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Marketing of coastal barrier spits as liminal spaces of creativity

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Abstract

Nowadays tourism draws on many aspects of post-structuralist philosophy, which helps to understand the contemporary fluidity of the social construction. Mass tourist flows are gradually being fragmented into the “tribes” of dedicated individuals pursuing their particular vocations. Barrier spits as art(ist) colonies and tourist destinations are transforming from mono (mass) to multiple tourist destinations. Nida, Lithuania, Ahrenshoop (Fischland-Darß-Zingst), Germany, Hiddensee, Germany, Skagen (the Skaw Spit), Denmark, Provincetown (Cape Cod), the USA are interpreted as artist-tourist landscapes. Liminality is used as the keyword for their critical interpretation. Two key targets for the critical discourse of the Curonian Spit as a tourism destination have been taken: The Grand Story of the Curonian Spit and Nida Art Colony as an artist-tourist bubble. The discourse of its transformation to a more fluid creative liminal space where art and wellness interact is given.

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1. Introduction

According to Hannam & Knox (2010), critical tourism draws on many aspects of post-structuralist philosophy because: a) it helps to understand contemporary tourism as a set of complex, negotiated, contingent, blurred and incomplete practices and ideas, and b) it helps to understand the contemporary fluidity of the social construction of realities that include the arenas of tourism. In this paper, we focus on the coastal barrier spits as creative and critical tourism destinations. We analyze the Curonian Spit as a case study since it is one of Europe’s largest coastal barrier spits and a World Heritage site. We also try to compare the development of creative tourism on the Curonian Spit

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with parallel tourism development on other coastal barrier spits in Europe and the United States. We argue that liminality is the key word for critical interpretation of coastal barrier spits as artist-tourist landscapes.

We focus on two key targets of the critical discourse on the Curonian Spit as a tourism destination:

1. The Grand Story of the Curonian Spit as iconic shifting sand dune wilderness with fishermen's cabins scattered on the lagoon shore and charismatic elks in the pinewoods.
2. Contemporary Nida Art Colony as an artist-tourist bubble interacting with the landscape and population of the Curonian Spit merely as a backdrop for the process of creation and self-expression.

2. Marketing icons and critical tourism on the Curonian Spit

2.1. Decline of the Grand Story of the Curonian Spit

Considering the Grand Story of the Curonian Spit as iconic shifting sand dune wilderness, it is remarkable how persistent this iconic image was over the time course of the 20th century and onwards. Nowadays, on the Curonian Spit, the access to the drifting dunes is restricted, except of two sites. The population of elk has declined from 250 in 1900 to 42 in 2003. Most of the authentic fishermen's cabins, boats and tourist hotels were destroyed during the World War II or afterwards. The Curonian Spit experienced a dramatic shift of local population, their culture and habits. Yet, the themes of the tourist photographs in the 2000s remain the same, as on the old postcards (Table 1). Tourists continue looking for and gazing at the remnants of the long-lost Atlantis, i.e., the Curonian Spit from the early 1900s. This weird paradox gaze is typical for heritage tourists that take efforts to resurrect the long-gone iconic heritage features by the means of photography. In this way, they are attempting 'to construct idealised images which beautify the object being photographed' (Urry, J. 2002, p. 128).

The loss of traditional iconic features of the Curonian Spit not only means the decline of the Grand Story, but also raises the need for new anchors and new, less grand, more fluid stories highlighting the appeal of the Spit. The contemporary Nida Artist Colony, its history and symbolic continuity fits well as an anchor and a 'fluid' story for the rebranding of the Curonian Spit. This process is supported by the current revival of the artist colonies' movement worldwide. Nida Art Colony is supposed to merge two 'fluid' stories: of the Curonian Spit as a landscape of creativity and Nida as part of the global artist colonies' movement. Yet, before interpreting and appreciating Nida Art Colony as a new signifier of the Curonian Spit, we need to answer two critical questions:

1. Is the contemporary Nida Art Colony an adequate signifier of the Curonian Spit as a tourist destination and a post-modern re-enactment of the identity myth of the Spit?
2. Are there any specific meanings and connotations beyond taking the name of the long-gone Nida Artist Colony of the late 1800s – early 1900s?

Table 1. Dominant themes of the images of the Curonian Spit on the postcards of the early 1900s and tourist photos of the early 2000s

Themes	Postcards of the early 1900s	Tourist photos of the early 2000s
Shifting dunes + people + lagoon	15%	15%
Fishermen's cabins + lagoon	14%	11%
Forest + animals	11%	11%
Sea + beach	6%	6%
Lagoon + boats	6%	6%
Local people	2%	2%

The next two questions could help answering the above ones:

1. The artist-tourist ‘bubble’: What is the relationship of the contemporary Nida Art Colony residents with the local environment, inhabitants and tourists?
2. Is Nida indeed a special place of creativity?

2.2. *Nida Art Colony as a ‘bubble’ and a liminal place of creativity*

Firstly, according to Judd (1999, p. 39): ‘The tourist bubble is like a theme park, in that it provides entertainment and excitement, with reassuringly clean and attractive surroundings’. In the case of the Curonian Spit, besides the visual appeal, the bubble has also to ensure an evocative backdrop catering for artist’s imagination and inspiration. Meanwhile, the interaction between the colony residents and local people and tourists is weak. No surprise that artistic actions of Nida Art Colony draw only little attention locally. As it is aptly noted by MacCannell (2001, p. 27): ‘Most attractions were made to serve other ends, or no ends at all in the case of natural attractions. Nevertheless, within the framework of a narcissistic mirroring type of tourism [attractions are supposed] to do a better job of captivating tourist desire...’ In the case of Nida Art Colony, the landscape captivating artist-tourist desire is sterile and static, void of any entanglements into the nature conservation regulations, processes of littering, erosion and plant succession, and local conflicts between conservation and development.

Secondly, the seminal concept of liminality helps interpreting critically and understanding whether Nida is indeed a special place of creativity. Thomassen (2012) analyzes the concept of liminality in different space-related aspects, arguing that the understanding of the liminal as related to art and leisure prevails in the society. Liminal spaces are the places we go to in search of a break from the normal. Liminal landscapes are found at the fringes, and seashores, particularly, beaches are archetypal liminal landscapes. In the case of Nida and other art colonies ‘on the edge’, creativity could be interpreted as a liminal experience in a liminal place by the artists as a liminal group.

In this respect, the observation of Bennett (2007, p. 42) is particularly pertinent: ‘Liminal spaces are intangible, elusive, and obscure. They lie in a limbo-like space often beyond normal social and cultural constraints. In these spaces can be found brief moments of freedom and an escape from the daily grind of social responsibilities. As a place of desire they offer a ‘dreamtime’ that resonates with spiritual rebirth, transformation, and recuperation...’ The liminality of the coast was emphasized by Shields (1991), who interpreted British seaside resorts as marginal, carnivalesque and unruly places, where only wild imagination rules.

According to Preston-Whyte (2004), a Western interpretation of the beach considers liminality to be linked with heightened sensibilities associated with the temporary suspension of normal states. Yet, the ‘heightened sensibilities’ related to the beach is not ‘a Western interpretation’ only, but a universal cultural feature manifesting in various forms, e.g., in voodoo rites of the Afro-American population in Brazil (Fig.1). Again referring to Bennett (2007, p. 42), ‘the cleansing act of immersion that takes place during religious ceremonies on beaches, is probably ages old. These actions seem to induce in believers a feeling of religious passion that imbues the beach with special meaning. It becomes a liminal space in which normal statuses are temporarily suspended...’

3. **Marketing of barrier spits as liminal spaces of creativity**

3.1. *Evolution of barrier spits as artist colonies and tourist destinations*

Summarizing what is said above, no surprise that artists’ colonies have most often been established on liminal peripheries away from cities such as riversides or coastal areas (Cusack, T. 2012). Besides Nida, at least four other artist’ colonies flourished on coastal barrier spits since the late 1800s to the early 1900s: Ahrenshoop (Fischland-Darß-Zingst, Germany); Hiddensee (Germany); Skagen (the Skaw Spit, Denmark); Provincetown (Cape Cod, the USA).

The images of these liminal coastal areas evolved similarly throughout the last two centuries: from romantic wilderness to post-romantic creative landscapes, to post-mass multi-purpose seaside resorts. Appreciation of dune wilderness as a space for creativity is a relatively new phenomenon. Romanticists of the 19th century considered the coastal spits and shifting dunes as alien, hostile and desolate places. This interpretation is apparent from the essay *Cape Cod* by H.D. Thoreau, the short stories *Romance in dunes* by H. Drachmann (with the Skaw Spit as the scene)

and *Primogeniture* by E.T.A. Hoffmann (the Curonian Spit as the scene), as well as the painting *The Monk at the Sea* by K.D. Friedrich (the Hiddensee Spit as the scenery).

The advent of post-romantic landscape painting turned a more welcome artists' eye upon the dunes and their environment. In the 1870s, the artists started to appreciate the seaside people, landscape, and light. First seaside art colonies were established in the Netherlands, England, Germany and France (1870-1880). The location of these artist colonies was truly liminal: on remote peninsulas, on the edge, between the villages, water and dune wilderness. However, considering these early artist colonies critically, we shouldn't overemphasize the opposition between 'romantic' and 'post-romantic'. Rather, the appreciation of the seaside people and landscape by the artists evolved as a parallel, romantic and post-romantic, or fuzzy, discourse.

The cultural appreciation of seaside dunes coincided with a dramatic development of mass seaside tourism. For instance, in Ostende (Belgium) the number of seaside tourists increased from 500 in 1800 to 80'000 in 1900. In 1911, in England and Wales 20% people had regular summer holidays on the coast (Urry, J. 2002). The further dramatic growth of mass seaside tourism was indeed the most prominent feature of tourism development throughout the 20th century. It also influenced tourism on the coastal barrier spits. The blend of tourism with the artist colonies in these remote coastal areas has spawned numerous art galleries, museums and shops catering for the tourists' needs.



Fig. 1. Voodoo ceremony on the beach in Fortaleza (Brazil) (photo by Ramūnas Povilanskas)

3.2. Seaside artist colonies and self-expression of coastal 'neo-tribes'

The contemporary post-modern revival of the seaside artist colonies should be interpreted in the context of post-mass (post-Fordist, post-industrial, post-modern) coastal tourism and a post-mass coastal tourist with multiple leisure demands. We currently witness a remarkable evolution of coastal tourists from 'Golden hordes' (Turner, L. & Ash, J. 1975) to 'neo-tribes' (Bauman, Z. 1992, Maffesoli, M. 1996), and their leisure demands expanding from mass 3S (sun, sand, sea) to post-mass 7S (sun, sand, sea, sport, safari, spa and self-expression).

As noted by Blackshaw & Crawford (2009, p. 149): 'Neo-tribes are social groups distinguished by shared leisure life-styles and leisure tastes... They are what Michel Maffesoli (1996) describes as the 'little masses' of the uncertain and fragmenting consumer society that is postmodernity.' According to Bell & Lyall (2002), the members

of the ‘neo-tribes’ choose the group to belong to through recognition of style and of consumer goals. For them, a sense of belonging and development of self-identity become mutual processes. This gives emotional meaning to the term ‘tribes of tourists’. These tribes are fluid; they ebb and flow across international space. In this way, a trans-national, neo-tribal community constructed through processes of late modern and post-modern consumption and tourism emerges on the seaside (Bennett, A. 2004).

The post-modern seaside tourists as members of these neo-tribes are flexible and mobile. They travel through multiple places and do not expect to get their whole experience within a single place (Bærenholdt, J.O., Haldrup, M., Larsen, J. & Urry, J. 2004). As aptly noted by Ioannides and Debbage (1998, p. 108): ‘rather than a chronological break between Fordist and neo-Fordist activities, the tourism industry, with its ‘permeable boundaries’ and diversity of ‘linkage arrangements’, has developed a ‘polyglot of multiple incarnations’. Such ‘neo-tribal’ tourist is a ‘creature of multiple identities’ (Cater, C. & Cater, E. 2007, p. 136): ‘...the ‘marine ecotourist’ [...] may be that for only a day or even afternoon, the next they may be an adventure tourist, then a ‘sun, sand and sea’ tourist for several days, and maybe then culturally and heritage-based before going home.’

Furthermore, as a result of the emergence of this post-mass tourist with multiple identities and interests, there is a growing relevance of ‘special interest’, ‘place specific’ and ‘experience specific’ tourism (Ashworth, G.J. 2005). These diverse, and vaguely defined, ‘new’ tourisms consume a wider range of products, including cultural and heritage experiences and are more spatially dispersed. As a result, the post-mass coastal resorts tend to vary in form and cater for an increasingly fragmented market divided into a variety of niches, each with its own clientele (Agarwal, Sh. & Shaw, G. 2007). Hence, the post-mass seaside resorts and their adjacent coastal areas evolve from homogeneous mass tourism destinations into heterogeneous networks of tourism attractions performed by creative tourist neo-tribes (Bærenholdt, J.O., Haldrup, M., Larsen, J. & Urry, J. 2004, Conti, G. & Perelli, C. 2006, Povilanskas, R. & Armaitienė, A. 2011).

Table 2. Seaside resorts on the barrier spits as multiple tourism destinations

Seaside resort	Annual visitor number (2011)	Conservation status of adjacent areas	Number of galleries/museums
Provincetown	4'500'000	National seashore	74
Skagen	2'000'000	Nature reserve / National park	19
Neringa	400'000	World heritage/National park	5
Ahrenschoop	50'000	National park	3
Hiddensee	30'000	National park	2

3.3. Barrier spits as multiple tourism destinations

Barrier spits are well suited for self-expression of the diverse coastal ‘neo-tribes’ since they are isolated liminal areas with an inspiring dune landscape (‘shining sands’, cf. Cross, T. 2008). They present an assemblage of diverse niches catering for multiple interests, and place-specific experiences of ‘new tourists’. Furthermore, they are tourist destinations with a long-established image of places and spaces for creativity, as well as networked spaces performed by multiple nexuses of mass and post-mass tourism corresponding to the fluidity of ‘neo-tribes’. Comparing the Curonian Spit with other coastal barrier spits in Europe and the United States as liminal artist-tourist landscapes, we can see certain similarities (Table 2). All these barrier spits are protected nature areas; a relative number of art galleries and museums per 1000 visitors is roughly comparable. These all areas aspire to maintain their high profile as creative tourism destinations catering for the self-expression quest of the post-mass tourist ‘neo-tribes’ with multiple identities.

4. Discussion

The vicissitudes of the coastal barrier spits as artist-tourist landscapes show, that their obsolete grand stories should be replaced by more fluid ones – of creative liminal spaces where art and wellness interact. This means, that for bursting the bubble of Nida Art Colony it should be integrated not only with human actors performing the Curonian Spit as a creative tourist destination, but also with non-human ones as well. Such a complex, heterogeneous, actor-network should comprise the inspirational landscape, the sea, as well as art-conscious local people, museums and galleries, and tourists interested in wellness and creativity (Povilanskas, R. & Armaitienė, A. 2011).

Nida Art Colony could and should play the key role facilitating the interaction between art and wellness on the Curonian Spit. For this aim, innovative approaches of engaging post-mass seaside visitors into creative leisure activities should be designed and applied. Creative thalassotherapy approach seems particularly suitable in this sense. It focuses on the enhancement of positive experiences, creative participation and self-expression of tourists: yoga- and sound-based seaside mind-body-soul meditation and exercises; guided meditation workshops and training; make-it-yourself curative thalasso cosmetics workshops; seaside art therapy; participation in seaside art events, actions and projects. The co-operation network comprising all five coastal barrier spits with artist colonies could be instrumental in finding new approaches for blending art and wellness creatively.

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