An Overview of Touristic Aesthetic Representation—A Case Study of Guizhou's Thousand Household Miao Village

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Abstract. Heidegger, Foucault, Weber, Adorno, and other scholars argue from different perspectives that aesthetics can awaken individuals submerged in everyday life, liberating them from the 'iron cage.' However, in a modern landscape, what once caused astonishment has become artificial 'simulacra,' and perception of natural objects is constrained by discourse. Through tourism, individuals, while escaping the mundanity of daily life, paradoxically engage in 'mechanical' behavior, transitioning from one 'iron cage' to another. As highlighted by Saussure, in representation issues, the subject is abolished, echoing Foucault's notion that the concept of the 'subject' is formed within discourse, subject to the constraints of discourse rules and conventions, thus shaped and defined by the power and knowledge structures within discourse. Consequently, the subject is both molded and invalidated within discourse, as it excludes other discourses and their meanings. This paper uses the tourism representation of Guizhou's Thousand Household Miao Village as a case study to explore tourism behavior within the context of consumption and landscape society, aiming to better analyze contemporary tourism phenomena.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Visual Representation; Touristic Representation.

1 Introduction

In modern society, due to industrialization, urbanization, free-market economy, and technological advancements, a large population resides densely in limited urban spaces, forming a unique civilization form. This lifestyle, described by Simmel as the metropolitan way of life, is characterized by rational principles controlling various aspects of life, leading to restricted personalized living, and suppressed emotional life.[1] Alongside the rapid development of mass media, a mass culture distinct from classical and folk culture of pre-industrial societies flourishes. Weber, in exploring the characteristics of modern life, presents a perspective. He believes modern life is governed by rules and institutions, with individuals often succumbing to various bureaucratic systems. This results in a monotonous and innovation-lacking life due to strong influences of rationalism. Weber vividly metaphorizes this modern life form as an

"iron cage," indicating individuals are trapped within invisible constraints and norms in modern society. In this context, Simmel notes the emergence of an adventurous desire within individuals to break free from life's constraints, characterized by "sudden departure from the continuity of daily life."[2] In contrast, Weber suggests that individuals need various activities such as aesthetic experiences or sexual activities to transcend the repressive life akin to an "iron cage." These two theories are relevant to tourism and involve two important features of modernity: first, "deviation," where tourism temporarily breaks the continuity of daily life by changing environments and spaces, providing new experiences. Second, these new experiences largely resemble aesthetic experiences, a brief escape from rational principles, emphasizing the qualities of sensory experience. However, in the context of landscape and consumer society, tourism as a means of escaping daily life and reawakening perception does not seem to address the problem effectively.

2   Tourism as an Aesthetic Representation

In the context of tourism behavior, the tourist destination typically holds significant importance. Through continuous shaping in official discourse, media discourse, and elite discourse, tourist destinations have become a kind of "spiritual utopia" that attracts tourists. Taking Miao Village as an example, in official discourse, "In 1982, Xijiang Miao Village was designated as a cultural tourism site along the eastern line of Guizhou by the People's Government of Guizhou Province. In 1992, it was listed as a provincial-level cultural relic protection unit. In 2004, it was listed as one of the five key ethnic villages for the first phase of town and village protection and construction projects in the province. In 2005, the Xijiang Miao Village's stilted houses were included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list. In November 2005, the 'China Ethnic Museum Xijiang Miao Village Pavilion' was established." The above information is from the official website of Xijiang Miao Village. A search engine query for "Xijiang Miao Village" yields thousands of results such as "Xijiang Miao Village in-depth travel guide," "Beautiful Miao Village in-depth tour," "the world's largest Miao ethnic village," and so on. Academic platforms like CNKI provide analyses of Miao Village from various perspectives such as intangible cultural heritage, rural revitalization, and local identity construction.

When we use the term "representation," it is typically seen as a source of social knowledge production. Foucault, in his usage of "representation," focuses on how knowledge is produced through discourse, emphasizing power relations rather than meaning. He uses the term "discourse" to refer to a set of statements that provide a language or method for discussing or representing a specific topic of historical moment, Discourse involves the production of knowledge through language. Since all social practices involve meaning, and meaning shapes and influences our actions—our conduct, therefore, all practices have a discursive aspect.[3] Foucault argues that discourse not only constructs the topics we discuss but also defines and generates the knowledge objects we understand. "Discourse" determines how topics can be meaningfully discussed and influences how thoughts are practiced and used to

regulate behavior. Because "discourse" adopts specific ways of discussion, it also defines acceptable and understandable ways of speaking or writing. Thus, "discourse" through this definition, excludes, limits, and constrains other possible forms of expression. Therefore, meaning and meaning practices are constructed within the discourse scope. Foucault does not deny the existence of other real, material things outside of discourse, but what he discusses is that "outside of discourse, things have no meaning."[4] Foucault's viewpoint is that our understanding of things is based on the meaning they possess. In his view, meaning is generated by discourse, not directly by the things themselves, which means that our understanding of the world and knowledge are constructed and understood through the medium of discourse.

Using Xijiang Miao Village as an example, it is through official discourse, media discourse, and elite discourse such as "the first batch of intangible cultural heritage list," "the world's largest Miao village," "the most beautiful night view of Miao village," and others that Miao Village tourism is defined and shaped. Tourists also engage in these discourses during their tourism practices, and in this practice, the position of tourists is delicate.

According to Xijiang Miao Village government website, in 2018, the village welcomed 8.15 million tourists, generating a tourism revenue exceeding 10 billion RMB. While we typically consider tourists as the main actors in tourism activities, in reality, tourists seem to move from one workplace to another during their travel experiences. Everything appears to operate in a conveyor belt-like manner: taking almost identical photos at the same scenic spots, eating the same local specialties at the same characteristic local restaurants, wearing the same ethnic costumes for photos, and posting similar travel narratives on social media platforms.

Tourism is expected to be an experience that breaks the continuity of daily life, allowing individuals to transcend the oppressive "iron cage" of routine existence. However, the reality often diverges from this ideal. Typically, we perceive the "subject" as a consciously aware individual, an autonomous and stable entity, serving as the core of selfhood and an independent source of behavior and meaning. This viewpoint posits that when we hear our own discourse, we perceive alignment between our discourse and our inner self, granting a unique status in understanding meaning. Foucault's discourse theory, however, asserts that it is discourse rather than the speaking subject that produces knowledge. The "subject" is constructed within discourse, unable to exist outside of it, as it must be governed by discourse rules and conventions, submitting to the disposal of power/knowledge.[5]

Additionally, discourse also creates a designated position turned subject, in this context, the tourist. This position makes specific knowledge and meanings easily understandable, such as "tourist routes," "best spots for night photography," "exotic ethnic minority culture," and so forth. Tourists place themselves in a position where discourse can be understood, "and thereby make ourselves 'subjected to' the meaning, power, and rules of discourse, thus, all discourses construct subject-positions." This means that tourists can only become subjects constructed by discourse, not true subjects of themselves. Under the continuous command of discourse, the subject-position of tourists is abolished.

3   Images in Tourism

Since the invention of photography, particularly in the contemporary era of digital imagery, its development has experienced rapid progress. The widespread availability and digitization of photographic technology enable individuals to conveniently record and share visual experiences like never before. In modern society, almost everyone can use portable devices such as smartphones to capture scenes and share them instantly through the internet. This culture of photography, along with the digital image culture it embodies, is a product of modern consumer society and has profound impacts on contemporary cultural norms. Photography, as a cultural phenomenon, not only alters individuals' modes of visual experience but also influences patterns of social communication.

Walter Benjamin was one of the earliest scholars to deeply contemplate images. He believed that in an era where all artworks can be mechanically reproduced, this not only changes the form of culture but also alters society. However, Benjamin also viewed the impact of mechanical reproduction technology and the resulting image culture on human society positively, leading to the democratization of art and transforming the relationship between art and the public. On the other hand, Theodor Adorno held a negative view of the development of the image era. In "Dialectic of Enlightenment," he wrote: "The products of the cultural industry are used everywhere, even in the context of entertainment and leisure, they are flexibly consumed. However, each product of the cultural industry is a specimen of the enormous economic machine, and from the very beginning, no one can escape these products while working, resting, as long as they are still breathing... Everyone in society is influenced by the cultural industry. Every movement of the cultural industry inevitably reshapes people into what this society needs." [6]From the perspective of current developments, it must be said that Adorno's predictions have been accurately fulfilled. Looking at the relationship between photography and tourism, today's tourists have shifted from observing with their own eyes to viewing through the lens. Not taking photos is akin to not having traveled, a rule followed by many tourists.

In the photography of tourists, one often observes a plethora of images that closely resemble official promotional pictures. Official institutions are also keen on guiding tourists to optimal photography spots, sometimes setting up dedicated viewing platforms to facilitate photography. Should a tourist's photographs differ significantly from the official imagery, they may even feel as though they haven't truly experienced the tourism destination. This phenomenon reflects a distinct aspect of contemporary image creation. As Oscar Wilde once remarked, "Life imitates art" [7]yet in today's context, it seems more apt to say that art imitates life.

French theorist Jean Baudrillard vividly elucidated this concept with a metaphor: "A map that precedes the territory - the precession of the simulacra - leads to the emergence of the territory itself." The production process of images is predetermined by the images themselves. From being a reflection of reality through symbols to being disconnected from reality, contemporary images have become an incessant production and imitation divorced from reality.

Baudrillard introduced the concept of "hyperreality" from the contemporary image culture, suggesting that reality has disappeared within simulacra.[8] Disneyland serves as a quintessential example of simulacra. Within Disneyland, one encounters fantastical realms, whether devils, pirates, or futuristic worlds, all fabricated realms of imagination. In this sense, Disneyland is not real, yet on another level, it epitomizes true reality, the so-called "hyperreality." Imagination surpasses reality, becoming a form of reality more real than reality itself.

Simulacra possess both their illusory nature and a sense of reality. Illusory refers to a collusion resulting from imagination and ideology, while reality denotes its status as an indelible idol in people's minds. This phenomenon is prominently exemplified in tourist photography, especially with the rapid growth of the internet, urging people to capture more photos, disseminate them online, and continuously manufacture a "hyperreal" for everyone.

Reality mimics the virtual rather than the virtual mimicking reality. The design of landscapes aims to fully satisfy the virtual, the visual, the image-centric, and the communicative, constituting a prominent characteristic of contemporary tourism imagery.

4   Contemporary Tourism Representation

In the 1980s, the aestheticization of everyday life became a topic of discussion in Western academia, with many scholars using it as a tool to resist the oppressive influence of instrumental rationality and to awaken individuals from the monotony of daily life. In his work "Consumer Culture and Postmodernism," Featherstone discusses the aestheticization of everyday life, proposing that the concept involves "the pursuit of blurring the boundaries between art and life... focusing on the aesthetic consumption of life, as well as how to integrate life into (and shape it as) a dualistic whole of aesthetic pleasure in art and knowledge counter-culture,"[9] which should be linked to mass consumption in general, the pursuit of new tastes and sensations, and the construction of distinctive lifestyles (which forms the core of consumer society)inundated with symbols and images that permeate contemporary daily life.

In this interpretation, the concept is heavily influenced by consumer culture and visual culture. In contemporary tourist landscapes, we can observe an extreme application of the idea of aestheticizing everyday life.

Tourism entails the displacement of individuals in space, with the landscapes of destinations serving as the objects of tourism. Landscapes can be categorized into natural landscapes and cultural landscapes. Natural landscapes encompass geographical features like mountains, rivers, seas, and grasslands that are naturally formed and challenging to alter through human intervention. Cultural landscapes, on the other hand, encompass elements such as architecture, clothing, handicrafts, and cuisine. Prior to industrialization, the limitations imposed by the geographical distance and rudimentary transportation methods meant that people could not easily travel to distant places for tourism. Consequently, traveling to far-off destinations offered vastly different experiences of natural and cultural landscapes, disrupting the monotony of

daily life and potentially achieving the aesthetic effect of estrangement and astonishment as described by Heidegger. However, in the post-industrial era, the boundaries between regions and cultures have become blurred or even diminished.

Zhou Xian pointed out in "Cultural Representation and Cultural Studies" that "folk culture is closely related to the specific temporal-spatial group life of traditional societies." [10]Folk culture, originating from pre-industrial societies, exhibits unique temporal and spatial attributes that are typically closed and localized. In contrast, mass culture formed in post-industrial societies breaks through these limitations, displaying more open and universal characteristics. The development of mass culture is driven by the large-scale production and market demands of industrial societies, showing a clear trend towards commercialization. This transformation has led mass culture to move away from the self-sufficiency and simple style of folk culture, instead focusing more on meeting universal needs and adapting to market operations. As a result, cultural elements that originally had regional characteristics, after undergoing transformation by mass culture, become widely popular and commercialized, distancing themselves from their local roots. This means that once a cultural product enters the realm of mass culture and its popular and fashionable operations, its original regional features and boundaries disappear. When a regional product becomes a commodity that everyone can purchase, its regional characteristics will fade away. In the rapid industrialization process of contemporary times, under the increasingly rapid development of mass culture, more and more local regional features are disappearing, leading to cultural homogenization and homogenization.

5   Conclusion

In the context of the aesthetic normalization of daily life, the dissolution of the subject within discourse, and the homogenization and standardization of individuals in contemporary culture, there may be a need for a greater pursuit of authenticity. This pursuit could involve a heightened perception of everyday experiences and a discerning observation of consumer society and landscape culture. Engaging in such processes might contribute to awakening a more rich and multifaceted inner world within individuals.

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