

Tourism as a sign: a critique of cultural tourism in the age of consumption

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Abstract. In a consumer society characterized by symbolic exchange, the consumptive nature of tourism is obscured by cultural ideology. "Poetry and distant horizons" has become the emblem of tourism, while the "museum" has emerged as the basic structure of tourism consumption. Through a critical deconstruction of tourism semiotics, it becomes possible to reveal the inevitable consumptive essence concealed by tourism ideology: as a sign, tourism rationalizes the entire process of consumption through cultural simulacra. Within the systemic framework of consumer society, tourism cannot extricate itself from the structures of consumption. Accordingly, the aim of critique is not to negate tourism outright, but to confront it with a more active and autonomous stance.

Keywords: consumer society, tourism, sign, symbolic exchange

1. Introduction

The age of consumption possesses a distinctive structural configuration. It has gradually moved beyond the original paradigm of commodity value, such that exchange is no longer governed by the logic of use-value, but instead shifts toward value exchange and symbolic exchange. As Baudrillard observes, "the logic of exchange value is already everywhere... every object, even artistic and scientific products, even those that are novel or transgressive, is produced as a sign and as exchange value" [1]. Commodities no longer attract people because of their use-value; rather, it is their symbolic meanings, once signified, that are avidly pursued. The value embodied in symbolic signs becomes the true object of desire. Consumption has thus become the dominant structure of the present era. It must perpetually realize growth, otherwise the entire structure would collapse and the symbolic meanings it sustains would dissipate. This structure is not merely economic in nature; it constitutes a comprehensive system of social operation that reshapes everything within society in its own image. "Once people engage in consumption, they enter a comprehensive system of coded value production and exchange. The logic of consumption—that is, the logic of signs and differences—replaces the logic of production and becomes a relatively autonomous mechanism of social integration" [2].

Tourism is precisely one of the phenomena transformed and reconfigured by this structure. During peak travel seasons, tourism is invariably articulated through refined rhetoric and imbued with dreamlike meanings. Whether through depictions of scenic beauty and the embellishment of regional characteristics, interpretations of the cultural connotations and values of particular destinations, or discourses on the personal growth and benefits tourism purportedly brings to individuals, all such narratives convey a single message to the public: tourism is valuable to the individual, especially in a spiritual sense. In reality, however, these discourses merely articulate, in different ways, the ideological construction of tourism—namely, the construction of "poetry and distant horizons." Beneath this rationalized ideological framework lies the system's own imperative: through the dialectical movement of consumption and production, it continuously realizes economic growth in order to secure its own reproduction.

2. Tourism as a symbolic sign

The symbolic signs of tourism can be divided into two principal types: tourism as "poetry" and tourism as the "distant horizon." "Poetry" constitutes the cultural symbol of tourism, while the "distant horizon" represents its exploratory significance—that is, the expansion of one's horizons and the enrichment of life experience. These symbols presuppose the meaning of tourism, transforming it into a human need, even into something that ought to be, or must be, included in personal growth. The symbol of

"poetry" is displayed within the "museum," whereas the "distant horizon" is experienced through various forms of "novel" consumption activities.

2.1. The museum

Museums, art galleries, science museums, and similar exhibition spaces are the sites where cultural symbolic operations are most visibly enacted. As signifiers, they most directly point to the cultural meaning of tourism and become the core of the entire tourism ideology, thereby rationalizing the act of tourism itself. In reality, visitors merely stand before glass cases, lingering amid the refined appearances of cultural simulacra. The objects within the display cases are not important in themselves; as long as an item is placed inside a display case, it can function as a cultural sign, symbolizing the tourist's perception of culture. The longer one lingers before a display case, the deeper this perception appears, and the more fully the meaning of the sign is manifested. This constitutes the core structure of tourism. Even when exhibition halls are not actually visited, this structure—and the ideology generated by it—continues to exist.

An exhibition hall constitutes an integrated atmosphere saturated with diverse signs, while the display stand itself performs a signifying function. Only when placed on a display stand can an object become a sign and thus acquire meaning beyond itself. The exhibition hall provides a particularized cognitive pathway for the display stand, constraining and focusing the meanings attributed to the objects displayed. It ensures that artworks are not perceived as technological products, and that antiquities are not regarded as commodities. While the exhibition hall furnishes an overarching atmosphere for all signs, it is itself placed upon a vast "display stand" and thereby becomes a sign in its own right. For this reason, architectural design becomes paramount. A distinctive exterior allows the building to signify specific meanings: from its appearance alone, one can infer the nature of the exhibition space and anticipate the themes of the objects displayed within. Modern art museums differ markedly in appearance from traditional ones. The avant-garde design of the Guggenheim Museum signals its focus on modern and experimental art, whereas the Baroque palace of the Louvre signifies its emphasis on premodern artworks. Museums across different regions also incorporate local characteristics, enabling culturally informed visitors to recognize at a glance the location of a given museum. The Shaanxi History Museum adopts architectural forms inspired by the Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties, while the Yunnan Provincial Museum features a design imbued with stronger natural elements.

Because cultural symbols are the primary objects of attention within museums, what is actually displayed becomes secondary. The display stand, the display case, and the frame constitute the true core. Once an object is placed on a display stand, it becomes an exhibited sign, whose symbolic value is conferred by the exhibition hall. The display stand thus becomes the source of cultural meaning. When a banana is placed on the platform of a modern art museum, it becomes a revered artwork; when an unremarkable stone is placed on a natural history museum's stand, it becomes a sign revealing the mysteries of nature; when an ordinary drinking cup is placed on a museum stand, it becomes a precious artifact documenting historical development. Visitors do not concern themselves with whether the exhibit is the Mona Lisa or Campbell's Soup Cans, nor with what Marcel Duchamp intended to express; their attention is directed instead to the display stand itself. If the same object were moved between different exhibition halls, it would become a different sign. A radio in a museum symbolizes historical change; in a science museum, it represents a scientific principle; in an art museum, it becomes an artwork with a particular aesthetic orientation. Within this holistic atmosphere, everything presented on the display stand is represented to us in a specific manner. Through these specific presentations, the meaning of the exhibits is disclosed, allowing us to perceive them as cultural relics, artworks, or technological products. As Bourdieu observes, "all legitimate works in fact tend to impose the norms of their own perception and tacitly to define a particular configuration and mode of perception as the only legitimate one" [3].

A sign acquires value of existence only when it is displayed to others. Just as purchasing luxury goods signifies economic affluence, signs must be "worn on the body" and seen by others in order to mark identity and assert distinction. Consequently, photography becomes ubiquitous in these exhibition spaces. Recording the display stand becomes the most important activity: only by capturing it with a camera can one demonstrate the possession of the sign to others and to one's future self. To prove that they have been there, and to obtain cultural signs that can be displayed, visitors document the display stands from multiple angles. If simple photography suffices to demonstrate the acquisition of culture, then carefully composed shots promise aesthetic and cultural gains, deepening the cultural sign and enabling greater distinction from others.

To summarize the "museum" structure: cultural symbols render the entire process of consumption—such as purchasing tickets and buying souvenirs—both rational and obscured; the "display stand" constitutes the core of the visit because it marks the sign, and its existence enables the reduction of things into signs. Here, the indeterminacy of symbolic meaning is replaced by the specific signified of the sign, making the exchange of signs possible. The cultural meaning signified by the sign thus becomes the ideological construction of tourism. As Baudrillard notes, "the symbolic becomes ideological only after its reduction through semiology" [1]. Signs must be recorded in order to be manifested. This structure does not refer solely to museums and art galleries as exhibition spaces, but permeates tourism as a whole.

Ancient towns that are largely similar to one another are given different names in different cities and endowed with distinct "characteristics." Mount Tai is designated a historical and cultural attraction, while Daocheng Yading is framed as a natural ecological destination. Yunnan promotes its awe-inspiring natural landscapes, whereas Shaanxi foregrounds its profound

historical heritage. Each region becomes a "museum" with a distinct theme and character, determining how it presents itself to the world, how it constructs its display stands, and how it delimits the meanings of its exhibits. All tourist attractions are transformed into exhibits on the display stands of a vast "tourism museum," and all promotional methods become display stands in their own right. Only those places promoted in specific ways become recognized as attractions and acquire corresponding cultural meanings. Through the consumption of one display stand after another, people confirm the cultural significance of tourism as an activity.

2.2. Novel experiences

Novel experience constitutes a crucial driving force of tourism. It functions simultaneously as an important marker of distinction, a key sign that rationalizes consumption, and a major source of another central meaning of tourism—namely, the expansion of horizons. Novelty is presented through the production of freshness, yet its core purpose remains consumption, because only through consumption can these signs be exchanged and these sensations of novelty be realized. For this reason, novelty is continually manufactured in different forms. However, under the logic of consumption, such novelty can exist only insofar as it fulfills the consumptive tasks assigned to it by producers.

Immersive novelty is an especially effective means of producing novel experiences, precisely because it constructs experiences that are markedly different from consumers' everyday lives. Through various forms of simulation, tourists are invited to experience ways of life they have never encountered before. Such experiences are regarded as particularly "culturally meaningful" within tourist attractions, because attractions themselves are the most salient symbols of tourism. Whether riding a boat through a water town, taking a carriage ride in an ancient town, or participating in the production of handicrafts unique to a particular destination, these activities are all designed to embody the distinctive culture constructed by that locale. By virtue of their location within a specific scenic area, they become signs endowed with particular cultural connotations.

Aestheticized novelty operates by incorporating aesthetic elements that allow consumers, in the process of consumption, to acquire additional aesthetic signs. Various artistic styles are integrated into products and environments, readily capturing the human gaze. Their intrinsic aesthetic qualities also facilitate their reduction into signs, much as museums and art galleries often use architectural form as a primary marker. As a result, such aestheticized experiences attract large numbers of visitors who gather to "check in," especially those eager to appropriate these signs in order to fashion themselves as cultural or artistic types. They enact Andy Warhol's acerbic dictum that "good business is the best art," enthusiastically transforming art into commodities. This, in turn, confirms that "the artwork—that is, the object they have purchased—has nothing to do with intellectual or aesthetic value. The only thing that matters is that it is a socially prestigious branded product and that it yields economic benefit: a truly good deal" [4]. In short, to generate a sense of novelty—particularly in areas with heavy tourist flows or highly developed tourism industries—aesthetic transformation becomes indispensable. Only when a scene is guaranteed to be visually striking, regardless of context, will tourists treat it as a significant sign to display on social media, thereby enabling destinations to attract even more visitors.

Technological novelty takes the form of combining new technologies with traditional tourism. Initiatives such as "Internet + tourism" and "artificial intelligence + tourism" exemplify this approach. Technology-enhanced tourism represents a form of symbolic exchange infused with technological coloration; it merely presents the symbolic signs of traditional tourism in a different guise. Artificial intelligence, immersive technologies, and similar innovations are fundamentally methods of attracting tourists. When cultural and aesthetic strategies can no longer generate additional visitors, technology is introduced to compensate. By offering experiences associated with new technologies, destinations create new "internet sensations," which are in fact reconstructions of earlier ones. Traditional attractions once drew visitors on their own, but to keep "appeal" aligned with the times, new technologies are added. AI-guided tours, interactive systems, light-and-shadow shows, and VR immersion all lend culture an additional technological layer. Visitors now not only observe cultural relics but also marvel at technological advancement. Although new technologies appear to stimulate interest in history and science, the ultimate purpose of tourism remains unchanged: it is not culture itself, but consumption. Through consumption, tourists acquire novel experiences, and through the signs marked by such experiences, the meaning of tourism is accentuated.

All forms of novelty ultimately serve as means of attracting consumers, rather than as ends aimed at cultural transmission or promotion. Their core task is to draw more consumers to engage in tourism. If they fail to do so, they are abandoned, left idle, restricted, or even prohibited from use and viewing. Scenic areas deserted due to low visitor numbers, machines left unrepaired because few people use them, and artistic installations destroyed because no one purchases them—all share the same trajectory, collectively attesting to the primacy of consumption.

3. The consumptive structure of tourism

Tourism always unfolds within a consumer society, and it is precisely for this reason that it bears the fundamental characteristics of such a society—namely, symbolic exchange through signs. Even when efforts are made to endow tourism with cultural value,

this remains nothing more than a crude imitation of culture under the rationalization of consumption. For both consumers and "sellers," the purpose of tourism is not culture as such. What consumers seek is the symbolic value of tourism, while what sellers seek is the monetary equivalent of symbolic wealth obtained through symbolic exchange. Culture need only possess symbolic value in order to be consumed by tourists. Just as exchange value takes use value as its rationalizing façade, tourism practices and their purported cultural connotations function primarily as justifications for consumption. It is for this reason that "superficial sightseeing" and "check-in" tourism have become the dominant forms of travel.

3.1. Traveling for the sake of signs

Under the influence of tourism ideology, tourism itself becomes a sign—a sign that points to "poetry and distant horizons". The act of traveling thus acquires a cultural meaning. Going on a trip comes to be understood as an "exploratory" activity, whether in terms of broadening one's knowledge, viewing beautiful scenery, experiencing a different way of life, or something else entirely. These symbols are displayed through acts of sharing. Their purpose is not merely to indicate that one has visited a certain place or to share novel sights and experiences, but rather to articulate the tourism sign itself, thereby demonstrating one's "possession" of "poetry and distant horizons". This logic gives rise to the phenomenon of "check-in" tourism, as well as the dialectic between internet-famous and niche destinations.

As a sign, tourism singularly symbolizes cultural and exploratory value. However, the meaning of a sign can function as a marker of "status" only when it is recognized by others. As a symbolic sign, tourism therefore must be displayed. With the development of the internet, such display has become remarkably easy. Today, anyone can produce photo logs or video logs and, through aestheticized forms of sharing, fully demonstrate their symbolic appropriation of what tourism represents. For individuals, then, the value of tourism lies not in "poetry and distant horizons" themselves, but in demonstrating that one is engaging in an activity labeled as "poetry and distant horizons." Consequently, the act of "checking in"—photographing a scene to show that one has been there—becomes the core activity of tourism.

"Check-in" tourism often involves a pair of opposing movements: the opposition between internet-famous and niche destinations. Yet this opposition is only superficial. At its core, the niche remains oriented toward becoming internet-famous, while the internet-famous often emerges from what was once niche. Their relationship resembles the operational logic of fashion, which advances in a spiral through the logic of difference. As Baudrillard notes, "fashion continually produces 'beauty' on the basis of the negation of beauty, and on the basis of the logical equivalence of beauty and ugliness. It is capable of treating the most bizarre, dysfunctional, or ridiculous characteristics as markers of distinction" [1]. The core of this dialectic lies in the differentiating power of signs, and the entire movement unfolds according to the logic of distinction.

In pursuit of "individuality," people develop a reaction against what is internet-famous. "Through consumption, through style, one distinguishes oneself, asserts one's uniqueness" [5]. As a result, they choose niche destinations or alternative modes of travel. These niche forms, in turn, attract more individuals seeking "individuality," eventually becoming new internet-famous destinations. Within this dialectical process, new forms of internet fame and new niches are continually produced: every niche can become internet-famous, and former internet-famous destinations may, through new configurations, become niche once again. Yet this dialectical movement remains oriented toward a single objective: the ultimate purpose of tourism—the appropriation and display of exploratory and cultural value. The niche resists the dominance of the internet-famous by asserting difference, while the internet-famous, through its uniformity, simultaneously facilitates the emergence of the niche.

3.2. Comprehensive consumption

Tourism is a form of comprehensive consumption. It encompasses the widest array of consumption modes and categories, functioning as a vast "general store." Moreover, because of its "one-off" character, tourism tends to pursue the maximization of consumption within a limited time frame. These acts of consumption are rationalized by the symbolic association of tourism with "culture," that is, by tourism as a sign of "exploration" and "cultural enrichment."

From the beginning to the end of a trip, individuals experience, within a short period, one of the most complete cycles of consumption in life. From food, clothing, and daily necessities to music, board games, calligraphy, and painting; from material consumption to spiritual consumption—all are compressed into a brief span of time. From the moment travel plans are made, consumption is already being organized: transportation, accommodation, dining, attractions, and souvenirs together form a complete chain of consumption. During the actual journey, additional paid services are encountered, including guided tours, novel experiences, and cultural merchandise. All of these forms of consumption are rationalized by the symbolic "cultural" meaning of tourism. Within this symbolism, other consumptive signs are also embedded, such as staying in luxury hotels, renting high-end vehicles, selecting expensive services, or purchasing luxury goods in distinctive commercial districts, all of which serve to further display distinction and elevated status during travel.

Travel itself is thus a comprehensive act of consumption, merely another version of a "general store." Accordingly, other signs are also present, but these symbolic forms unfold upon the foundational sign of tourism as "exploration" and "culture."

Beyond simple monetary differentiation, tourism offers additional modes of distinction, particularly through cultural and aesthetic differentiation. Nevertheless, consumption remains the core. Distinctions based on culture and aesthetics must be realized through modes of travel—more precisely, through modes of consumption. The logic of distinction, in all its forms, ultimately unfolds within the structure of consumption.

4. What is the meaning of tourism

Confronted with increasingly commercialized attractions and standardized modes of mass tourism, people seek to rediscover the "original intention" and meaning of travel. They hope to return tourism to "poetry and distant horizons," so that personal travel is no longer a matter of following the crowd, but instead carries significance uniquely one's own. To this end, young people continually experiment with ways of breaking free from the tourism industry's prescribed "sightseeing-shopping" model. Yet none of these attempts can ultimately escape the fate of commodification.

4.1. Attempts to "rediscover" the meaning of tourism

"Whatever fate I may yet encounter, whatever experiences I may gain—there will inevitably be a kind of wandering and a kind of mountain climbing: for in the end, one can only ever experience oneself" [6]. Amid the prevalence of internet-famous tourism and the normalization of high travel costs, contemporary young people are exploring new ways of traveling. Some seek to accomplish the feat of a "mountain climb" with limited energy, while others pursue a spontaneous form of "wandering." In all cases, the aim is experience itself—to make the journey an end in its own right and to fully "experience oneself." As a result, some choose "special-forces-style" travel, aiming to visit as many destinations as possible in the shortest time and at the lowest cost; others engage in City Walks that deliberately exclude consumption elements; still others select little-visited destinations, or embark on "pilgrimage" journeys centered on specific cultural symbols.

"Special-forces-style" tourism is a variation on the slogan "youth is the right time." It represents a response by young people to intense consumption pressures and is enabled by the increasing convenience of transportation. Its defining characteristic is "high efficiency." Travelers calculate meticulously, using minimal time and minimal expenditure to "clear" as many attractions as possible, often imbuing the journey with the significance of a "mountain climb." Some manage to visit multiple cities in a single day; others complete intercity journeys using only shared bicycles. Because the intensity of such travel resembles a special forces operation, it has come to be labeled "special-forces tourism."

Compared with "special-forces" travel, City Walks embody a greater sense of ease. They aim to "wander" through a city in a relatively unstructured manner, rather than to view the homogeneous spectacles of crowded attractions. City Walks have become an ideal way for young people to experience the everyday life and atmosphere of a city—an attempt to genuinely experience culture, rather than the constructed cultural simulacra. In this sense, City Walks represent an effort to break free from the logic of the display stand. For some, the randomness and uncertainty inherent in City Walks most authentically express the true meaning of "tourism." The unsymbolized scenery encountered along the way, as well as the accidental and contingent events that occur nearby, become precious experiences in their own right.

The practice of City Walks is often associated with so-called "niche attractions." From the traveler's perspective, the discovery of such niche sites typically occurs amid unsymbolized landscapes encountered along the way. These scenes often resonate with a particular cultural sentiment within the traveler, prompting them to endow the site with meaning and to present it online through specific forms of construction. The defining features of such sites are their relative lack of visitors and their possession of a certain aesthetic quality, or their resemblance to scenes previously depicted in cultural works. Once presented to their "discoverers" in a particular way, these scenes are constructed as niche attractions. Everyday landscapes, long taken for granted, are placed upon a display stand and transformed into objects of appreciation. As Bourdieu notes, "these objects have already been aesthetically constructed—and are thus destined to be appreciated by those who have learned to recognize and appreciate what is designated as worthy of appreciation. This capacity refers to the ability to construct virtually anything, even the 'vulgar,' as aesthetic, and to choose, in the most ordinary circumstances of everyday life, a 'pure' aesthetic principle"[3]. Through this niche display stand, the site acquires a distinctive meaning: it showcases the observer's unique aesthetic capacity and cultural literacy, distinguishing them from the general public.

Moreover, once such "niche attractions" are discovered, their cultural atmosphere—or the fact that they are themselves prototypes or filming locations of that atmosphere—naturally attracts corresponding cultural communities to undertake a "pilgrimage." By "pilgrimage" is meant the longing of a specific cultural group for material carriers that embody a particular culture. Once a scene is constructed as a niche attraction, it is reduced to a single cultural symbol. It may be a place where a character from a literary or artistic work once appeared, a location that matches the ambience of a film, or a scene that embodies a certain aesthetic element or cultural motif. Because of their particular mode of presentation—one that is apprehensible only to groups that possess the relevant cultural symbols—such sites inspire deep longing and become, for those groups, their own "Jerusalem": places that most powerfully display their "devotion."

4.2. The commodification of these attempts

Such attempts are often extensively reported by mass media. Both official media and the rapidly expanding sphere of self-media devote considerable attention to promoting these "new forms of tourism (consumption)." They become new signs which, beyond the traditional symbolic repertoire of tourism, also signify youthfulness, vitality, and defiant individuality. They are framed as "the way of young people," a mode of distinction that sets the young apart from others, and as tourism symbols exclusive to youth. Yet these efforts to rediscover the meaning of tourism are inevitably transformed, under the public gaze, into new points of consumption. They remain embedded within the structural framework of consumer society. Within the dialectic of demand and consumption, nothing that is put on display can escape the fate of commodification. Through cultural signs, tourism draws people in with irresistible appeal, generates myths of economic growth, and demonstrates a fully realized logic of consumption. For this very reason, the transmission of culture is not the primary objective of cultural-tourism promotion; sustained economic growth is the overriding goal throughout.

4.2.1. The semiological reduction of tourism

Within the ideological construction of tourism, people unconsciously "deceive" themselves and enter into cultural simulacra. They construct what tourism ought to mean; display stands construct what cultural connotations exhibits ought to possess. Display stands imitate cultural relics, surpass them, and ultimately become the true bearers of cultural meaning. Further still, "culture" itself comes to be regarded as the true essence of tourism. Tourists no longer see themselves as consumers, but as travelers or wanderers. They continually reposition their self-understanding, turning their journeys into exalted "pilgrimages" and themselves into devout believers in cultural simulacra.

Through the distinctions generated by symbolic consumption, consumer society constructs for individuals the needs they are "supposed" to have. Possession of signs becomes a mark of nobility. As Baudrillard observes, "people never consume objects themselves (use value); rather, they always manipulate objects (in the broadest sense) as signs that distinguish them, either by affiliating them with a group regarded as ideal, or by differentiating them from a group of higher status" [5].

Once subjected to semiological reduction, tourism presents two contrasting postures: "poetry and distant horizons," and what is not "poetry and distant horizons." The former is regarded as the "authentic" state of tourism, an essential form centered on culture. People praise tourism for broadening horizons and enriching experience, while vehemently criticizing the "alienation" of tourism into a mere profit-seeking enterprise driven by economic interests alone. Practices such as soliciting customers and overcharging are condemned; the commercialization of cultural sites is fiercely criticized; and strong resistance is expressed against cultural destruction undertaken in the name of tourism development. Accordingly, people willingly travel to places with weaker commercial atmospheres in order to experience cultures perceived as untainted by commercialization, thereby seeking a return to the most "authentic" form of tourism. Culture thus becomes the essence of tourism, leading people to overlook its consumptive nature. As Marx noted, "the commodity form reflects the social character of men's own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the natural social properties of these things, and hence reflects the social relation of the producers to the total labor as a social relation existing outside them, between objects" [7].

However, the problem does not lie in whether tourism has deviated from its authenticity, nor in how one might recover an "original" meaning of tourism. Essentialist narratives about the nature of tourism cannot resolve the so-called problem of alienation. This is because experiences of cultural objects are constitutive rather than essential. Scenic sites do not inherently possess cultural qualities. Only when they are placed on a display stand—when they are institutionalized within the tourism system—do they acquire cultural meaning. On this display stand, they are constructed and interpreted in specific ways, through which corresponding meanings are disclosed. Through belief in tourism as "poetry and distant horizons," people unfold it as an experience of culture and exploration. In the continual emphasis on its authenticity, this meaning is accepted and collectively constructed. The more people travel in this way, the more tourism is reduced to a sign. The indeterminacy of tourism's symbolic meaning is transformed into a stable and singular referent; its symbolic richness is dissolved, leaving only a single signified after semiological reduction. "Poetry and distant horizons" thus becomes the ideology of tourism. It is for this reason that tourism metaphors are so frequently invoked and applied to the understanding of life itself.

As Baudrillard writes in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*: "The system of objects develops simultaneously with, and in inverse relation to, the generalization of exchange value. The more systematized the system becomes, the more intense the fascination produced by fetishism. If it continually invades new domains and gradually detaches itself from the strictly economic sphere of exchange, this is not because of a fascination with pleasure or a latent desire for enjoyment and leisure, but because these domains are swallowed up by the rapid advance of systematization—in other words, because they are all reduced, within the framework of the overall system of exchange, to exchangeable signs/values" [1].

5. Conclusion

Tourism consumption is packaged under the banner of culture, while culture itself is processed and rendered consumable, thereby becoming both the objective and the pretext of tourism consumption. Tourism is symbolized as a sign, and possession of this sign enables individuals to present themselves to others as having broad horizons, rich experience, and a fulfilled life. Travel is no longer undertaken primarily for relaxation, enjoyment, or the genuine expansion of one's worldview, but rather to acquire tourism symbols—to signal to others that one is enjoying life, broadening one's horizons, or even using travel as a means of overcoming personal setbacks. Cultural simulacra obscure the consumptive nature of the tourism process, and digital technologies further intensify the realism of these simulacra, turning tourism as a whole into a massive consumer carnival conducted in the name of culture. Consequently, tourism in the age of consumption is structured around three interrelated pairs: tourism and consumption, tourism and culture, and culture and consumption. Together, these relationships reveal the essence of tourism in the consumer era—namely, consumption operating beneath cultural simulacra. Therefore, regardless of how one seeks to redefine the meaning of tourism, it can never escape the framework of consumption in a consumer society. We inhabit an era of consumption, and in a world grounded in consumption, social relations and social practices are "naturally" imbued with consumerist characteristics.

In such a society, consumption is unavoidable. Accordingly, the purpose of critique is not to wholly negate contemporary tourism practices, but to provide an analytical perspective for understanding tourism in the age of consumption. This perspective helps explain why tourism has taken its present form and enables a more appropriate and reflective engagement with the various "disorders" that characterize tourism today. As Marx noted, "Only when the practical relations of everyday life appear before people as transparently rational relations between human beings and between humans and nature will the religious reflection of the real world disappear" [7]. Similarly, when the concrete forms and relations of tourism in the consumer age are fully brought to light, those forms of worship that are of no help in overcoming tourism's so-called 'disorders'—including the fetishization of 'poetry and distant horizons' and essentialist modes of commodity fetishism—can be dispelled. This, in turn, allows us to identify more effective ways to mitigate tourism's negative effects and to confront it with greater agency and freedom, rather than remaining subject to its domination. Ultimately, as has been argued, "only by fundamentally dismantling the logic of capital and its dominance over the entire social sphere can consumerism be transcended and the genuine development of human life be realized" [8].

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