

On Images in Tourism Studies & of Iceland as a Tourism Destination

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Images of tourist destinations can be found in tourist brochures, guide-books, advertisements, in newspapers, on film and TV. Tourism images communicate messages about places, their tourist attractions, and have since long been used in the marketing and promotion of tourism. Undoubtedly, images in whatever form are an essential part of tourist imagination and in tourism studies various forms of „image analysis“ have been carried out since the early 1970s (Pike, 2002). One of the postulates of these studies has been that a destination image:

has a crucial role in an individual's travel purchase related decision making and the individual traveler's satisfaction/dissatisfaction with a travel purchase largely depends on a comparison of his expectation about a destination, or a previously held destination image, and his perceived performance of the destination (Chon, 1990, p.3).

In the contemporary era the Internet has undoubtedly become a particularly important provider and producer of images of tourist destinations. Furthermore, it seems to be that images in and of tourism now live in an increasingly technologically mediated environment. In addition they are often nowadays being produced also by tourists themselves, with the help of technological devices like personal computers, mobile-phones, digital cameras and video cams.

In this paper we would like to convey something of this topological complexity of the tourism system environment that images of tourist destinations now seem to live in, and explore some implications and challenges for researching images of tourist destinations in tourism studies. We will not conduct an image analysis, but we will briefly allude to images of Iceland as a tourist destination for illustrative purposes.

Image & destination

Without going into theoretical details, one could conceive of an image as a hybrid inhabitant in a land of in-between. On the one hand, image connotes something constructed or made up, and is therefore a kind of “artificial representation”, or even fiction. On the other hand, in accordance with its etymological root of *imitari* (“to copy” or “imitate”) image also denotes something real. An image is an image of something, for example sites and attractions at a tourist destination. In the production and consumption of images in tourism, as investigated through concepts such as „tourist destination image“ (TDI) and “product-country image” (PCI), one is likely to find „the real and the fictional“ of images inevitably and irretrievably entangled. So therefore:

Iceland is not a myth, it is actual and real, a solid portion of the earth’s surface. It is not, either, what every one supposes, nor what we have reason to believe it is, from its name, its location, and the meager descriptions we have of it. But it has not been thought advisable to leave this country entirely alone, especially in an age of travel and discovery like the present (Miles, 1852, in Boucher, 1989, p.17).

Iceland is “actual and real”, also in the age of modern mass tourism. Yet, perhaps, not “what everyone supposes”. When the country were to be developed into a tourist destination one couldn’t leave it “entirely alone”, as just another area on the surface of the Earth with a mere silent spatial coordinate attached. In order to spark off “tourist imaginationing” something more is needed, for example “Energy for life through the forces of nature” (as it reads in a recent marketing of the *Blue Lagoon*, in Map of Iceland, 2008-2009).

In destination imagery the visual and the textual usually work intimately together. In that sense an image is a map, a combination of story and picture. But however important role pictures often play in the construction of tourist destinations, it is important to not conflate a visual image with a picture: “And this is Iceland! – but I see no ice” (Miles, 1852, in Boucher, 1989, p.17). As Wittgenstein once put it; “What is imagined is not in the same *space* as what is seen” (Wittgenstein, cited in Olsson, 2007, p.124). A picture is what we can see with our eyes, but images also live a life in human imagination, perhaps as “simplifications of more complex ideas” or as “the sum of beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that a person or group has of an object”

(Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly and Luk, 2008, p.84). In imagination images are like angels, able to trespass borders of here and there, North of Iceland and South of China. Now and then they can cross the mind in the mapping of tourist destinations:

That the country itself [Iceland], or any thing that is to be found here, is worth a journey to see, or that the history or habits of the people possess any degree of interest, has not, probably, crossed the minds of a thousand persons (Miles 1852, in Boucher, 1989, p.17).

It's a different story today, with every part of the country, every town or district, making a conscientious effort to offer tourists something special. /.../ Travelling around Iceland to enjoy nature and the local's way of life is a wonderful and enjoyable activity (Skarphéðinsson, 2008, p.2).

Without human imagination, without the ability to make the absent present and *vice versa*, we would have no tourist destinations and no tourism. For if there was no other place to imagine, that is, "to form a mental destination image of", then why and where one travel should? Furthermore, the significance of images in tourism is directly related to the fact that tourism as a product is very much intangible, which means that it is practically impossible to try or test the product before purchase. As a solution to spatial fixity, images of a tourist destinations may instead be distributed, images that in practice simultaneously display and erase. The cultural product *Blue Lagoon* appears as nature and will work as an efficient image of Iceland because it is unique and therefore *not* representative of Iceland as a tourist destination.

Tourist imaginationing is thus situated in the abyss between images of tourist destinations and whatever their referential spatial locations. In other words, the impetus to travel, so as to become a tourist in the modern sense, is driven by possibilities, pleasures and whatever else, which may arise in the intersection of map and territory:

Modern tourism is based on the reproduction (and re-enactment) of the coming together of representation and (bodily) experience, of abstraction and materiality (Minca, 2007, p. 434).

As for the materiality part, where tourist imaginationings are to be ontologically transformed into the bodily experience and doing of tourism, this is supposed to be provided by a destination. Although a concept widely used in both the tourism business and in tourism studies, it is nevertheless less clear where its "referential destination" is to be found:

Destination is by nature a problematic concept. It refers to a varying range of spatial scales (i.e. levels of representation) in tourism: continents, states, provinces, municipalities and other administrative units, tourist resorts or even single tourist products. Spatial scales and definitions of destinations based on administrative or other such units are sometimes useful and practical, but theoretically they tend to approach tourism as a spatial and geographical phenomenon from a technical and static viewpoint (Saarinen, 2004, p.164).

Destination is in practice also a matter of “destinationing”, which also seems to be more in tune with the “changing faces of contemporary tourism” (Cohen, 2008). One of these changes is that tourist experience is no longer easily reducible to encounters on a site because it is constituted through “intradestination movement patterns” (Lew and McKercher, 2006, p. 419) throughout the total trip of traveling, thus leaving traces quite independent of the destination as such.

Images of Iceland as a tourist destination

Before the advent of modern mass tourism there were no touring masses. These were also times when images, like those of Iceland, in a material sense were confined to live their lives as inmates on paper:

This is the island that is shown to us in our geographical books and maps, as a small white spot on the borders of the Arctic ocean, and described as a cold, dreary, and uninteresting region, inhabited by a few dwarfish and ignorant people, who has little knowledge of the world and whom little is known (Miles 1852, in Boucher 1989, p.17).

With the adventure of modern tourism came the possibility for places on Earth to mutate into tourist destinations and as such enter the gates to real-and-imagined tourism geography. On arrival they were to find themselves surrounded by other destinations, competing against them as images, well aware of the fact that a past exchange-value will not necessarily be an asset of the present, nor of the future. Nowadays tourist destinations have to compete on a “global tourism market” where there is so much knowledge easily available that it becomes difficult to choose and decide. And it’s only a mouse click away. Type; “Iceland” on Google and then *voilà!* In 0.19 seconds you can have about 122,000,000 results! Type; “Images of Iceland” and you may receive 416.000. For an empirically minded researcher in tourism

studies, it is not easy to tell whether this is to be regarded as a dream of number come true, or as a daunting nightmare of quantitative overload.

The Internet, with its too numerous to mention websites, is now the place many potential tourists will visit during their process of deciding on a destination. They are then, with or without “Google” as a gateway, in the phase of their tourist imagining where they will form a “pre-image” of Iceland as a tourist destination. Not altogether easy, for customer and researcher alike, and not only due to the vast pool of easily accessible images:

It is worth emphasizing that there is no single or ‘correct’ answer to the question, ‘What does this image mean?’ or ‘What is this ad saying?’ Since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have ‘one, true meaning’, or that meanings won’t change over time, work in this area is bound to be interpretative (Hall, 1997, p.9).

A pre-image will be further interpretatively processed, during an eventual visit, through tourist experiences of the actual encounter with the chosen tourist destination. It so happens that also images themselves are among what tourists are likely to come across, for example in the form of various classic tourist information material (yes, such still exists even in this “digital age”!).

After having conducted an analysis of information material on display in the tourist information centre in Reykjavik, Gössling (2006) concludes that it reveals the image of Iceland as a: “cold, peripheral, and ‘different’ destination” (p.120), which, he states, is further reinforced in books on Iceland; “‘Lost in Iceland’, ‘Magic of Iceland’, ‘Wonders of Iceland’, ‘Colours of Iceland’ or ‘Land of light’” (p.122). Incidentally, the last two decades the cover of Iceland’s Tourist Board’s yearly brochure has predominantly presented an image characterized by water, rather static nature and bluish colors (Gunnarsdóttir, 2007).

This image of Iceland as a tourist destination may be compared, for example, with the official tourism plan (Ferðamálaætlun 2006-2015), with its vision of environmental consciousness that features issues like purity, health, safety and the country’s beauty in terms of untouched nature (Samgöngu-ráðuneytið, 2005). As for the image of Iceland more generally, and not only as a tourist destination, a recent report by a committee working on the behalf of the Prime ministers’ office concluded that Iceland’s image is weak, and that the country is practically an unknown figure in the mind of most foreign nations (Nefnd forsætisráðherra, 2008, p. 22). The recommendations of the

committee's report is that the core in Iceland's image should be power, freedom and peace (*kraftur, friður og frelsi*, p. 25), and it is stressed that it is important to research the success of that image building in the key markets (p. 29).

Researching images in tourism studies

The study of "destination imagery", in a broad sense, is quite a major research area in tourism studies. Given that the field, or discipline, itself has had a strong emphasis in business administration and management it is unsurprising that "tourism destination marketing", among a host of business perspectives, has been an active area. It may be noted, however, that this is an area which in recent years:

the need for more pluralistic approaches in understanding tourism destination image formation has become more pronounced (Govers, Go, and Kumar, 2007a, p.980).

There are signs indicating that research on tourism marketing has often taken a quite narrow perspective. It seems as if "a significant portion of the tourism marketing literature has focused on a specific set of topics, such as destination image, Internet marketing, and market segmentation" (Xiang and Petrick, 2008, p.235). Moreover, Xiang and Petrick also identify two imbalances in current tourism marketing research. The first is "an overemphasis on tourist research, in comparison to a lack of attention to marketing strategy and organizational behavior research", and the second imbalance is "an overemphasis on empirical investigation, in comparison to a lack of attention to theory building and conceptual thinking" (Xiang and Petrick, 2008, p.243).

The relationship between tourists and the tourism supply system has often been conceived of as simply one of buyers and sellers on a dematerialized and a-spatial market. In that conceptualization, the task for tourism marketers and providers become one of merely assemble different tourism products and service components, and so make them available on the market for the tourists. Accordingly, the marketing of tourist destinations seems to have thrived on the presentation of clear and concise images, under the presumption that they come with a capacity to catch the attention of potential tourists and possibly change their behavior in the direction of a pur-

chase (Gunnarsdóttir, 2007). But when examining the role of tourism promotion, and specifically as a component of destination image formation, Govers, Go and Kuldeep found that:

tourism promotion does not have a major impact upon the perceptions of travelers and that other sources of information have a much greater bearing on the formation of destination image (Govers, Go and Kuldeep, 2007b, p.15).

Given that the perception of travelers is dependent on a broad range of factors, including various external influences, the relative position of tourism promotion more generally, and not only in terms of its influence on destination image, may frequently have been exaggerated. That destination image research often has had a narrow focus on the relationship between image and behavior further suggests that it becomes important to broaden the picture and more thoroughly include the topological complexity of the environment in which images live their lives. Part of that environment is obviously the Internet where:

tourism destination images are becoming increasingly fragmented and ephemeral in nature (Govers, Go, and Kumar, 2007a, p.977-978).

Today tickets are bought on-line, reservations are made, and plans changed on the basis of destination images accessed on the Internet, also during travel while sitting in a café or when surfing from a hotel room. Sometimes, the best way to find a restaurant in Reykjavik is to send a text message to Sweden. Under the technological macroscope of tourism studies, the tourism business looks more and more like a topologically complex tourism network, where “the tourist is regarded as a creative, interactive agent, as a co-creator of tourist spaces” (Ek, Larsen, Hornskov, and Mansfeldt, 2008, p.124). This means, as far as tourism providers are concerned, that:

They are not providing final products, but offering solutions (value propositions) to satisfy customer needs and wants through their knowledge and skills (Xiang and Petrick, 2008, p.240-241).

It may be so that many of these customers are what is often referred to as “post-tourists”. What motivates them to travel is not so much authentic sites and attractions, but enjoyment. The post-tourist is a creature who instead of:

pursuing different experiences /.../ may choose to visit places which offer familiar ones, but in a greater variety, of a higher quality, in a more agreeable ambience (or at a lower price), than those available at home. Sheer fun and enjoyment become, in this view, a culturally approved, sufficient reason to travel (Cohen, 2008, p.332).

This presumably implies that the post-tourist is prone to also become excited when exposed to images of technologically sophisticated contrived human-made attractions, of which Disney World is the icon. In that particular market segment, tourist destinations with images of high-tech fabrications and fantasy, rather than of the real no matter how authentic, will have competitive advantages. Yet, there are also those, like some backpackers, that are constantly on the look-out for remote little accessible places in order to experience what they believe to be the last remnants of authentic life and untouched pristine nature.

Although there are lots of other tourist species, the point here is that there is no longer a single tourist customer onto which a clear cut destination image can be projected. The tourist now conceptually appears in tourism studies in the plural, but they are not only tourists. It so happens that they increasingly dress up also as tourist guides for visiting family and friends, which now form a considerable part of tourism in a world of mobility. As one observer notes:

Communication at-a-distance produces new needs for face-to-face interaction (and the unique socio-emotional qualities that follow with it), which in turn creates new needs for mobility (Jansson, 2007, p.6).

Traveling, visiting, and hosting, have become increasingly necessary in order to keep up a social life spread out over geographical distance. The reproduction of social life by the means of tourism suggests that „a break from ordinary life” is no longer the distinguishing mark of modern tourism it used to be. Sometimes, even, “one doesn’t need to leave home to be a tourist” or, we may add, to be a guide (MacCannell, 1976/1999, p.199).

Concluding remarks

With our emphasis on placing images in a broader context, and avoiding giving them a reductionist treatment, it is now perhaps easier to understand why we did not choose to simply approach images as visual and propose that

researching them requires the adoption of visual methodologies (see for example Rose, 2001).

Yet, this is not the whole story. It also marks the arrival of what we would like to refer to as the “visual paradox of tourism studies”. On the one hand, tourism is full of visual technologies and there is little doubt that the visual part of tourist experiences is highly significant (Urry, 1990, Crouch and Lübbren, 2003). On the other hand, and in spite of the just mentioned importance of the visual in tourism “image based-research methods are simply not on the agenda for many tourist researchers” (Feighey, 2003, p.78). Although photography is recognized as essential for touristic experience:

Few studies have analysed how tourists picture the places they visit; what sort of photographs they take and how they exhibit and circulate them (Ek, Larsen, Hornskov, and Mansfeldt, 2008, p.136).

It seems that when tourist researchers have been researching tourists and tourism that, however defined, are jaded with the visual, they have nevertheless relegated the visual to stories in plain text. To the extent that visual images have appeared, they have often been inserted merely for illustrative purposes. As Garrod notes, “it is surprising how few studies in this area have adopted volunteer-employed photography (VEP) as a research tool” (Garrod, 2008, p.381).

It may be all true that the visual in tourism, tainted as it has been by the “scopic regime” of modernity, has been overemphasized, and that it desperately needed to be deconstructed and counterbalanced by an embodied tourist multisensually engaging in the performance of her or his own encounters. Any touristic site involves more than sightseeing and it seems very likely that “[t]ourists know that looks deceive” (MacCannell, 2001, p.31). Yet, it may also be the case that emerging mobile technologies “are changing the nature of vision for both tourists and tourism researchers” (Feighey, 2003, p.82). As Jansson notes:

The nature of visual representation is becoming more negotiable. Digital photography and video enable tourists to watch their recordings immediately and decide whether to keep them, or to delete and create new images (Jansson, 2007, p.13).

Tourism images in digital code are instantly made and easy to move, remove, edit, distribute and show in different environments and circumstances, and yet: “tourist videos have largely been ignored in tourism studies”

(Feighey, 2003, p.81). And some of them are easily accessible. “You Tube” may be as good as any other example: video results on “Iceland”; about 33,400, “Images of Iceland”; 305, “Iceland and Tourism”; 25. In spite of the fact that there is now a vast expanding pool of empirical visual evidence of tourism and tourists, it is almost not being researched.

What we have tried to convey, then, is something of the topological complexity of the tourism system that images now are living in, as well as themselves being a part of. If images are on the move through different mediums in different guises, textual, visual, and if they (dis)appear under a variety of circumstances and locations, then this suggests a need to transcend traditional research methodologies by which images have been studied as isolated entities, be it for example through content analysis, visual semiotics or textual interpretation.

Research in tourism studies then needs to place, and methodologically approach, images in a broader frame, rather than, say, conceive of images as objects traveling in a neutral medium between sender and receiver. In what ways, for example, may film influence people’s travel decisions and induce them to visit, or avoid visiting, particular destinations they have seen on the cinema screen or on TV? How does images from the movies reverberate with those in books, advertisements, “blogs”, or, for that matter, good old photography? How can researchers use photography and video cams in their study of tourism images and how can they develop these techniques also for reporting and communicating their research findings?

Images, then, are part of the „new modality of networking“ (Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen, 2007) that holds tourism together, and do not exist as solitudes in a de-materialized vacuum. They are mediators and transformers, circulating around dis/connecting the home and mind of (post-) tourists with a travel agency, a hotel, a feeling, an imagination, a destination marketing organization, a tourist office, a booking sheet, a country, an authentic building, a pool for children, a hiking trail, and whatever attractions and expectations at the real-and-imagined tourist destination.

If that image is reasonably correct, then “what is important for future research is deciphering the interconnections” (Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen, 2007, p.259). That, in turn, requires research methods that are able to construct information and knowledge about the interconnections of mobile images in the enactment of the tourism system more broadly conceived.

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