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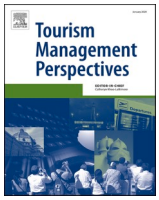

Dark tourism on Netflix: From place to person-dependent

Konstantina Zerva

Dept. of Business, Faculty of Tourism, University of Girona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Dark tourism has recently garnered significant interest as a niche market on an academic level, witnessed by the increasing number of papers on the subject. Despite various attempts having been made to categorize different types of dark site, most of these have been place-dependent, therefore overshadowing the role of the cultural intermediary at a dark site. This conceptual research attempts to offer a different categorization of dark attractions based on the Netflix documentary series *Dark Tourist*. The aim is to show that, given the role played by the cultural intermediary in dark storytelling, some dark attractions are basically person-dependent and award little importance to the place, which opens up new marketing options within the dark attraction spectrum. Six fundamental roles of dark intermediaries are identified, ranging from typical tour guides to the villains themselves; that is, from light to darker person-dependent attractions.

1. Introduction

Human curiosity about death and torture, although regarded (and criticized) as a post-modern phenomenon due to its emphasis on spectacle and reproduction (Foley & Lennon, 1996), has historically manifested itself in the Roman gladiatorial games, medieval public executions, Victorian guided morgue tours and nineteenth-century visits to 'correction houses', these latter establishments allowing visitors to witness flogging as a recreational activity (Stone, 2006). Today, this research shows the use of new technological tools such as augmented reality glasses and apps for witnessing dark sites (Handayani & Korstanje, 2018). Thus, over time, a growing demand for visits to places related to death first gave rise to the 'hot' interpretation of war and conflict (Uzell, 1992), then the management and interpretation of the 'heritage of atrocity' (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), or 'negative sightseeing' (MacCannell, 1998), eventually leading to the creation and widespread academic acceptance of the term 'dark tourism' (Foley & Lennon, 1996).

This subset of cultural tourism (Joly, 2011) or heritage tourism (Mionel, 2019) represents a 'phenomenon which encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites' (Foley & Lennon, 1996, p. 198), or 'the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre' (Stone, 2006, p. 146). This latter definition adds the 'seemingly macabre', which includes broader concepts related to death, such as crime (Dalton, 2014) and violence (Robb, 2009). In an effort to make this definition less abstract, scholars have proposed other similar terms, such as 'thanatourism' (Seaton, 1996), 'death tourism' (Miller & Gonzalez, 2013), 'conflict-heritage tourism' (Mansfeld & Korman, 2015), 'difficult heritage tourism' (Logan & Reeves, 2009), post-disaster tourism (Martini & Buda, 2018), or even paranormal tourism (Pharino, Pearce, & Pryce, 2018).

Despite its growing relevance in recent tourism studies, dark tourism has been significantly questioned for its deviant nature of 'paid masochism' (Straton, 2016), its moral standing in society (Seaton 2009; Stone & Sharpley, 2014), the techniques used to exhibit dark tourism sites (Wight, 2006), the refusal to call a destination dark from a management point of view (Seaton, 2009), or the very labeling of this segment as dark (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2010). In this latter case, dark tourism has been mostly considered an umbrella term (Light, 2017) for understanding and classifying places associated with death or dark emotions related to these places; that is, an analytical instrument or a conceptual research tool, rather than a clearly defined mode of tourism (Mionel, 2019; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 2017). For example, it has been used as a peace paradigm between North and South Korea (Lee, Lawerence, Bendle, & Kim, 2011), or as commodification of remembrance, bringing death back into the public sphere and socially neutralizing it (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Moving away from the restrictive and concise definition of thanatourism (Seaton, 1996), which is related to real death, dark tourism includes symbolic death, such as suffering and macabre feelings, which Tunbridge and Ashworth (2017) considered hard to measure, qualify and thus conceptually clarify, concluding that any tourist at any time and at any given site could feel such darkness. Nonetheless, although darkness can be found and felt in any context,

E-mail address: konstantina.zerva@udg.edu.

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tourism-related or not, from an individual perspective, in this paper dark tourism is studied as a subset of wider types of tourism related to the intentional production and reproduction of death, whether symbolic or real, from the point of view of supply in response to explicit demand.

When it comes to ethics, the commercialization of dark tourism has created conflicting opinions in the public sphere (Stone, 2009), whereas media influence, exemplified in the popular HBO series *Chernobyl*, demonstrates a clear positive effect on tourism demand. And with regard to demand, the pro-visit motivational spectrum has been widely investigated (Gillen, 2018; Iliev, 2020; Le & Pearce, 2011; Light, 2017; Stone, 2006) under the conceptualization that dark tourism is a behavioral phenomenon defined by tourists' motives (Sharpley, 2009). Stone (2018), on the other hand, redirected the emphasis on death in tourism from tourist motivation to mediated tourist experience. Studies have expanded to analyze post-visit affective results (Martini & Buda, 2018), even introducing positive feelings during a dark visit, through black humor in the Merry Cemetery in Romania (Mionel, 2020), and site categorization based on the variety of place identities that these sites generate during and after the visit (Du, Littlejohn, & Lennon, 2013).

As for supply, a significant number of investigations have been conducted with the aim of accurately describing, classifying and grouping tourism supply in order to understand current tourism flows and increase demand for dark sites (Mionel, 2019), but without focusing on the role of people within or as tourist attractions. Analyzing existing definitions of tourist attractions, there are those who take a broad view, considering them to be anything that serves to attract visitors and persuade them to travel away from home (Inskeep, 1991; Yale, 2004), and highlighting the specific or generic features of a destination (Lawton & Weaver, 2010) as occurrences, creations or happenings in natural or human-made environments that attract people (Botha 2005, in Edelheim, 2015), as a social process (Sjöholm, 2010), or, finally, as a connection between a tourist, a nucleus or central element, and a marker or informative element (Leiper, 1995; MacCannell, 1976). And then there are those who focus on the precise relationship with place, allowing for a more concrete and thus possible study of the concept (Edelheim, 2015), defining attractions directly as "places people go to visit" (Sears, 1998:3), named sites (Pearce, 1991) or single units, individual sites or clearly defined small-scale geographical areas that are delimited and managed so as to attract people (Swarbrooke, 2002). However, this focus on the spatial nature of the tourist attraction detached from the human element and the power it may exercise upon it may limit the dynamics of the definition and its further management. This paper addresses dark tourism from the supply side, but with a focus not so much on the site itself, as on the people behind the story, in order to conceptualize a new type of tourism in which the person is ultimately the attraction. Examples of this can be seen in cases such as the Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, where prisoners-cum-rodeo riders inflict bodily harm on one another, or exhibitions like 'Body Worlds', which show dissected human bodies and anatomic structures preserved through the process of plastination. Therefore, dark attractions can become person-dependent, in which case who or how someone is, what s/he knows and/or what s/he does, become the focus of the visited dark story.

2. The role of place in dark tourism

Numerous studies have highlighted the media's influence on the growing demand for dark tourism. Global communication technologies and entertainment media play an important role in creating the initial interest around death and places where it has occurred (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Media portrayals tend to regard dark tourism as deviant, troubling, or even a source of moral panic (Seaton & Lennon, 2004). Dark tourism is a regular subject for newspaper and magazine articles, television programmes, and popular travel writing (Joly, 2011; Lennon, 2010) -a February 2020 Google search produced 260 million hits- and even a documentary series called *Dark Tourist* by Netflix. The ability of the media to instantly report and repeat death-related events has had a direct impact on the rise in interest and demand for such events (Stone, 2006), especially through the communication of new, more sensationalized moral meanings related to them and a kind of cinematic reconnaissance for future visits (Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2007; Rojek & Urry, 1997). After all, the complex and multifaceted nature of death allows for many interpretations (Stone, 2013) under the justification of educational purposes, making its commodification and commercialization easier to apply but harder to distinguish from the meanings of the site and what transpired there (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

Due to its very nature, dark tourism has been considered rather place-dependent, inviting visitors to connect with the site of the dark events that transpired there (Brown, 2016). More particularly, place is perceived as relatively stable and absolute, providing the possibility of enjoying experiences related to the area, while space is more of a changing and moving concept (Borghini & Zaghi, 2006). Dark attractions are usually located at the place of original violence, where being in situ is the primary product, while simulations try to recreate the original habitat (Robb, 2009), or they can be physically distant from in situ sites, creating *in populo* locations (Cohen, 2011). Most types of dark tourism use words related to a specific place or the concept of place, such as sites of darkness (Jamal & Lelo, 2011), and places with dark associations (Miles, 2014), or are more specific, such as favela tourism (Robb, 2009), prison tourism (Strange & Kempa, 2003), battlefield tourism (Baldwin & Sharpley, 2009), slum tourism (Frenzel & Koens, 2012) and terror parks (Wright, 2018). Even before the term 'dark tourism' was coined, Rojek (1993) labelled it 'black spots tourism', referring to graves and places associated with the death of celebrities or large numbers of people. Furthermore, these dark sites have been compared to dystopias, providing glimpses of possible future fearful societies, in order to warn of imminent dangers through immersion in effective interpretation of a site (Podoshen, Venkatesh, Wallin, Andrzejewski, & Jin, 2015), or as tourist-embodied experiences in contaminated and barren places like Chernobyl (Farkic, 2020). On the other hand, dark sites, like Chernobyl again (Stone, 2013) have also been linked to Foucault's (1967) heterotopias, that is, places of deviation that disrupt the stability of normal everyday life (Toussaint & Decrop, 2013).

Over the years, a diverse range of dark sites, attractions, and exhibitions has sprung up. Every now and then, the discursive analysis of dark places allows for the creation of either exciting new experiences (Bowman & Pezzullo, 2009), or disturbing ones (Sather-Wagstaff, 2011). This diversity has prompted researchers to try and create categories and types of dark sites based on a 'fluid spectrum of intensity' from dark to darker, depending on different supply characteristics (Stone, 2006, p. 146). From a demand point of view, Seaton (1996, p. 240) mentioned the 'continuum of intensity', which reflects the extent of interest in death from general to dominant.

A first playful attempt in this respect was made by Dann (1998), who distinguished between perilous places, houses of horror, fields of fatality, tours of torment, and themed thanatos. A significant further categorization was provided by Miles (2002), with his separation of dark and darker, according to which, based on the temporal dimension (or what Lennon and Foley (2000) called chronological distance) and location of the site, some places are closer to death (darker) than others. Robb (2009) went even further by mentioning sites where violence is still in progress, current and live. On the other hand, Miles (2002) distinguished between sites that are associated with death, such as Memorial museums, and sites that *are* death, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. This distinction is what Robb (2009) later called secondary vs. primary sites of dark tourism, respectively.

Stone (2006) posited that a site's association with death is more related to political influence and ideology, creating a dark tourism spectrum with different shades of darkness between the two dark types described by Miles (2002). This ranges from a light version of entertainment, commercialization, and romanticised dark interest, where neither the location nor tourists' perception of the product

interpretation is authentic, to actual death sites, which are educational, commemorative, and fit for conservation, and where both the location and product interpretation are authentic. However, Stone (2020) would later go further into the 'spectacularization' of death and the experiential focus of a dark visit, reorienting the tourist gaze, not at the place itself, but at the role of the dead, as 'immortal guardians of the living'. Thus, the dead form part of a spectacle that, in order to reproduce the death theme, requires the existence of mediators, without entering into details regarding their nature.

3. Cultural intermediaries in dark tourism

In extant work from a supply perspective, places and objects have provided significant material for dark site categorization. However, much less has been written about the role of the interactor in dark sites or spaces: human liaisons between site and tourist and the type of draw they can represent for the site. Edensor (2001) referred to them as 'cultural intermediaries', a category of keyworker for tourism staging, who provides meaning to the tourist-local interaction and plays two roles, one when dealing with tourists, and another when conforming to local norms. Cultural intermediaries are those who perform the task of direct or indirect manipulation of taste (Bourdieu, 1984), offering legitimacy through their knowledge and expertise. They basically construct value by framing how others should engage with the projected good, while they have different degrees of relation and thus authority with that good (Smith & Matthiews, 2010). Their impact on *what* and *who* is legitimate, desirable and worthy, is sometimes superior to the very *what* and *who*.

A classic example of cultural intermediary in tourism research is that of the tour guide. The complex content of being a guide is defined variously as a broker of tourism experiences across a range of domains, like accessing local culture (Weiler & Yu, 2007) and cultural understanding (Scherle & Nonnenmann, 2008). Tourist guides focus on the creation of experiences (Wong, 2001) or historical empathy (Modlin, Alderman, & Gentry, 2011) through the (re)production and negotiation of global discourses based on cultural processes of meaning-making for the tourist (Salazar, 2006). Through this process, they turn local heritage, settings, and people into tourist attractions, via an amalgam of myths and culture-in-the-making (Selwyn, 1996). Furthermore, they provide information on what to visit, how to remain safe when danger is near, and how to play with danger when it is missing, while also promoting group interaction (Moscardo, 1998; Wang, Hsieh, & Huan, 2000).

The role is multifaceted: a guide can be a pathfinder or a mentor; a leader or a mediator (Cohen, 1985); an information-giver and fount of knowledge (Cohen, 1985; Moscardo, 1998), whether acquired from training or from 'know-how' due to personal engagement with the experience. Pathfinders or leaders are usually locals who are well informed about their region, mostly from personal experience but with no specialized training, and who provide access to non-public places, unknown lands, or simply territories not much influenced by the tourism system (Cohen, 1985). Their first-hand knowledge and experience lend authority to their leadership (Delakorda Kawashima, 2016), while for Travesi (2017) it is this very knowledge of the local host that can be seen as the tourist attraction itself. The roles of the guide have been divided into caring, instrumental, social, interactive, communicative and dealing with emergencies (Tsaur & Teng, 2017), in addition to de-routinizing the tour if needed through the use of dramaturgical skills (Holloway, 1981). Guides' cultural connection with the territory or the heterotopias that they introduce to the tourist play a significant role in the type of information shared (Zerva & Nijkamp, 2016), while their online profile plays a significant role in whom the tourist decides to book, or choose as an intermediary (Banerjee & Chua, 2020). Thus, considering that dark sites represent heterotopias or/and dystopias, the guide's role is not just instrumental, but rather closer to that of a cultural broker (Farkic, 2020; Modlin et al., 2011).

In dark tourism, the role of the tour guide need not differ from the established profile. That said, even though research has demonstrated the importance of tour guides as cultural intermediaries, questions remain over how far the cultural intermediary is only a tour guide, especially within the field of dark tourism. On a broader scale, Virgili, Delacour, Bornarel, and Liarte (2018) explained the importance of stakeholders in the process of commodifying dark tourism, where new figures like volunteer associations or local authorities, in their effort to meet new tourist demand, might legitimize the commodification of dark sites and create harmony in a society where there are conflicting ideas about dark tourism. Thus, the role of brokering is not limited to tour guides alone (Jennings & Weiler, 2004), since by definition brokering is about bridging cultural differences between host and visitor through familiarization with the foreign culture (Cohen, 1985), without specifying the need for a formal mediator in this task. Informal brokers, with no identifiable uniform or title, proper training or remuneration, are usually invisible (Chambers, 1997), and thus hard to track down. The level of influence they exert on the dark tourist experience has therefore been little studied. They comprise back-of-house accommodation staff, local residents, taxi drivers or local employees (Jennings & Weiler, 2004); however, the diverse influence they exert on the tourist experience based on their precise role in the narrated attraction is never fully described.

Within the context of dark tourism, it is only through the role of the tour guide that local residents or agents directly related to the dark story have been studied. The significant emotional dimension and pedagogical contribution of brokers, such as survivors of the Rwandan genocide (Robb, 2009), or of the Katrina hurricane in New Orleans (Mahn, Scarles, Edwards, & Tribe, 2020; Robbie, 2008), have been addressed in the form of victimized people's narratives of remembrance and testimonies. Thus, proximity to violence is not only offered by a place's relationship with tragedy and its distance in time, but also by the providers of the relevant information, as long as they have a direct link with the dark event. A cultural intermediary that communicates a story with which s/he has no link may form part of the tourist experience, but does not add darkness to the tourist attraction. Cohen (2011) explained how recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors provide a dynamic view of the dark tourist experience, and that interaction with the affected population could avoid the risk of distancing the tourist from the dark story when it is emphasized only in displays (Cole, 2000). Travesi (2017) showed how local cultural knowledge is transformed into a tourist attraction through the inversion of hosts' power relations with guests and their ability to direct the tourist gaze. For Robbie (2008), this knowledge was related to what it meant to be a local in post-Katrina New Orleans through the unique discourses provided by authentic identities, that is, the victims, but mostly as a means of justifying residents' rights to exploit a disaster for profit. However, intermediaries have not been researched as part of the attraction, but as a powerful means of communicating personal loss, reflecting many subjective experiences and a diversity of voices that have found their expression through tourism spaces (Mahn et al., 2020). From an attraction management approach, this means that the main attraction within dark tourism is the dark story, and the remaining assets that can best represent it stand for the fundamental symbols of that attraction, whether sites, objects, activities, or even people.

In the aforementioned cases, such as the Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, or 'Body Worlds', the actor forms a substantial part of the attraction. That is, the *who* becomes more important for the tourist than the *what* and the *where*. The role of the victim as a formal, or even informal, broker is not the only one directly attributed to a dark story and thus not the only subjectivity that could be of interest to tourists. The lack of attention in the existing literature on dark tourism regarding the significance of intermediaries in interpreting dark events highlights the current focus on destination management and place, rather than mediators. In order to further understand the significance of the cultural intermediary in the overall experience of a dark visit, this paper

proposes a different categorization of dark attractions based on the relationship between the cultural intermediary and the dark event.

4. Netflixing dark intermediaries

The place-dependent focus on dark tourism has led to the importance of the role of the intermediary being largely ignored. Intermediaries create the space where the tourist enjoys his/her experience, whether for educational, interpretational, or entertainment purposes. They are individuals with many identities, who significantly alter the tourism experience.

In order to identify the various roles that dark intermediaries play in tourism experiences as an observable yet non-addressed focal phenomenon in the existing literature, a conceptual research was conducted (Jaakkola, 2020). Conceptual research systematically attempts to create, clarify or reinterpret concepts, investigating their evolution over time as well as in other contexts (Wallerstein, 2009). Even though, generally speaking, it can be carried out without depending upon empiricism to support its knowledge claim, a distinct form of conceptual framework which may involve some empirical elements can be deemed (Xin, Tribe, & Chambers, 2013). Differing from other interpretivist strategies that depend on qualitative empirical data, this type of research can produce conceptual (not theoretical) knowledge through the use of observations made by the researcher prior to the research project, for example. In line with this, Kerr, Stone, and Price (2020) developed a conceptual framework regarding young tourists' experiences within dark tourism, with the use of unstructured interviews and post-visit comments.

Following the aforementioned strategy, and referring to a variety of dark sites and roles the human agent can have as a dark intermediary, this paper turns its attention to the documentary series *Dark Tourist*, distributed by Netflix in 2018. Comprising one season of eight episodes (40 min each), the series was presented by the New Zealander journalist and actor David Farrier, who, interested in the phenomenon of dark tourism, decided to share the experience as a tourist at a total of 28 sites. These episodes are divided in geographical terms (Latin America, Japan, the United States, the Stans, Europe, Africa, and the United States again). Two to four dark sites are addressed in each episode. For the purposes of this research, three of the 28 sites were excluded (the Huis Ten Bosch theme park's Henn-na Hotel [staffed by robots], the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games, and the Baikonur Cosmodrome of the Soviet space program in Kazakhstan) because they did not qualify as dark attractions by any of the existing definitions. It should be noted that the choice of these dark sites based on the subjective criteria of the producer, which aimed to attract audiences as well as raise awareness, represents a limitation for full conceptualization of the cultural intermediary's role within dark tourism. However, the relativist nature of outcomes that conceptual research provides (Xin et al., 2013), allows for the spotlight to be turned on areas worthy of academic examination (Kerr et al., 2020), within limitations.

Thus, a total of 25 dark sites have been analyzed, focusing particularly on the projected place (the *where*), the cultural interactor (the *who*) and the dark narrated story (the *what*). The subject of this analysis was the key stimulus at each site (that is, where, who or what), the variety of roles played by individuals representing the supply side, and what were they actually offer to the final product. Therefore, a conceptual typology research was conducted, which aims to create a categorization of different variants of concepts and combine them in a coherent and explanatory set of types, offering a theoretical approach that needs to be analyzed through future empirical research (Cornelissen, 2017; Xin et al., 2013). As a result, six types of cultural interactors -that is, people related to the dark attraction, whether as intermediaries of the dark events or as part of the attraction- were identified. The first three types refer to guides towards darkness, as connectors between the tourist and the past dark story, the villains, and the visitor's own dark side; the other three are intermediaries that became the attraction, including preppers against darkness, victims of darkness, and finally the villains themselves. This order is based on the transition of the dark intermediary from being a simple connector of parts he/she is not a part of to becoming the attraction itself (Fig. 1).

4.1. Connector to a dark story

The importance of the role played by cultural intermediaries in interpreting and understanding the content of an attraction or site is not new to tourism studies. The classic role of a tour guide who has studied the history of the event and/or wishes to provide entertainment (Cohen, 1985; Holloway, 1981; Selwyn, 1996) is also evident in dark tourism. In this category, dark intermediaries are personally as distant from the dark event as tourists, that is, there is no personal experience or involvement, and their intention is to pass on information they have learned in various ways so as to connect the tourist with a dark story that can be shocking and hard to imagine (Salazar, 2006; Zerva & Nijkamp, 2016).

According to the Netflix series in question, this profile is fulfilled by tour guides, who are there to provide information, sometimes accompanied by entertainment or realistic simulations of the events. Pure information free from gimmicks is offered by tour guides like the ones in Nicosia in Cyprus, the ghost town of Kurchatov, the suicide forest in Japan, and the Manson murder tours. The first three guides basically explain the dangers of entering forbidden territories as locals (getting shot if entering Famagusta, getting radiation if swimming in the atomic lake, and getting possessed by evil spirits if entering the forest), such information being shocking enough for the visitor. In the Manson case, the information is rather controversial, as one guide describes how Manson drugged and forced his 'Family' to commit the murders, while the other is a fan of his personality and explains how Manson was a misunderstood figure. The difference between the conventional and unconventional story regarding the same person makes the second guide darker than the first.

Trying to instil greater emotion, some guides provide information with entertainment, offering more of a show than an event that sells. Dressing up as Pablo Escobar and quoting lines from the *Narcos* television series, calling up the spirit of a cannibal serial killer, or explaining the John F. Kennedy assassination with an actress dressed as Jackie Kennedy and accompanied by party music are examples of connectors whose aim is not to focus on the dark side of these events. Farrier considers the level of information on these tours to be limited, while the entire experience is too relaxed, creating more distance from the events than connection with them. Additionally, visiting vampires in New Orleans is offered not only as a show, because many people get dressed as vampires, but also as embodiment, given that there are people like Maven, who converts tourists' teeth into fangs for a more realistic vampire appearance.

In contrast, information is provided with a more realistic simulation on two tours where the objective is to transfer in-depth knowledge of the dark events of the past. In these cases, the role played by actors in a simulation is fundamental for a more convincing representation of the villains. This is seen, for example, when actors pretending to be narcos and thieves 'rob' tourists pretending to attempt an illegal border crossing, as well as police patrols that supposedly arrest them before they reach the border. In this category, the adoption of realism through role-playing is crucial to the success of information-sharing with tourists. Nonetheless, as Farrier notes in the series, the acting part by people unrelated to the facts does not shorten the distance to the dark side, making it more like a B-grade movie than a tourist experience.

A combination between realism and simulation is found in the Littledean Jail Museum and Noah's Ark. In the former, the museum owner, collector, and guide shows visitors a series of original or simply shocking objects related to dark crimes of the past (e.g. a lampshade made out of human skin), sometimes in a very theatrical and controversial representation, in order to depict his version of reality. In the replica of Noah's Ark, Dr. Durdom, who believes that the world will soon come to a biblical end, attempts to connect science with religion, explaining how

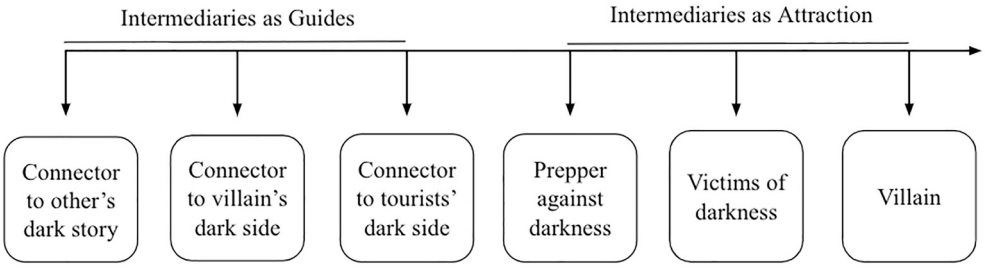

Fig. 1. Roles of dark intermediaries: from guides to attraction.

the story of Noah's Ark was actually real. In both cases, the object, whether original or precise simulation, is the focus of the tourist gaze, while the connector basically provides information on their own point of view.

Being a connector to a dark story involves fulfilling the role of cultural intermediary (Smith & Matthiews, 2010), where the tourist gaze focuses on the *where* and the *what*. When the place provides an overload of information, as with the Littledean Jail Museum, the story itself is rather limited, while when the place is visually detached from dark details, the story comes through to add value, as in the Kennedy tours.

4.2. Connector to the villains

The interest in this category of connectors arises when they turn out to have met or still have contact with the villains, the person(s) that at some point and for some reason caused harm to others. The connector then passes from being a broker to a leader (Cohen, 1985), due to their probably being the only link between the tourist and the villain. This would make them the 'liaison' (Liebowitz, 2007, p. 29); that is, the connection between two different worlds: that of the tourist and that of the villains. The visitor is intrigued by this source, due to the difficulty involved in reaching the liaison (Chambers, 1997), and the offer of information regarding private moments of a person connected to darkness, which includes details that may humanize or at least give another version of the villain. This information, which may or may not be related to the dark story, but is strongly connected to the villain, forms part of the attraction (Travesi, 2017). In this category, the series presents connectors who either gained the trust of these dark agents after the crimes had been committed, such as the fiancée of Charles Bronson (Britain's most notorious prisoner), the lawyer of Jeffrey Dahmer (serial killer), or the heir of Charles Manson (American criminal and cult leader), were related to them, such as Pablo Escobar's sister-in-law, or even worked with them, such as Escobar's most trusted hitman. Some of them work as informal brokers (Jennings & Weiler, 2004), Farrier's status as a journalist giving him access to Dahmer's lawyer or Bronson's fiancée, while others commercialize that past relationhip as official guides and offer familiarization with a different culture (Cohen, 1985).

This profile of connector does not necessarily provide information regarding a specific dark event, but rather what the villains were or are like in their own private space, or how they generally operated. If the relationship was personal, the villain is humanized or even considered misunderstood. If it was professional, details of how the villain organized crimes are revealed. This last category represents the dark side of the villains and the logic behind their crime as they perceived it. The *where* is non-existent, and the *what* gains value because it refers to information known only by those who were close to the villain. The *who* is a cultural intermediary who has an impact on others based on his/her role in the villain's life (Smith & Matthiews, 2010). This intermediary is of particular importance when the villain has deceased (as in the case of Pablo Escobar, Jeffry Dahmer or Charles Manson), converting him/her into the next best option as far as representing the villain's point of view is concerned.

4.3. Connector to the tourist's dark side

Connecting to the dark side of past events is one thing, but connecting to one's own dark side is another. Here, there is no tour guide, but rather mentors (Cohen, 1985) or change agents (Weiler & Black, 2015) or spiritual teachers (Kujawa, 2017), who work as spiritual advisers and broker tourists' self-development in spiritual tourism (Parsons, Houge Mackenzie, & Filep, 2019). Even though the existing literature has not developed the role of the guide in spiritual dark tourism experiences, spiritual tourism in general is beginning to expand. Responding to an inner call for a cathartic transformative experience, tourists are looking for non-institutionalized spiritual movements, co-constructing rituals with the mentors to structure and interpret the world, while becoming the hero/heroine themselves (Kujawa, 2017).

According to the series analyzed here, people are turning to rituals like voodoo, exorcism, or any other form of liberation from evil spirits, to look for others who can do this job for them. These rituals are either done to others and represent a real dark attraction for the visitor, or they are done to the visitors themselves, moving from attraction to personal experience. In the former case, a priest performs an exorcism on a woman, or a voodoo priestess invites Farrier as an insider to attend a violent voodoo ceremony by the Tofinú tribe, where people start hurting themselves until the evil spirit is freed from their bodies. In the latter case, Farrier is the person who asks to be liberated from any evil spirits, be it through 'good voodoo' as the priestess calls it, or through a simple ritual by Noriko, a woman who communicates with spirits in the suicide forest of Japan. Whether or not the visitor believes in spirits, these connectors are not selling a simulation, but rather a real opportunity to be liberated from the dark side.

Although connecting to someone's dark side sounds rather disturbing, as long as tourists have faith in their own intrinsic goodness, there is no real darkness. The guiding here is not related to the information provided or necessarily to the visited location (since the 'good voodoo' takes place in the priestess' backyard, while Notiko's ritual is done inside the suicide forest), but to the self-development within a spiritual context based on the credibility of the interactor (Parsons et al., 2019). The core attraction is the experience of the tourist; that is, the *what* based on how convincing the *who* is.

4.4. Preppers against darkness

In addition to those who want to connect with the dark side, there are agents who are preparing to fight against it when the time comes. In this case, the dark story has not yet been written; there is no dark site, only certainty that there will be one, meaning that the attraction is the intermediary's knowledge (Travesi, 2017). Virginia's 'doomsday' preppers in the United States and Orania's Afrikaners are people who believe that the end of the world is coming at some point, or that their white culture will be wiped out, respectively. Defending these beliefs, the war preppers basically show different ways of dealing with that future tragic moment: whether fighting back with guns or having a well-organized escape plan, they are prepared for violence. For visitors, it is not about them believing that the end of the world is coming, but about

meeting those who actually hold that belief and try to explain why they think this is true and what they are going to do about it. Preppers are not peaceful fighters of the darkness; they are prepared and willing to use violence for their defence if needed.

In the following sections, it is the interactor who is the basic element of the dark attraction, whereas how dark he/she is depends on the context that justifies that darkness. Therefore, the *who* and *what* are interrelated, while the darkness is yet to come.

4.5. Victims of darkness

This category of dark agent does not refer to a connector to a dark story but rather to his/her own dark story. There are various profiles that do this, based on elements like the time of the dark event, ways of interpreting it, and whether the victims are able to communicate their story or simply form part of the attraction. In terms of time, there are those intermediaries who describe a past dark experience in the role of a witness or a survivor. This role in dark tourism has been mentioned in previous investigations (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Mahn et al., 2020; Robb, 2009; Robbie, 2008) and can be encountered either in ex-local inhabitants of the afflicted territory they swiftly were forced to abandon, like the former inhabitants of Famagusta in Cyprus or Hashima Island in Japan, or in tour guides, like Yo in Fukushima, Japan, who explains the events of the nuclear explosion that occurred there. In this latter case, the tour guide plays the role of pathfinder or leader.

On the other hand, when the dark story is still ongoing and there is no particular event -only a way of living- to commemorate, there is no role of a witness or survivor, but rather current victims of an existing dark situation. In this case, connectors seem to deal with the dark side in three different ways: there are those who accept it, those who fight back, and those who are in denial. Acceptance is found in the case of the Alexandra township tour in Africa, where the tour guide explains that although there are social difficulties, danger is not always present, inviting tourists to move around the city and even socialize at night, as well as in his own house, to show what it means to live there. Meeting a local carrying a gun, as well as participating in a car-spinning contest, where the driver was a local female law student, is proof of two different personal stories where danger is interpreted in a different way. Acceptance and fighting back are seen as two opposite sides of the same coin on two different occasions, once in the Tofinú tribe in Africa, and another time in Kurchatov, Kazakhstan. In the former case, the tribe worships a violent spirit (Kokou) and, when possessed by it, they expel it through voodoo. In the latter, in the nuclear-contaminated area of Kurchatov, there are locals who accept contamination and keep fishing in contaminated lakes, while inviting tourists even to swim there, while there are other locals who wish to inform and fight back against this commercialized version by showing the consequences of nuclear explosions through the deformed bodies of young children in an orphanage in the area. Finally, personal tours in the new capital of Myanmar, Naypyidaw, and at Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, both luxurious yet rather deserted destinations, provide examples of denying a dark situation. Farrier is escorted by personal tour guides who deny any negativity about the current situation and give strict instructions as to what he should be asking people, as well as limitations on how to move around, where to go, and what pictures to take.

Victims are divided into communicators of their own stories and those who serve only as part of the attraction without communicating any personal reflections. The latter are represented by the cases of the Tofinú tribe and the children in the Kazakh orphanage. Even more extreme examples are found in the two funeral rituals in Toraja, Indonesia. In the first, the dead man, referred to as the 'sick man resting', is in the family's house for two years, and after a week's ritual, the casket is closed and he is finally buried; the second, referred to as the Ma'nene ritual, is a ceremony for cleaning corpses (performed once a year). Whether in the format of informal conversations with locals or a commercialized product with a tour guide, the tourist values the personal touch of the information, where true personal stories are the primary focus of the shared information (Travesi, 2017). Even with the tour guides, Farrier asks questions about personal information to visualize an example of what it means to live under these conditions. This case is similar to that of the dark exhibition Body Worlds, where the victim is present but silent, and another mediator in the form of a formal or informal tour guide explains his/her story.

For a site to be dark, there must be victims, and finding these victims and listening to the story that victimizes them makes the interrelation between the *who* and *what* fundamental to the tourist experience (Robb, 2009), while the *where* completes it. In this case, the main attraction can be considered to be shared between the place and the person, where one would not be as attractive without the other. These sites would be dark without the interactors, but it is the latter who in the end create more impact due to their connection with and role in the story. The role of place changes the narration of the dark story, since it is different to listen to it in the exact place it happened than at home. Visual features of installations and rituals provide new memories and descriptions, which are added to by a personalized narration from the victim.

4.6. Villains

The final type of dark agent that forms part of a dark site is the villain: the individual responsible for the dark side of the attraction. The appeal here is to see the person behind the darkness or how the darkness feels when you are within it. The attractive element of knowledge in this category (Travesi, 2017) is its source, attributed to cultural insiders of the dark heterotopia, and more specifically its producers (Zerva & Nijkamp, 2016). There are various levels of villain. To begin with, the lightest version is the one where people pretend to cause death, like in Maidstone, in the United Kingdom, which holds the War and Peace Revival festival every year, where people from around the world either watch or actively take sides in a recreation of a historic battle and pretend to shoot the enemy. Another example with a more realistic tone is the simulation of crossing the border into Mexico, where the tour organizer is an ex-people smuggler who shouts out orders to the tourists to help them safely escape the country, the ultimate aim being to show the numerous possibilities of getting arrested, robbed, and/or killed. Finally, the limits between simulation and reality are rather blurred in the visit to McKamey's horror house in Tennessee, where the entire dark experience is based on breaking adrenaline junkies through a reproduction that involves the abducting, torture, and attempted killing of the visitors. The attraction lies in seeing the villain in action and being the victim of that action.

Moving from simulation to reality, a dark agent can be the reason why darkness exists, the originator of the dark story. In the Netflix series, this is represented either by people who claim to need human blood for survival, like the real-life vampires of New Orleans, or by others who have caused death and been punished for it, such as Escobar's most trusted hitman, Popeye, and a former corrupt policeman giving information about what they did, how and why; or British criminal Charles Bronson, who was still in prison at the time the series was shot and engaged in an informal conversation on the phone about his girlfriend. In the former case, the 'ex-villain' commercializes that part of his life by answering questions regarding the crimes he committed, this forming part of the product. In the latter case, interaction was rather unplanned; the lack of a commodified product made the experience emotionally tense, but no information on past actions was either asked for or mentioned. The dark side of the experience lies in the simple fact of communicating directly with this type of intermediary.

Finally, there are dark attractions where the focus of the experience is actually on causing death, where the dark agent may be the tourist himself/herself. In the series, such an example is found in Cambodia, at the Phnom Penh shooting range, where guests pay to shoot real guns at live animals, like cows. Here, then, there is no simulation or role-playing, but rather role-performing to experience the thrill of killing

(though not humans).

For a story to be dark, there is usually a villain, apart from in natural disasters. Contact with that villain is the closest one can come to a dark story. The affective importance of the experience is strongly connected to the *who*, while the *what* becomes legitimate strictly because of its source. Yet, the *where* either completes the experience, since the storyteller is the author of the dark story explaining what happened in situ and allowing for a visual imaginative representation in the eyes of the tourist (Escobar's hitman in his personal prison, La Catedral), or is absent, since the difficulty of reaching the person and his/her testimony overrides the significance of visiting the dark site (the phone call with Charles Bronson). Therefore, this latter category of dark intermediary provides for a completely person-dependent tourist attraction.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This conceptual research has attempted to offer an alternative conceptual framework within which to situate the supply of dark tourism as a product. Even though Lennon and Foley (2000) did mention a greater sense of empathy being generated in tourists when they came into contact with a survivor during a visit to a dark site, the intermediary's role in the appeal of a dark site has been less studied. Considering that the profile of the guide matters in the experience of the heterotopia (Zerva & Nijkamp, 2016) and that this profile plays a significant role in choosing one product over another (Banerjee & Chua, 2020), this paper investigates the role played by the cultural intermediary at the dark site and its importance in the overall experience. Thus, dark tourism as an umbrella term (Light, 2017) or conceptual tool (Mionel, 2019) may not only focus on the dualism between sites and emotions (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 2017), but also on people's relationship to the interpretation of these sites and creation of these emotions, at least on a supply level. Yet, moral complexity still remains a relative variable of analysis in this case.

Taking the Netflix documentary series *Dark Tourism* as a database, various forms of this niche market have been presented, including nuclear tourism, poverty tourism, narco tourism, ruin tourism, battlefield tourism, and disaster area tourism. Maintaining the evolving conceptual typology from light to darker (Miles, 2002; Stone, 2006), the focus here moves away from the place and towards the person at the site. This is not to say that dark tourism is not place-dependent, as Brown (2016), but rather that it is also people-dependent, as emphasized by Cohen (2011). While both elements are essential for the creation of a tourist dark attraction, empirical investigation based on visitors' perceptions will be required to determine which is of greater importance to the tourist experience.

As Fig. 1 shows, of the six roles, the first three refer to a connector that maintains some distance from the dark story, but can provide second-hand information or entertainment. These roles are more commercialized, offering a dark product to the market in a structured way, and they are therefore easier to find for tourists. On the other hand, the last three roles refer to the intermediator as the attraction itself, in the form of the opposer, victim (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Robb, 2009), or origin of the darkness. Therefore, this paper acknowledges the value of broad definitions related to tourism attractions, like the ones provided by Inskeep (1991) and Yale (2004), according to which the motivation for travel may not be an immobile element at a destination but a mobile one (preppers are not only based in the USA, for example). This role separation does not mean that one individual cannot represent a combination of these types. For example, Escobar's hitman is a connector to Escobar's narco-legacy and also a villain himself. This is a less commercialized category, where intermediaries are not necessarily on the market, and part of the tourist's mission in order to have a dark experience is to find them and interact with them. Moreover, the tourist is offered ways in which to become part of the dark story, whether through the experience of cleansing dark elements or an immersive experience towards the dark side.

The harder it is to get close to these intermediary roles, the darker the encounter, and thus the experience. In parallel terms, this is similar to the chronological distance that Lennon and Foley (2000) suggested are found at dark sites, where recent events are darker than older ones. This paper claims that the closer the intermediator is to the darkness, the more attractive and thus the darker the visit is, because the source of information can be equally or even more important as the information itself. It follows from this that the sequence from dark to darker also depends on who the cultural intermediary is. Although this premise naturally applies to all types of cultural product, it is one thing to have an artist explain his/her artwork, and quite another to have an ex-murderer justifying his/her crimes from a consumer's perspective. Finally, according to this research, another added element in determining the spectrum of intensity among dark intermediaries is the possibility of their replacement due to their human and thus mortal nature. In the case of the connector to the dark story, the less dark the role of the intermediary, the more easily s/he can be substituted by others, as long as they follow the basic and well-studied guidelines of a tour guide or a pathfinder (Cohen, 1985; Moscardo, 1998; Salazar, 2006). On the other hand, villains, that is, the originators of the dark story, cannot be replaced as intermediaries, and the remote possibility of interaction is eliminated for the dark tourist once they are gone. Thus, perishability makes this intermediary dark role short-lived, creating an urgency in pursuing social interaction when the opportunity appears. Hence, the value of a villain as an intermediary is not only based on the difficulty of reaching out to one, but also upon the certainty of his/her transient nature. Connectors to the villains or survivors are also affected by this variable, but are less dark due to their role in the story. Once villains pass on, the next best contact to their version of the story are the connectors to the villains, like Escobar's hitman or Dahmer's lawyer, or audio-video recordings of their testimonies, as suggested by Cohen, 2011.

This paper also highlights the important difference between storytelling and testimonies. Depending on the role individuals had in a dark story, different personal perspectives are shared, because a victim can describe how the tragedy happened and what the consequences were, whereas those who cause darkness answer questions of how and why. The more versions for which there is a potential audience, the darker the tourism products that will appear on the market. For some, the touristification of their dark past has constituted a legal way out of it, while for others the communication of who they really are represents the end of myth circulation and a direct vision of their reality. The transformation of the intermediator into an attraction provides more roles for the tour guide to occupy, while the place loses protagonism, or simply provides more commercialization possibilities, without threatening the darkness of the tourist experience.

This transformation of the guide into the attraction itself shows that destination management in dark tourism could evolve, not only in terms of different places being interpreted as dark (Seaton, 1996; Miles, 2002, Stone 2006), but in terms of various dark spaces (Borghini & Zaghi, 2006) existing within one place. Considering that dark sites as heterotopias have the power to juxtapose several incompatible spaces in a single real place (Stone, 2013), it would seem that it is not just distance in time that can generate these spaces, but also different versions of the same dark story according to the intermediary's role in it. This would generate various dark sub-products or a complete version of one dark product. The more distant the intermediary is from the dark story, the more information can be given from all sides, while the closer the tourist gets to those involved in the story, the more information-biased it may be due to their particular role in it. And of course, for the same reason, the darker it will be. Intermediaries who are survivors of accidents or crimes, or ex-convicts who want to explain the conditions under which they committed their crimes, offer a personalized experience and reasoning that generates greater affective empathy (Modlin et al., 2011).

In the morally questioned territory that dark tourism covers (Stone, 2009), the inclusion of people directly related to the story in the dark

experience would raise further doubts regarding the motivation of the visit. Future investigation should focus on the type of experience tourists enjoy based on the social interaction they develop with different types of intermediaries, as well as how this is influenced by the difficulty of reaching them. It is worth noting that a significant proportion of the visits undertaken in the Netflix series would not be available to the typical tourist; although, on the other hand, there is nothing typical about engaging in dark tourism.

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Dr. Konstantina Zerva is a professor of Marketing and Market Investigation at the University of Girona. She received her PhD from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and her PhD thesis was related to the social exchanges regarding music consumption. Her current research interests include the analysis of niche tourism market segments like dark and volunteer tourism, immigration, social marketing and theories of social exchange.