

DREAM DESTINATION VANCOUVER

An analysis of tourist's postcards

Postcards are not only an instrument of visual communication, they shape the image and identity of a country or city, casting its natural and cultural resources in the best light. They create dream destinations and allow us to explore an exaggerated, idealized version of a place through the eyes of the host. Following Walter Benjamin's notion of photography as a way of exposing the optical unconscious, this project analyzed tourist's postcards in Vancouver according to pictorial content (space and subjects) and symbols in order to describe main themes of Vancouver's identity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Photographs play a crucial role in the promotion of travel destinations, working through a range of media including brochures, TV commercials, and postcards (Garrod, 2009). In order to attract tourists, the images used are usually highly curated and idolized representations, casting its natural and cultural resources in the best light. Their representational power functionally transforms a place into a destination – a commodity (Hunter, 2008). Postcards play an important role in creating destinations. The picture postcard is the most common and easily accessible souvenir at almost any tourist destination. It usually shows man-made and natural attractions, as well as iconic and abstract descriptions, and is designed and produced so tourists will have evidence for their travel experience (Milman, 2011: 157). Travellers send postcards as a visual ‘validation’ of their trip, and to let friends and family know that they are thinking about them despite the geographical distance. Even though recipients recognize the staged and maybe even manipulated nature of the photographic scenes, there are underlying values that are encoded and that play on culturally held beliefs, as Mamiya (1992) points out. Thus, postcards are not only an instrument of visual communication, but they also shape the image and identity of a country.

For scholars, postcards offer evidence of culture and architecture as a visual record of the present and past. Most studies are based on content analysis (Milman, 2011: 160). For example, Christin J. Mamiya (1992) used content analysis to examine how postcards represent the Hawaiian culture, and the effects of that representation. Ady Milman (2011) assessed the role of postcards in representing a destination image of Berlin, Germany. The analysis concluded that the postcards lacked human portrayal and featured a limited sample of its cultural and heritage attractions. Instead, the majority of the postcards featured war themes, as well as generic icons

and legendary mascots of the city. Building on Milman's work, this project examines how Vancouver is represented in tourist's postcards. 40 postcards were analyzed according to pictorial content (realistic and true photograph or 'iconic' images) and featured symbols.

II. POSTCARDS AS REPRESENTATIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Walter Benjamin's cultural critic approach offers a theoretical framework that helps us make sense of photographs as representation of identity. Following Sigmund Freud's main principle of psychoanalysis, he argued that photographs are an expression of societal, cultural and political conditions. The camera enables us to explore things that were previously hidden, such as invisible relations in society. Benjamin referred to this deeper level as 'the optical unconscious': "Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psycho-analysis discloses the instinctual unconscious." (Benjamin, 1931: 7) In the mid-1900s, postcards – just as regular photographs – were produced for a mass audience for the first time, and therefore fitted in with Benjamin's description of non-auratic image production in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility'. Benjamin himself had a huge collection of postcards, and enjoyed sending them. But he also understood their relevance as representations. To him, they "uttered a truth about the age which more arcane modalities might easily disguise." (Wall, 2015) This study aims to describe the disguise that tourist's postcards of Vancouver offer us. In describing their pictorial content we can try to understand what elements are used to create Vancouver's identity.

III. VANCOUVER – A DREAM DESTINATION

Vancouver, the largest metropolitan area in Western Canada, is located on the western half of the Burrard Peninsula, bounded to the north by English Bay and the Burrard Inlet and to the south by the Fraser River. It is consistently named as one of the top five worldwide cities for livability and quality of life. In his book ‘Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination’, urban planner Lance Berelowitz gives an emotional insight into his first impressions of Vancouver in 1985. He describes his arrival as

“[...] a fantasy dream. There is no other arrival experience quite like it. You land on an estuarine island at the mouth of the largest remaining salmon-bearing river in the world. Stepping out of the airport terminal, your olfactory senses are immediately assailed by the powerful smell of salty sea ozone wafting in from the surrounding water, mixed incongruously with the odour of jet fuel. Looking up, you are quite likely to spot one or more bald eagles circling off the intertidal zone that almost surrounds the airport [...] As you crest the airport bridge, Vancouver is laid out before you. It seems to float, poised between mountain and sea, a light of confection hovering between the temperate rain forest of the Coast Mountains and the convoluted inlets of the Pacific Ocean.” (2010: 3)

Before even entering the city, Berelowitz captures central motifs of Vancouver and Canada. From a tourist perspective, the combination of the Pacific Ocean and a mountain backdrop is what is often described as main characteristics of Vancouver. Among urban planners, it is often regarded as the “poster child of North American urbanism” (Berelowitz, 2010: 1), honouring “the intimate and apparently happy cohabitation of wild nature and built fabric.” On the other hand, its seemingly perfect setting has led to a certain artificiality of some areas, accelerated by the housing affordability crisis. This notion is confirmed by the fact that Vancouver is the third most filmed city in North America, but hardly ever plays itself in movies, usually doubling for Seattle,

San Francisco, or even New York City. Especially the Downtown area with its wide streets and glass high-rises seems generic enough to be used as a stand-in for other places, as pointed out by filmmaker Tony Zhou.¹ Looking at Vancouver's 'generic' character on one hand, and its popularity as model of contemporary city-making on the other, it seems hard to find a unique identity at first glance.

IV. METHODOLOGY & FINDINGS

As mentioned before, content analysis is the most widely held approach employed in postcard research. Using Milman's (2011) study as a general framework, this study also adopted a content analysis approach to analyze postcards from a constructive viewpoint by examining what were the images or representations on the postcards themselves, rather than the subjective perspective of tourists or other buyers of what they believed to be represented in the pictures or the images portrayed on the postcards. The sample consisted of 40 postcards offered for sale in Vancouver. The data were collected in three different locations that are heavily frequented by tourists (a souvenir shop in Downtown, a souvenir shop in Gastown, and a small corner store located at the University of British Columbia) in March 2018. The researcher collected the data by randomly choosing a postcard rack, choosing one side of the rack and taking pictures of all postcards in that row. The photography technique was implemented for convenience purposes only.

Following Milman's case study, the postcards were divided into groups. The first group featured realistic and true photographs of Vancouver or specific places and sights in Vancouver. A

¹ Zhou's video on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojm74VGsZBU>

majority of the total postcards sampled were part of this group. The second group of postcards presented iconic images of Vancouver or Canada. The postcards predominantly displayed famous sights and wildlife like bears, geese or moose.

Postcards' content and their meaning

Based on Hunter's (2008) typology of photographic representation for tourism, the postcards were analyzed in terms of a) space and b) subjects/ symbols featured in the pictures.

The following conclusions were drawn: First, almost half of the postcard presented 'natural landscapes' (Hunter, 2008). Natural landscapes are open spaces "that feature pure and unspoiled mountains, oceans, beaches, forests, lakes, wild animals, fields or sky" (Hunter, 2008: 360). The popularity of the nature theme



Figure 1. Moose

is not surprising given that wide landscapes, mountains, rivers and forests are what Canada is internationally known for. Postcard images showed for example moose (Figure 1) and mountain ranges. Less popular but still featured in many postcards were so called 'cultivated landscapes'.



Figure 2. Stanley Park and Downtown Skyline

Cultivated landscapes are "open spaces that feature the beauty of nature as pruned, gardened or otherwise altered. Such landscapes include gardens and fountains, golf courses and beaches with a few human implements such as a lounge chair or an umbrella." (Hunter, 2008: 360).

Vancouver has numerous parks, gardens and beaches, the



Figure 3. Downtown Vancouver and mountain backdrop



Figure 4. Vancouver skyline and maple leaf



Figure 5. Totem Poles in Stanley Park

most popular cultivated space being Stanley Park, a 405-hectare public park that is one of the city's main tourist destinations. Stanley Park was featured in four postcards, either as a dominant part of a city/ skyline photo (Figure 2) or as the main theme of the postcard. Some images combined natural and cultivated spaces, for example the skyline of Vancouver with mountains in the background (Figure 3) or the skyline with a maple leaf in the front (Figure 4). These images reflect Vancouver's proximity to nature, especially mountains and the ocean, while still being a modern and economically relevant city.

Second, 'heritage and material culture' played a significant role in tourist's postcards of Vancouver. This includes "all situations where a specifically ethnic and unique history has made itself evident, for example ancient ruins, arts, carvings and relics or their reproductions, temples and shrines, and landmarks and cityscapes (alleys and streets) that have typically been gentrified into sites." (Hunter, 2008, 42) Depictions of

heritage and material culture included first nations relics and totem poles (Figure 5). Two postcards showed the Gastown Steam Clock, a steam clock built in 1977 and popular tourist sight of Vancouver (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Steam Clock in Gastown

Third, the analysis of the postcards showed that only one of the 40 pictures displayed on the postcards portrayed humans. Referring more specifically to Hunter (2008), the postcards did only once portray the host, but did not portray tourists, or a combination of tourists and hosts.

The only postcard with a human portrayal shows an image of a “Mountie”, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The analysis concludes that the majority of the postcards offered for sale in Vancouver did feature realistic or authentic representations of the destination. Most of the postcards displayed a nature-related view of the city, with a relatively clear communication of the city’s current identity. However, they showed an exaggerated, optimized version of Vancouver, e.g. bright colours with extreme contrasts, and flattering perspectives. Some of the postcards were clearly staged or montages of Canadian symbols like the flag or a maple leaf against a realistic backdrop. This is common for postcards, thus it does not result in inauthenticity. In general, Vancouver’s images offer a coherent and clear representation of the ‘dream destination’ for tourists, excursionists, and recipients of the postcards. For further research, a bigger sample of postcards must be analyzed.



Figure 6. Human portrayal of “Mountie” and maple leaves

LITERATURE

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