

*Tourist gaze* expresses the dynamics associated with construction of tourist experience, the complexity of the social organization of tourism, and the systematic nature of these processes. It allows us to articulate what separates tourist experience from everyday living and to illuminate ways in which production and consumption of tourist goods and services have wide implications for social relations. The social organization of these processes encompasses a number of elements, including carefully chosen images about places to see, narratives that speak about the uniqueness of their history, culture and heritage, varieties of performative practices through which tourist experiences are embodied, and a network of professionals and institutions providing services to ensure that particular tourist experiences can be generated. These developments are closely related to the emergence of mass tourism, consumerism, and commodification of places and cultural practices. The gaze is an organizing principle which structures encounters among tourists and people and places visited at multiple levels; it helps to create experience that is felt as extraordinary and in this way memorable and also implicates people into an ongoing and systematic set of social relations through competition for tourist attention.

The tourist gaze suggests that tourist experience involves a particular way of seeing. Images and myths about what to see tend to be distinctive, striking, unusual, and extraordinary. Such visual and narrative depictions of tourist destinations are strategically promoted by the marketing industry to contrast with people's daily routine and work schedules at home. These imaginaries are captured through signs which signify a particular fantasy. A photo of a couple kissing on the streets of Paris is not meant to simply capture youthful behavior on a busy urban street but rather the idea of romantic Paris. Similarly, a photo of the Grand Canyon does not simply signify an unusual geological formation but rather the idea of unmatched natural beauty. Such gazes help create anticipations in travelers about what they will encounter during their trip and they fuel desire to experience these particular imaginaries. Varieties of gazes organize anticipations of a wide range of experiences, from romance and pleasure to health and education. Organization of such experiences also implies different kinds of socialities, from private and solitary to collective involving festivity and conviviality. The tourist gaze signifies something distinctive about tourist experiences because of which these become endowed with importance and significance and come to be remembered as unique.

In historical terms, the tourist gaze emerges from changes in the organization of travel, innovations in communications technology, developments of travel infrastructure, transformations of the economy, and the changing tastes of travelers. On their trips for pleasure and cultural purposes, the elites of Imperial Rome made use of a network of roads and various providers of hospitality. By the late middle ages, a network of hospices and mass production of religious handbooks encouraged the spread of pilgrimage so that in the fifteenth century, historians already note the existence of regularly organized tours from Venice to the Holy Land. What is known as the Grand Tour flourished among the sons of the aristocracy a century later. They traveled to prepare themselves for political leadership at home by educating themselves about the languages and ways of life in faraway places. Starting with the 16<sup>th</sup> century, historians begin to note a gradual

transformation from traveling for knowledge through opportunities for conversations to traveling for the purposes of seeing something with one's own eyes through eyewitness observation. The development of the idea of scientific knowledge, coupled with growth of professional classes, availability of the rail system, proliferation of guidebooks, spread of packaged tours, and the invention of the camera, facilitated the emergence of scenic tourism and the practice of sightseeing. These become the basis for the emergence of the tourism industry, as discretionary income grows across the population and travel becomes available to ever larger numbers of people. Throughout the past century, the scale of tourism has continued to grow, entering what is known as the global economy.

Tourism has become a central component of the processes of globalization, subsuming ever larger numbers of travellers to most every part of the globe, including, recently, the outer space. From small towns to metropolitan centers, from the most remote parts of the globe to areas that have long been placed prominently on the tourist map, places compete for the growing flow of tourists by inventing and reconfiguring themselves to be able to attract visitors. Most unlikely of places have developed tourism infrastructure, from concentration camps, jails, and military occupation sites, to places associated with mass murder and sacrifice, poverty stricken neighborhoods, and defunct and dilapidated industrial sites. Such places and their populations enter a worldwide network of restaurants, museums, tourist information centers, tour operators, tourist agencies, tour guides, marketing enterprises, transportation corporations, mass media outlets, and TV travel programs. In hopes to be able to enter the global order through tourism, cultural and social life of people and their places become commodified.

In most basic terms, commodification of places and people involves their ability to be effectively represented through images and myths in such a way that they can attract tourist attention. Tourist representations are based on selected elements of history, heritage, culture, ways of life, and various features of townscape and landscape. These are captured through photographs, maps, film, documentaries, news, novels, postcards, souvenirs, travel blogs, and alike. Such media enable this particular way of seeing a tourist destination to be endlessly reproduced and globally disseminated. As more and more spots around the globe compete to become tourist destinations, tourist gaze becomes an ever more perfected marketing effort to maximize the potential of a destination. This effort involves an array of specialized institutions and services, including consultancy firms, university departments, professional conferences, and various research centers. Such professionals work together to development signs that seek to transcend the simple gaze captured through tourist images and narratives and produce a carefully constructed destination concept. This process of concept construction is referred to as destination branding.

In a highly competitive and overcrowded global tourism market, tourist destination branding is an agenda to create a distinct and compelling destination identity which is clearly and confidently differentiated from all other competitors. These efforts include continuously perfecting criteria that evaluate the effectiveness of a particular brand, actively pursuing venues to push the brand to the forefront of people's attention, and vigilantly devising procedures and measures to protect the brand from losing its appeal.

City and state governments are actively participating in the efforts to pursue such opportunities. This is perhaps most visible in the fierce bidding competitions to host highly visible global events such as the Olympics, the World Cup, or World Expos. Governments see such events as opportunities to build, restore, or redesign their social and physical environments to make them compatible with the concept of tourist identity they are promoting. As the world's attention is focused on the brand, dissent to these practices often remains invisible. Poor and crime ridden neighborhoods are heavily policed to demonstrate to the global audiences that a particular country and its urban areas are a safe place to visit. The tourist flow is engulfed by surveillance technologies and security procedures to preempt possible acts of violence against tourists and in this way ensure uninterrupted tourist flows. Tensions over which aspects of history, heritage and culture are to be included in the brand are pushed away from global media coverage as are struggles over whether or not their locales should even become a tourist destination. Also downplayed are power struggles over how state branding efforts should shape identities of local minorities, particularly the racialized, the indigenous, and the poor.

The concept of the tourist gaze has proven to be highly influential. Nevertheless, critics suggest that its emphasis on representation and the power of the visual may have a western bias. What is needed are historical-comparative and cross-cultural studies of the processes of construction of tourist experiences that pay close attention to the dynamics of practice and acting in different tourism contexts. At the local levels, detailed ethnographic attention to performative practices and framing activities may generate insights into possible cross-cultural differences in how tourist experience is embodied and with what emotions. It may also broaden our understanding of the varieties of social relationships such interactions may have a potential to create, not only among the tourists but also between the tourists and the locals. At the global level, a historical-comparative approach to tourism practices may be able to illuminate how the dynamics surrounding the construction of tourist experiences have been changing over time in different socio-cultural contexts and suggest to what extent cultural variations have been able to withstand the homogenizing tendencies of the tourist gaze in the global economy. The challenge remains to show in comparative empirical terms how, through tourism experiences conditions are created for self-reflection, group empowerment, and visions of alternative modernities.

### **Further Readings**

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### **Biography**

Vida Bajc is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Methodist University, North Carolina. She is the author of *Security and Everyday Life* (co-edited with Willem de Lint, Routledge, 2011) and guest editor for *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing* on collective memory and tourism (2006); *Mobilities* on pilgrimage (with Simon Coleman and John Eade, 2007); and the *American Behavioral Scientist* on surveillance and mobility (with John Torpey, 2007).