

Postcard Perfect: the representation and production of the Canary Islands as tourist space

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From the vedute acquired by travellers on the Grand Tour to the disposable-camera photographs taken during cruise excursions, images –in a wide range of formats– have long operating as instruments for representing the tourist destination. Objective as they might seem, these images are not an accurate depiction of reality, but rather mythifications of the tourist site. Through processes of capture, framing, and dissemination, rather than depicting reality, they produce mythified versions of the site. Over time, these images crystallize into built and social realities: only to be visited, photographed, and circulated again, continuing to reinforce the myth. Impartial as they might seem, they flatten and sediment the identity of the visited places, under the gaze of those observing.

Through the infinite reproduction of images in advertisements and souvenirs, this research examines how a complex and politically layered territory has been compelled to align itself with its image-based representations. Despite ongoing social, energetic, and geopolitical frictions, the archipelago is widely understood, by visitors and residents alike, through a Disneyfied appearance of ‘holiday islands’. This elevates the somewhat perverse notion of the tourist as the exemplary citizen: politically uncontroversial, ideologically detached, and largely indifferent to the processes shaping the place they inhabit temporarily. The mental image that attracts them in, ultimately becomes the tool for shaping the city in their name.

According to Fernando Estévez’s notion, “the tourist gaze, eager to consume images, has come to appropriate everything on display at tourist destinations”. As such visual regimes force the visited place to reinvent itself to meet visitors’ expectations, the charming postcard image of a young woman sunbathing on a paradise beach becomes, in reality, a disguised instrument of quiet colonisation.