also represents one important actor of global economic and cultural relations, re-territorializing wealth through a process of communication that erases the boundaries of *Otherness*. We believe that in a postmodern dialectics, tourism finds itself in the stage of reversed power relations, that eludes the ancient understandings of the nation-state. As scholars assert that "[...] nation states have sought to build homogeneous cultures and make nationality a core aspect of people's identities, so that people would feel Dutch, or Swedish, or British and incorporate nationality in their very being. More recently, globalized commercial culture has created new identities that are no longer

connected to a specific nation or place of origin" (Machin & Leeuwen, 2007, p. 41).

Thus, on one hand, tangible capital is acquired through capital flow that enters the touristic destination through human flow (the tourists). On the other hand, the paid intangible capital is rendered at the level of the *authentic*, that doesn't impose itself as a nationalist imaginary, but rather as a compilation of pre-civilized forms of indigenous traditions, myths and beliefs, previously packaged within media culture.

The postmodern character of tourism is also shaped at the level of its paradoxes. The first paradox that rises is the postcolonial articulation of the well-known fear vs. fascination for the Other. We believe that this ambivalent attitude is processed especially as the speaker acts or enunciates within the space of the Other, in our case, the touristic destination. Another paradox is imbedded within the language of self-promoting of indigenous minor cultures. The paradox lies in the fact that although, more recently, tourism became a great factor promoting indigenous cultures and authentic places, linguistic barriers of *minor* languages emerging from various and exotic geographical areas of tourism, discourage the *major* stake of the general purpose. In this context, tourism must find an equilibrium between promoting indigenous cultures and linguistic means of promoting areas of *Otherness* in order that, eventually, non-native addressees understand the message.

In general, "linguistic globalization has stirred up much the same issues as media globalization. Philipson (1992) condemns the 'linguistic imperialism' of English. 'The British Empire has given way to the Empire of English', he says [...]" (Machin & Leeuwen, 2007, p. 125). Yet, tourism seems to manifest a pro position for English and develop thus, as a peculiar case within the global economic benefits. Even though "language is said to be integral to people's culture and where one loses one's language one also loses one's culture", Hall states that the only chance of minor cultures/languages to enter the circuit of western knowledge and capital is to be conveyed into an international language: "Somewhat ironically, given the desire to give voice to local and indigenous perspectives unless that voice can be spoken in English it is likely not to be heard" (Hall, quoted in Chambers & Buzinde, 2015, p. 10).

In other words, Bhabha coins *culture as a strategy of survival* as both transnational and translational:

> *"It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the 'middle passage' of slavery and indenture, the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translational because such spatial histories of displacement − now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of `global` media technologies - make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 172)*

As scholars agreed that "each race has a special destiny, psychology and ethos" (Said, 2001), the British civilisatory mission phenomenon (extrapolated, the American and European ones), lead in 21st century to a model that posits a "primeval state of autonomy (usually labeled 'precapitalism') that is then violated by global capitalism. The result is that both local and larger special arenas are transformed, the local more than the global to be sure, but not necessarily in a predetermined direction. This notion of articulation allows one to explore the richly unintended consequences of, say, colonial capitalism, with which loss occurs alongside invention" (Gupta& Ferguson, 2001, p. 35-6). From the dictum "become like us", the civilizing process means nowadays that in the long run, all societies must become consumer ones, replacing traditional values and habits. Tourism carries out the mission of translating a global message for any community that wants to prompt out and safeguard its cultural features. In our opinion, the 'civilisatory mission' of tourism, in a westernized perspective, consists in promoting cultural geographies of Otherness, understood as minor cultures, through media support, that creates markers of sight, colonizing, yet, the tourist's gaze. This perspective lead us to the sociolinguistic correlation of tourism as a language of recreation of play perspective (Dann, 1996), involving anticipated gaze: "however, where the entire phenomenon of tourism itself is treated as a game, we find ourselves within the framework of a post-modern perspective" (Dann, 1996, p. 17). In this sense, sociologist J. Urry, who coined tourist's gaze for the first time in 1990 in his work with the same title, opines that "many tourist practices, even some of the past, prefigure the post-modern ethos. There has always been, for instance, an emphasis on spectacle − a combination of

the visual, the aesthetic and the popular. Not only have sights and resorts competed on the basis of display, but their visual characteristics have been mechanically and electronically produced on site and in the media [...]" (Dann, 1996, p. 18). This mechanical reproduction of culture lead to commoditized, visual culture, prefabricated as such in order "to be consumed, not in a state of contemplation, but of distraction" (Dann, 1996, p.18). Urry even envisages a deconstructive perspective of tourism, stating that in a postmodern acceptation, it might trespass the borders of a destination and be reiterated in a dialectic of de-differentiation that might bring an end of tourism: "just as capitalism moves through historical stages [...], so too do travel and tourism evolve [...]. The last of these eras is characterized by post-Fordist consumption where there is a rejection of certain forms of mass tourism, an increased diversity of preferences, fewer repeat visits a proliferation of alternative sighs and attractions, a multiplication of types of holiday and supporting information [...]. Typical of such post-Fordist consumption is the post-modern practice of dining out, where today people can enjoy cosmopolitan and ethnic experiences without even stepping outside the limits of the city in which they live" (Dann, 1996, p.19).

Still, we shall focus on tourism as a postmodern phenomenon that takes place outside the limits of familiar boundaries of a pluralized Self that assumes the linguistic, cultural and economic role of encountering the Other.

2. (Re)thinking *Otherness*

On the map of postmodern power geographies, *Otherness* is understood in terms of *norm* vs. *difference.* Gender, racial, ethnic or economic issues shape the discourses of *Otherness* within various epistemologies of western emergence, which involve the western *ethos* in a meta-colonizing process of knowledge. In Bhabha's opinion, *Otherness* is situated between a primordial identity and the cultural patterns that generate epistemological difference, expressed in the discourse of certain disciplines:

> *"The place of the Other must not be imaged, as Fanon sometimes suggests, as fixed phenomenological point opposed to the self, that represents culturally alien consciousness. The Other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity − cultural or psychic −*

that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the cultural to be signified as linguistic, symbolic, historic reality." (Bhabha, 1994, p. 51-2).

Furthermore, the author brings to attention the term of *cultural difference* as a linguistic pattern that is responsible for localizing the '*topos* of enunciation':

"The analytic of cultural difference intervenes to transform the scenario of articulation − not simply to disclose the rationale of political discrimination. It changes the position of enunciation and the relations of address within it; not only what is said but where it is said; not simply the logic of articulation but the topos of enunciation. The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization [...]." (Bhaha, 1994, p. 162).

In tourism terms, these *topologies of enunciation* are theoretically localized within the space of a touristic destination, but, in fact, the *cultural difference* is *a priori* announced within the promotional space of media, which fabricates an alluring enunciation of a community that signals glimpses of identity through a specific lexicon of *differentiation*. In terms of marketing, this strategy is said to position the *unique selling proposals* in the mind of the future tourist/consumer and thus, to *differentiate* from any other competitor. As in its own turn tourism claims a specific language of difference, attentively developed by sociologist E. Cohen in the sociolinguistic *perspective of tourism as the unknown*, *Otherness* becomes a double realm of *difference* and advertises itself as a 'product' that must be consumed for this particular feature. The promised encounter with this different Other in an idealistic place featuring the *unknown* that generates fear and pleasure at the same time, situates tourism within the ontological space of postcolonial reconsideration. As a matter of fact, postcolonialism might be regarded as a phenomenon that studies the relations of power not only in terms of dominating/dominated dichotomy but also in terms of the place that western self-occupies in the realms of *Otherness*: "Postcolonialism can be described as a powerful interdisciplinary mood in the social sciences and humanities that is refocusing attention on the imperial/colonial past, and

critically revisiting understanding of the place of the west in the world" (Clayton in Anderson, 2003, p. 357).

3. Representations of *Otherness* in tourism advertising

As we have mentioned above, beyond the transparency of tourism discourse through the dominator's language, the uniqueness of tourism as a global communicative process stays, in our opinion, in the existence of a particular language that is coined in the literature as *'the language of tourism'*. This peculiar language involves realms of 'narrative', or specific "types of destinations as having their own 'narrative style' " (Dann, 1996, p. 5). In other words, "just as leisure becomes a code whose praxis has the value language for a given group (Thurot, 1989, p. 12), so too can one legitimately refer to the 'language of tourism' as a 'language of modernity'" (Dann, 1996, p. 4). Yet, susceptible of domination, language is replaced by other scholars (*apud* Dann, 1996, p. 12) with the term *discourse*. Other authors refer to the discursive aspect of tourism as to a subversive means of persuasion, coining 'the rhetoric of tourism' (Dann, 1996, p. 5). As Dann points out, there are also other syntagms that rather underline the sociolinguistic character of tourism. Eventually, scholars agree on the importance of semiotics within tourism, as "McCannell explains that there is a 'privileged relation between tourism and semiotics' since both have 'implications concerning the Other in global sociocultural arrangements" (Dann, 1996, p. 5).

Yet, in a postmodern light, the *sociolinguistic correlation of tourism as a language of recreation* plays an important role, as the *sign* becomes a meta-sign processed within media, that offers the visual spectacle to be consumed *a priori* a lived experience.

At the same time, in Bhabha's opinion, even though semiotics represents an important engine of cultural production through signs, today, the institutionalization of culture in epistemological terms requires a certain individual competence:

> *It is not adequate simply to become aware of the semiotic systems that produce the signs of culture and their dissemination. Much more significantly, we are face with the challenge of reading, into the present of a specific cultural performance, the traces of all those diverse disciplinary discourses and institutions of knowledge that constitute the condition and contexts of culture. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 163)*

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In tourism context, Urry opines that tourists nowadays are 'amateur semioticians', reading signs from the very departure to the arrival in the destination. Actually, in our opinion, the very touristic sign is strategically constructed within the media support, that is within the promotional discourse. This hyper-space of hyper-reality's representations build within the empire of media culture offers important amounts of signs ready to be read and further consumed in a travelling experience.

In order to be more specific, we have chosen the example of three advertisements for South Africa as a touristic destination that showcase the evolution in time of strategies that the message embodies both visually and textually.

In 1937, for instance, we find an overcharged poster with text and descriptions of the principal sights to be gazed upon, as the verb 'to gaze' appears explicitly. We can also notice intrusions of E. Cohen's specific set of key-words for tourism promotional language; these key-words are used redundantly ("best superlatives"), in a hyperbolized imagery suggested at the level of nouns or adjectives: "best superlatives", "majestic", "grandeur", "beautiful", "wonders", "charms", "beauty", "infinite", "marvellous" (http://mascola.com). The verbs play a persuasive role, as they express an urge: "*Visit* South Africa", "*Enjoy* a real vacation", "*Come* to the 'Sunny Sub-Continent'", or the inducement of a successful vacation: "South Africa's scenery and tourist attractions will provoke you best superlatives", "You will marvel", "The wonders and the charm of South Africa will impress pictures of lasting beauty" (http://mascola.com).

At the same time, at the visual level, the ad reproduces two pictures revealing specific landscape with no layers of signification that would touch upon any cultural issues (including identity, community or colonial relations).

We can seize important differences in a print ad from 1957, as "the advertisers here use the image of a small child to disarm people's fears of the untamed wilds of the 'Dark Continent' while still remaining exotic enough to pique the reader's interest into considering a vacation to this far off land" (http://mascola.com). The image is frontal and occupies most part of the print, while the text is visibly resumed, in a minimized font. We can already observe Cohen's set of *differentiation* strategy at the level of the text: "A completely *different* holiday recipe"

(http://mascola.com). South Africa is projected as a destination that offers specific *unique selling proposals*, compelled within the *keying technique*: "[...] glorious sunshine, ever-changing scenery, amazing contrasts in breath-taking, adventurous South Africa!" (http://mascola.com).

Eventually, in a 2012 print ad for the same destination, we can notice both at visual and textual level that the general cultural shifts in society lead to a different construction of the message. The image pictures the immersion of the tourist in the local community, or the encounter with the Other, as the relaxed proxemics of two couples (black and white) sharing a common experience suggests. The text is substantially reduced and situated at the top of the add. The three short propositions emphasize on the destination as a "place" of fulfillment, with no revealed *unique selling proposals*: "It was one of those places that just made you curiously happy. It was perfect!" (http://tradetoolkit.southafrica.net).

4. Conclusions

Tourism is highly an economic activity, yet embedded within cultural and linguistic realms that shape a destination's image within media support. In cultural terms, tourism represents a great factor of (re)creating identities. Yet, in the post-war context, emergent exotic former-colonies prompt themselves as destinations, or as intangible capital pools of the *authentic*. The economic aspect expressed through the touristic marketing strategies known as *unique selling proposals* claim, in fact, cultural identities that remind dichotomies of *Otherness*. The revival of these identities on the globalized map is, paradoxically enough, transmitted, generally speaking, under the sign of the imperial English language. Yet, tourism has developed its own specific language, coined by scholars (Cohen, 1984; Dann, 1996, McCannell, 1989; Urry, 1990, 2002, 2011) in different perspectives that showcase tourism as a complex field situated at the intersection of various disciplines, concerning, in our case, sociolinguistics, but also economics, semiotics, cultural studies and media. Yet, as we could also see, in the globalized society of consumption, media became the second empire to govern people's choices, in terms of touristic destinations as well.

Eventually, we ask ourselves whether on a reversed map of postcolonial relations, these exotic destinations will not be the future

empires of the intangible, authentic, genuine Other, as a counter-balance of western materialistic struggle.

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