Heritage Management Implications of onsite interpretation at heritage sites featured in popular media products

1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

This research examines heritage management of onsite interpretation at sites used for filming as a consequence of the various special issues resulting from the impact of popular media on heritage management. Heritage management and interpretation is one of the key issues for tourism studies (Nuryanti, 1996, Garrod and Fyall, 2000, Poria, Butler and Airey, 2003). While there is a significant body of knowledge of heritage interpretation (Uzzell, 1989 p.252, Millar, 1989, Moscardo, 1996, Grimwade and Carter, 2000, Yeoman and Drummond, 2001, Howard, 2003, Poria, Biran and Reichel, 2009) there appears to be a lack of research on popular media’s impact on people’s interaction with place that focuses on their use and experiences of interpretation methods.

Whilst making a significant contribution to the body of knowledge, studies that have examined visitors’ interaction or experiences with interpretation were conducted either at National Parks in New Zealand, for example Stewart, Hayward and Devlin (1998), Carr (2004) or at sacred and dark tourism sites, and have overlooked the influence of popular media on interpretation methods (Poria et al., 2009, Biran, Poria and Oren, 2011). In addition, both Stewart et al. (1998) and Poria et al. (2009) call for further research in the field of interpretation as a means of revealing the complexities and relationships between interpretation, visitors and place. Poria et al. (2009 p.12) also suggests investigating visitors’ preferences and experiences of interpretation methods at “less serious,” “less sacred,” or “less religious” historic sites.

and tourism is a “Pandora’s Box with layers and layers of new challenges and possibilities. It might therefore be concluded that there is a particular lack of research that examines the management implications for on-site interpretation in existing literature regarding both heritage interpretation and film induced tourism. All of the above mentioned reasons demonstrate that there is a gap in existing knowledge which this thesis will attempt to fill.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The recent report conducted by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) (2010) has estimated that heritage tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in the UK which contributes £20.6 billion to the British economy. Interestingly, this contribution in terms of the UK gross domestic product is greater than advertising, car manufacturing or film industries (Culture 24, 2010). Although it significantly contributes to the current economy, heritage tourism has a complex nature as one of its aims is “production of reproduction of the past” Nuryanti (1996 p.252). This complex concept includes tangible as well as intangible assets.

Heritage management is therefore a significant aspect of heritage sites and their irreplaceable resources (Timothy and Boyd, 2003). Heritage Management has developed from archaeological activities Stark and Griffin (2003) such as rescue archaeology carried out during World War II to protect threatened sites of historical significance (Neumann and Sanford, 2001, Neumann, 2010). Howard (2003 p. 14) treats heritage management as an independent domain, a “discipline in its own right” which needs to be explored as a whole, which should be studied together with other disciplines such as archaeology, history, sociology, cultural studies, art and geography. He further states that heritage management to be effective needs to take into account current circumstances and people’s requirements and expectations.

The management of built heritage is challenging and needs to be carefully planned as its role is to connect the past with the present and the future through tangible material (Timothy and Boyd, 2003). Heritage Management also involves conservation planning, architectural design and reconstruction techniques and, more importantly, reproduction of the past, cross-cultural sensitivity and education (Uzzell, 1989, Nuryanti, 1996). Heritage managers need to deal with a number of issues such as conservation commodification, overcrowding, which may lead to exceeded carrying capacity and increasingly with visitors’ expectation, experiences and interpretation. However, heritage site managers tend to put a strong emphasis solely on preservation without taking into account the site’s contemporary purpose which cannot be ignored (Grimwade and Carter, 2000). What heritage managers generally fail to appreciate is that their role is not only to deal with the conservation process but also to
take into account visitors as they are, as Graham (2000) argues, constructors of heritage. Lack of comprehension and understanding of visitors’ needs and expectations is a significant factor responsible for the failure of heritage management (McKercher and Du Cros, 2002). These issues can be effectively tackled by applying appropriate interpretation techniques.

Interpretation is a method that is utilised by management for communicating about heritage and transferring value and knowledge to the people (Howard, 2003). However, as Moscardo and Ballantyne (2008) suggest, it is also a significant aspect of the visitor’s experience. Tilden, although one of the most important pioneers in the field of interpretation, and working for 25 years on the most appropriate definition, still struggled to develop a satisfying concept (Tilden and Craig, 2007). He defines interpretation as

“an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden, 1977 p. 7).

Ballantyne and Uzzell (1998) argue that interpretation at heritage sites does not solely serve as a tool to reconstruct the history but also to create socio-cultural values, enhanced understanding and experience of a place. Indeed, interpretation should go beyond dictionary description or book, triggering curiosity and awareness about the world and its irreplaceable cultural resources.

One of the interpretation issues which Howard (2003) emphasises is the challenge to realize that individuals understand heritage sites in accordance to their own perception and as a result different people attribute different meaning to the same object. Another problem is that interpretation constructed by managers of a particular site may differ from what people have already gained from being exposed to various sources prior to their visit Young (1999) or it may be one dimensional showing only one narrative (Smith, 1999). The problem is that interpretation at heritage sites is strongly attached to the past and tends to ignore current circumstances and the future (Uzzell, 1989). Indeed, what management do not take into account is that visitors themselves construct their own interpretation of their experience.

There are also other significant aspects, mainly the risk of distorted perception of particular sites, lack of understanding of their significance and value, ineffective learning process and finally overcrowding, which leads to exceeded carrying capacity, especially at heritage sites featured in the popular media which have been increasingly visited by the various audiences (Tooke and Baker, 1996, Riley et al., 1998, Urry, 2002, Beeton, 2005, O’Connor et al., 2010). Indeed, with Britain the setting for over 100 international films and television series such as “Braveheart” (1995), “Notting Hill” (1999), Pride and Prejudice (2003), “the Da Vinci Code
Indeed, popular media depict diverse landscapes, destinations, exotic places, various tourism attractions and heritage sites which are consumed on a daily basis in forms of entertainment such as cinema, television or books. This consumption, as Kim (2010) points out, well characterizes post-modern societies where watching television or films in cinema has become an everyday practice. Certainly, these days, tourists’ choices of holiday destinations have been increasingly influenced by imagery and fantasy derived from non-marketing activities such as popular media. This global phenomenon has created a tourism niche called film-induced tourism, which Macionis (2004) defines as a post-modern trend of experiencing sites and locations featured in popular media products.

Although the prime purpose of film production activities is not to promote tourism, there is no doubt that motion pictures boost the awareness, profitability and attractiveness of the screened locations (Riley et al., 1998). However, apart from positive aspects film tourism generates negative impact. For example a strong perception of the location may create unrealistic visitors’ expectations and issues of authenticity, to such an extent that tourists may subsequently feel disappointed when the site does not live up to the expectations. Indeed, visual images convey meaning which is further formed in a subjective way to comprise people’s own narratives and allegories (Ateljevic et al., 2007). Apart from those pre-visit variables in various media, the perception is simultaneously built on their cultural background and own experiences (Young, 1999). In other words, the dichotomy of place knowledge indicates that people use a variety of sources to construct the sense and understanding of a place which is mixed with their own interpretation (Young, 1999).

As result, as Young (1999) confirms, they have preconceived knowledge and an enormous amount of stored information on which they build their expectations about a place prior to their visit. Schutz (1967) described this as a stock of knowledge. In this fundamental concept he argues that people’s past experiences and background information allow them to understand and construct meaning from what is new to them. When visiting various heritage sites people start looking at what they are exposed to (Urry, 2000) and seek familiar images which they had acquired prior to the visit in order to make sense and understand what they are exposed to. Therefore as Urry (2002) argues places featured in a film and subsequently visited do not usually live up to tourist’s expectation of them. Indeed, heritage sites featured in the popular media may suffer from misinterpretation, lack of appreciation and understanding, a distorted image or diminished authenticity and this may be due the lack of appropriate interpretation (Beeton, 2005, Bolan et al., 2011, O’Connor et al., 2010).
3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

In my research I will look into the impact of popular media products such as film on heritage management, in particular, issues for interpretation methods. In so doing, I will aim to provide a greater understanding of interpretation: its role, effectiveness, challenges and key elements in enhancing visitors’ experience and understanding of built heritage sites featured in popular media. I will also investigate how managers can enhance interpretation to suit visitors’ needs when they come with potential preconceived ideas resulting from popular media exposure.

I will simultaneously expose how popular media such as film influence peoples’ interaction with space focusing on their use of interpretation methods. Therefore, I will investigate visitors’ preconceived knowledge and investigate how this influences their experience, and preferences towards interpretation methods available on site. I will also examine if interpretation messages available at the site live up to visitors’ prior expectations.

Aim

My aim is to provide a greater theoretical insight concerning heritage management challenges and key elements in enriching visitors’ experiences and understanding through interpretation methods at heritage sites featured in popular media products.

This will be achieved through the following objectives:

- identifying and reviewing the existing literature on popular media and its impact at heritage sites, heritage management, in particular, the concepts of interpretation, and visitors’ experience

- examining heritage management interpretation issues that arise from the impact of the popular media on the heritage sites

- interviewing the visitors at heritage site/s to study their own interpretation, prior expectations, experiences, and their use of and preferences in respect of interpretation methods,
4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Due to the nature of this study, and particularly the research aim and objectives, a constructivist paradigm which is one of the Interpretative philosophies seems to be an appropriate choice for this research (Angen, 2000, Guba and Linkoln, 1994). Research paradigms are an integral part of research design as they allow an understanding of the researcher’s own position with regard to the studied phenomenon or subject. Particularly, paradigms dictate ontology and epistemology which both influence methodology and methods (Pernecky and Jamal, 2010). The Constructivist paradigm comes from hermeneutic methodological theory, however as a methodological philosophy in social science it was established by Mannheim who contributed significantly to the sociology of knowledge (Delanty, 1997). The hermeneutic philosophy endeavours to understand human realities (Brannick, 1997), and contrasts with the positivist paradigm. Indeed, the constructivist paradigm relies on relativist rather than realist ontology and subjective rather than objective epistemology, while the positivist philosophy is based on realism and objective epistemology (Guba and Lincoln, 2005).

5. METHODS

Given the very nature of the constructivist paradigm which relies predominantly or even exclusively on qualitative methods in order to be consistent with the research philosophy, I have been considering application of qualitative rather than quantitative methods in order to answer the research questions. I am planning to employ a case study approach of semi-structured interviews with site managers, and semi-structured interviews with visitors as my main primary research methods. Application of qualitative methods will provide interpretation of meaning and explanation of complex phenomena revealing findings which may not emerge from utilising more traditional methods in tourism studies. In addition, this method will allow visitors to reflect on their own experiences and reactions to interpretation methods. Correspondingly, this purely qualitative approach will serve exploratory purposes and provide deeper knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation.

6. POTENTIAL VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY
Given the lack of knowledge in existing literature on this area of academic study, the findings underpinned by the constructivist paradigm will add to the construction of new knowledge and greater understanding of the subject of interpretation issues at heritage sites. A deeper understanding of interpretation issues will help to avoid any potential negative aspects of heritage tourism linked to popular media, and more effectively support management to become better informed which, in turn, may inform and improve how preservation and conservation problems can be tackled and knowledge effectively transferred. Therefore, the significance of this interdisciplinary research lies in its contribution to the understanding of the role interpretation plays in the recognition of site values, and to improved management and enhanced presentation at heritage sites featured in the popular media.
Reference list


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