TOURISM ANALYSIS

***BOOK REVIEW***

*Tourist Attractions: From Object to Narrative*

Johan R. Edelheim (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2015; 288pp., Hardcover, £99.95, US$149.95, ISBN 978-1-84541-542-6)

Despite being seen as a key component of the tourism system, tourist attractions (TAs) have often suffered from a lack of critical academic research (Benckendorff & Pearce, 2003; Leask & Fyall, 2006; Richards, 2002). As such there have been calls for alternative theoretical perspectives and robust methodologies to expand the boundaries of attraction research (Leask, 2010, 2016). Interestingly however, this trend is changing and scholars have a renewed interest in the unique role and nature of attractions in tourism.

While major debates remain about the definitions and categories of attractions, greater focus is being paid to their role in society and the range of experiences that constitute the attraction product. Furthermore, the creation of stories, themes and narratives have long been considered as important contributors to the tourism experience (Cary, 2004; Lichrou, O’Malley, & Patterson, 2010; Moscardo, 2010). There is inherent value in critical scholarly work that questions our understanding of tourism narratives and this is particularly relevant in the attraction sector, where storytelling represents a key part of the product. Clearly addressing this gap in research, Johan R. Edelheim, the author of *Tourist Attractions: From Object to Narrative*, approaches the attraction sector from the cultural studies perspective. This innovative text provides a fresh perspective on attractions and provides the reader with a unique toolkit to explore TAs through the use of narrative analysis.

The book is divided into 3 parts and 9 subsequent chapters. In the spirit of an ongoing narrative, the book also features a prologue, epilogue and interludes. This can be seen as something of a forgotten art in contemporary tourism texts, but it works very well in this context and is befitting of the written style of the book. In Part 1 ‘Tourist Attractions’, Edelheim provides a broad but in-depth introduction to the TA sector and explores much of the existing management-orientated research. In Chapter 1 we see an introduction to TA terminology, definitions and typologies. The author addresses the ever-present *tourist* attraction vs. *visitor* attraction debate and justifies his position on the TA terminology. This choice will not resonate with all readers, however Edelheim makes a strong case for his use of terms and frames his theoretical boundaries accordingly. In chapter 2, critical success factors for TA management are introduced, including a balanced consideration of the impacts of TAs to local environments and communities. This chapter closes with a discussion as to the author’s methodology and how this provides new research directions for tourism. Chapter 3 presents challenges for maintaining TAs, such as the importance of the marketing function in addition to quality standards and benchmarking. This is where we see a key message being reinforced throughout the book – how narratives and their development take precedence over the operational design of TAs.

In Part 2 ‘Deconstructing TAs’, the authors turns to the narrative analysis approach as a new way of investigating attractions. Chapter 4 guides the reader through the conventions and values of narrative analysis as an interpretative tool. Distinctions between texts, stories and fabulae (the core of a narrative) are made clear and the reader feels well equipped for the upcoming discussion. Through reference to two case studies of Australian TAs, the author draws upon various tourist texts (such as promotional and informative guides) to deconstruct his own experience as a visitor. I personally found these accounts fascinating and add a reflective quality to this part of the book. Chapter 5 discusses the theoretical tools that narrative analysis can offer in exploring the formation of TAs based on the texts that tourists encounter. Particularly interesting for future tourism research is the concept of ‘narrative voice’ and the various ways a text can be narrated. This would be especially interesting to explore in other tourism contexts. In chapter 6, the deconstruction section closes with debate as to how various narrative techniques, such as focalisation (the focus a narrator can apply to a text), can assist in forging attraction narratives.

Part 3 ‘Constructing TAs’ (chapter 7) opens with an extensive review of phenomenological theory, interspersed with personal recollections and observations from the author’s case study research. Chapter 8 explores the authenticity of the tourist experience and considers enactment and performance in relation to Edelheim’s visits to one of the recurring attractions. Finally, chapter 9 extends the narrative into the post-visit stage by questioning how tourists remember attraction experiences. Here the author considers the role of pictures, markers and souvenirs in extending narratives into memories. This has clear implications for academics and also practitioners by exploring ways to extend the attraction experience into the long-term. In the Epilogue, Edelheim brings all of the strands of the text together. The author succinctly summarises his views on attractions through the narrative analysis and phenomenological lenses, featuring a particularly thought provoking statement that might make for interesting discussion in the future: *“I increasingly came to realise that every tourist is ultimately a phenomenologist”* (p. 228). The epilogue closes with open discussion as to the limitations of the research. The author particularly highlights the inherent subjectivity narrative analysis poses, but defends this approach for the reflective value that it brings to the study. Finally, future research directions are discussed with particular reference to ways in which post-structural narrative analysis could be applied in different contexts.

While this text has clear value and extends the frontiers of attraction research, I do feel there are some questions over accessibility. The book has a strong philosophical dimension with terminology that may deter undergraduate or even those at the early-postgraduate stage of their studies. Similarly, I would perhaps argue that the written style may not lend itself particularly well to attraction practitioners who, certainly in my experience, favour texts without the philosophical dimension. Furthermore, while the book is personal and insightful, I did feel in places that some of the discussion was too focussed on the author’s personal experiences. I agree that these offer rich interpretations as seen through the eyes of the author, however in places it felt more akin to a monologue. I did feel in places that such personal recollections could have been used to highlight, rather than overpower the discussion.

In turning to the ultimate question for this review, I would indeed recommend this text to scholars in attraction research and in the wider tourism field. I found the book thought provoking and rich in alternative views which is what I particularly look for in a text. As a researcher in this area, it has certainly ignited interest in applying alternative methodologies in the attraction field*.* This being said, Edelheim’s work does prove a marked departure from the existing texts in attraction management currently available. For students, researchers and established academics who are more accustomed to the business/management perspective, this text may challenge their thinking considerably and perhaps be seen as a more abstract view. Nevertheless, this has been a thoroughly interesting read and for those of us based in attraction research, a welcome contribution to the research agenda.

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