

Revisiting authenticity revisited

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It is perhaps by some strange coincidence of fate that two tourism journals, *Tourism Recreation Research* (32) and *Tourism Management* (28:4), are entering into a discussion on authenticity shortly after the death of one of the philosophers who has contributed much to our conception of authenticity, Jean Baudrillard. Arguably his perspectives on the symbolic realm of contemporary global consumer society achieved far greater acceptance in the social sciences and humanities than in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, but they have certainly influenced the discussion of authenticity in the field of Tourism Studies (Wang 2000; Pearce 2007). One of the main recurring themes of Baudrillard's work (1983, 1988, 1994, 1995, 2000) was that as contemporary consumers we live in a society in which representation and simulation have come to dominate over what was once regarded as reality. In this Baudrillard arguably contributes not only to understandings of the notion of authenticity but also the fascination of places in hosting mega-events because of their role as media spectacles (Poster 2001).

Nevertheless, with respect to the concept of authenticity in tourism studies his greatest contribution probably lies in his concept of hyperreality, which is the meticulous reduplication of the real, often through other reproductive media, such as film and television, to become a form of fetish (Baudrillard 1993). For Baudrillard, consumer societies had undergone a precession of simulacra from the era of the original, to the counterfeit, to the (mass) produced copy, and then to the simulated third order of the simulacra, in which the copy has replaced the original. Such observations undoubtedly find resonance in a field of study such as Tourism in which Disney is often used an exemplar. However, importantly they do not just apply to a physical space, but also to communicative space. For example, in his controversial book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* Baudrillard was seeking to make the point that what is considered real are simply images of what is 'real'. The real therefore becomes superceded by the signs of its own existence to become the hyperreal, a situation that at times possibly also characterises discussions on authenticity in tourism itself (Cohen 2007 provides a very good review of the literature in tourism on authenticity).

Yet authenticity is not just a concern for tourism studies, it is an issue that is reflected in discussions in the wider social sciences, many of which pre-date those in tourism (MacCannell 1973, 1976; Cohen 1979), as well as in the everyday. Concerns with, and hence the issue of, authenticity is a concept that has its origins in the conditions of modernity (Lowenthal 1985) as in traditional societies there are no disputes about origins. And commercial tourism as well as the authors and readers of this set of

articles, are children of modernity. This concern with authenticity is expressed both in academic debates over the subject as well as attempts to (re)produce authenticity for commercial and social purposes, and the disappointment of the consumer when they believe that they were not provided with the authentic. Selling authenticity, has therefore also become one of the benchmarks of many tourism destinations and tourist firms (Yeoman et al. 2007) influenced as they are by a belief in the competitive promise of the experience economy (Pine II and Gilmore 1999) and the economic potential of, if needs be, faking it (Boyle 2004).

As noted elsewhere (Hall 2007), the intriguing thing about the continued focus on authenticity in tourism is that for all the supposed growth in interest in the authentic it is also readily apparent that there is a growing preponderance of the fake or inauthentic which does not necessarily detract people. Fakery is the replication of environmental and/or social meaning through the manipulation of appearances, actions or experiences. Yet replication is not intrinsically bad, what is important is the different experiential depth (i.e. historical depth, spatial depth, cultural depth, environmental depth, educational depth) between the original and the replication (Hall 2007). Time is also extremely significant as a factor in people's understanding of authenticity. As Brand (1997, 23) observed with respect to how buildings are perceived and experienced, 'Age plus adaptivity is what makes a building come to be loved. The building learns from its occupants, and they learn from it'. In many cases replication is the only way that someone may be able to gain understanding or experience of the original. Therefore, inauthenticity emerges out of the very attempt to retain authenticity. Instead, a crisis of authenticity occurs when there is a deliberate attempt to deceive through fakery, reproduction or simulation and a breakdown of trust occurs between the consumer and the producer. Replication or simulation is not intrinsically immoral unless there is deception. As Dovey (1985, 39) suggests, people 'can accept all kinds of faked things and perhaps even learn to love them so long as they are not deceived by those things.'

However, in all of the discussion over authenticity an argument can be made that the concept should not even be used with respect to things and places at all. Authenticity is experiential, in that it is derived from the property of connectedness of the individual to the perceived, everyday world and environment, and the processes that created it and the consequences of one's engagement with it (Hall 2007). From this perspective anywhere, or anything, can provide the connectedness that leads to authenticity as authenticity is not intrinsically dependent on location although place, in the sense of everyday lived experiences and relations, does matter. Of course this may well mean that rather than the high yielding authentic tourist supposedly in search of 'authentic tourism experiences' that many national and regional tourism marketing organizations appear to dream of in their marketing strategies (e.g. Tourism Western Australia, Visit Scotland; Industry Canada) the most authentic tourist is likely someone

visiting friends and relations or going to the cottage because of the relational and connected nature of that experience.

Of course all of the discussion with respect to authenticity may perhaps also be interpreted by someone schooled in Baudrillard to be just another example of the operation of the 'sign value' of the use of the term, i.e. that it has a value within the academic system and perhaps in the tourism marketing system. If this was the case then as a community of scholars we perhaps live in a sub-culture in which representation and simulation have come to dominate over what was once regarded as reality to the extent that our reality now often is our simulation of it. Baudrillard was quick to focus in the extent to which the media filter our news so that we can no longer distinguish between reality itself and its simulacra. Perhaps scholars should be mindful of this when debates on a concept such as authenticity in tourism is not grounded in experience. Baggini's (2007) comment in the Guardian that 'There is some irony in the fact that many of those quickest to dismiss Baudrillard don't actually have any knowledge of his philosophy at all, but only secondhand representations of it'. Arguably should be taken on board in some of the discussions on authenticity in tourism in recent years. As Baggini also suggested, perhaps the sometimes-derided Baudrillard got the last laugh, after all.

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