Touristic photography and the construction of place identity: Visual image of Croatia

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Abstract: Visual culture and especially photography is crucial to the rituals of modern tourism. It shapes popular perceptions of peoples and places and supports so called places-myths, that is, stereotypes and clichés associated with particular regions. Although the literature describes various ways in which visual imagery and practices influence travellers’ destination choice and mediate tourist experience, there hasn’t been much research on how touristic images produced by tourist promoters contribute to the construction of cultural spaces they represent. This paper will focus on theoretical perspectives on nature of touristic photography as a system of representation and its role in cultural production and consumption of places and identities. In particular, it will explore the issue of contemporary touristic images, especially tourist posters produced in Croatia, as visual narratives that are privileging particular version of place identity.

Key Words: touristic photography, place identity, place myth, visual culture, destination image, tourist posters, semiotic analysis

1 Introduction
Touristic photography is a powerful medium that shapes the image of the tourist destination it represents and has a crucial role in creation of place and identity myths. Although photography holds the same subjective, interpretive potential as text, it appears to be believable as a direct representation of reality, a true reflection of actual places, people and events. Used in destination promotion, visual images are likely to influence recipients’ perception of a destination, generate certain attitudes and influence visiting intentions. There have been a number of critical and theoretical discussions on the relationship between photography and tourism. MacCannell [1] was the first to suggest that visual spectacle was central to the rituals of modern tourism and Urry, in his much quoted book The Tourist Gaze [2] presented a crucial and formative role of the gaze for structuring touristic expectations, experiences and memories. They both argued that tourist tries to make sense of what he sees through signs and symbols, which themselves provide meaning and tangibility to what is essentially an intangible experience. For both researchers, the use of visual culture in tourism was part of cultural process and identity formation in contemporary society. Thus semiotics, understood as “the science or doctrine that studies signs and their uses in representation” [3] reveals itself as a useful tool in the research of tourism and touristic representation. Dann in his book The Language of Tourism [4] offers an extensive discussion of tourism imagery including reference to the extent to which images can control and determine the behaviour of tourists as well as a wide discussion of their motivation. His research pointed towards the importance of understanding the links between motives and experiences and the visual representations of those experiences. Echtner [5] was one of the first to introduce semiotic analysis in tourism, arguing that the language of tourism marketing, communicated both verbally and visually, can be viewed as a sign system that creates, codifies and communicates certain mythical tourism experiences. Using the semiotic analysis, we can study the hidden meanings behind pictures, images and objects and the discourses they convey. Led by these findings, a number of authors have discussed visual representation of destinations in tourism promotional literature [7][8][9][10][11][12]. However, the application of semiotics and discourse analysis of photographic representation in tourism studies is relatively recent and only few of these studies have analysed the actual tourist advertising material like postcards and brochures, investigating the stereotypical imaging of destinations.

The aim of this article is to explore how touristic photography contributes to the perception and
consumption of sights, places and identities. Through the analysis of dominant discourses in the contemporary Croatian tourist posters, the paper examines their role as symbols that sustain certain notions of Croatia as a touristic destination. It seeks to find the particular stories of place, culture and nationhood that are being privileged through the visual narratives of tourist posters and the motivations they sustain. The beginning sections of the article deal with the connection between tourism and visual culture, the concept of touristic photography and its role in the formation of the destination image. The next section outlines the approach to poster analysis, followed by a presentation of the key findings. Finally, the research concludes by suggesting how further analysis of such visual touristic texts could offer wider insights into the cultural production and consumption of places and identities.

2 Tourism and visual culture

Visual experience and travelling have always been closely associated. Tourism specializes in visual goods and services, variously described as “virtual”, “non-material”, “symbolic” or “post-modern”: views, spectacles, environments, simulations, experiences, sensations, videos and photographic images. Visual culture can be encountered across a wide spectrum of media in tourism, including brochures, posters, postcards and other promotions which form the travellers’ mental visual collections, picturing the world of tourism and its objects, establishing how they are to be seen, their desirability, and the weight of their cultural meaning [14].

According to MacCannell [1] a tourist attraction consists of a set of relations between three elements: the sight, the marker and the tourist. Tourists travel in order to collect images and these images are both objective and material (postcards, snapshots, videos) as well as subjective and immaterial (hopes, dreams, visions). MacCannel [1] interprets tourism as sight-seeing, arguing that visual culture is constructed to deliver to the tourist what is understood to be authentic, even though this may be a staged authenticity, achieved through the skilful manipulation of artefacts and signs. These artefacts become translated into commodities for tourism, privileged as markers. MacCannell [1] uses the term “marker” to deal with representations of sights that are found in guidebooks, advertisements, on television, in magazines, on posters and postcards. These markers represent the first contact tourists have with a site. They mediate our experiences and a great deal of tourism is based on them. They are most responsible for setting the tourist in motion on his journey to find the true objects.

The marketing of tourism products relies, thus, heavily on photographic images. Pictures that communicate messages of destinations, programs and activities are the key to attracting and holding potential visitors. They not only represent the destination, but can also communicate attributes, characteristics, concepts, values and ideas [15]. In that sense, they have a great role in shaping particular versions of place identity.

2.1 Touristic photography

Photography is a complex text that can be read in many ways. It is surrounded by a historical, aesthetic and cultural frame of reference as well as by an entire set of relationships and meanings relating to the photographer and the point at which the image was made [16]. The power of the photographic image lies in its very ability to seemingly represent reality. Human [17] characterises the relationship between photography and tourism as ambivalent. He says that many destinations visited by tourists have a strong identity and sense of place, which is embodied in the history, culture, physical form and social activity. However, photography selectively extracts from this multifaceted expression and reduces it to a series of icons. This distorts the identity and trivialises the place and contributes to the consuming nature of tourism. People’s perception of particular places are indebted to place-myths, that is, conglomerates of place-images in forms of clichés and stereotypes associated with particular locations, in circulation within the society [13]. They derive they durability, spread and impact from repetition and widespread dissemination. Just as any visual text, touristic photography used in advertising can be seen as part of the dominant ideology of a society, reproducing and enhancing its preferred images [2] which privilege only particular versions of destinations’ cultural identity.

2.2 Creation of destination image

Tourism marketing creates powerful social and cultural representations of places in form of destination images. The term image generally refers to a compilation of beliefs, ideas and impressions based on information processing from various sources over time, resulting in an internally accepted mental construct. Image exercises a strong influence on tourist behaviour and plays a significant role in the success of tourist destinations [18]. Destinations
with strong, positive and recognizable images have more probability of being chosen by the tourists. Destination image is made up of three interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and conative [19]. Cognitive image is defined as an evaluation of the known attributes that a destination has at its disposal. Affective image relates to motives and feelings in the sense that it is how a person values the object under consideration. The conative image is analogous to behaviour because it is the action component. After processing external and internal stimuli about a destination, a decision is made whether or not to travel to the area. Recognizing the effect of photography on stimulating travel to a destination and creating an image of a destination is crucial for travel industry. Tourism industry, together with residents and visitors, participate in the continuous construction and performance of tourism places. The visible materiality of these places expresses the means by which they are imagined, produced and consumed. Tourism promotional material is, in this sense, not only decisive in creating discourses of place, but represent a rich cultural reservoir of popular perceptions of peoples and places.

3 Analysis of Croatian promotional posters
3.1 Methodology
The focus of the visual analysis in this paper are three series of tourist posters, each containing 35 individual posters, published by Croatian Tourist Board. The analyzed posters can be found on the web page www.croatia.hr and are the most recent national tourist posters produced in Croatia. They feature the work of three renowned Croatia-based photographers: Ivo Pervan, Romeo Ibrišević and Damir Fabijanić. Posters have been the primary means of visual communication within tourism industry since the end of the 19th century [20]. Their appearance is parallel to the emergence of first tourist organizations and their need to promote tourist destinations and attractions. From its historic beginnings until the present days, posters remained a culturally and artistically, economically and politically engaged medium. The poster as a genre is a dynamic, context-sensitive narrative, which can be seen as a discursive expression of the culture. Touristic posters represent only a part of the touristic visual imagery, but they are representative of some broad themes that can be found in books, brochures, TV advertisements, etc. This article uses content analysis and semiotic analysis to identify the images used to construct Croatia as a touristic and cultural space. The 105 images were first coded each according to the dominant image conveyed. Jenkins [9] argues that content analysis, as a methodological technique for analysing photographs, is concerned primarily with describing quantitatively the content or appearances of a group of photographs. This is done through coding the pictures based on their content in different categories. The technique has a long history of use in communication studies and as a research technique in tourism it has been frequently used in destination image studies. It involves taking a sample which is both representative but small enough to allow for substantive analysis. When it is utilised in conjunction with other forms of image investigation, such as semiotic and discourse analysis, the content analysis creates more critical, richer and complex interpretations of representations. Thus the second methodology used is a semiotic description that analyse how the pictures convey symbolic meaning. Jenkins [9] states that semiotic analyses investigate the content and composition of photographs and how these combine to communicate through signs and symbols various messages about the places they depict. The semiotic analysis traces its roots back to Roland Barthes [21] who introduced the concept of everyday myths, that is, pictures as social constructs that denoted an everyday situation but through their connotation became powerful symbols for the dominating discourse. Barthes distinguished between a signs denotative and connotative level. Denotation is the simple, basic, descriptive level or the literate meaning, while the connotation is the cultural elements associated with the picture, the interpretation of signs in terms of the wider realms of social ideology - the general beliefs, conceptual frameworks and value systems of society [22]. What Barthes terms as myth is in fact the manner in which a culture signifies and grants meaning to the world around it [21]. Mythologisation is the tendency of socially constructed notions, narratives, and assumptions to become naturalised in the process, that is, taken unquestioningly as given within a particular culture. The semiotic analysis also considers the context that the images appear in, how the images may influence social practice, as well as the images influence on the construction of reality. It involves searching for key themes and patterns of emphasis and to understand how these images help to create and reproduce meanings which in turn shape our knowledge of the social world.
### 3.2 Results and discussion

The content analysis of three sets of Croatian promotional posters was made using several pre-established categories. The results are shown in the Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image categories</th>
<th>Recurrence</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heritage and arts</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural scenery and landscape</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gastronomy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban activities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural life/traditions</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational and beach activities</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Recurrence of the categories

The results show that most images feature natural scenery or manmade landscape and buildings. Natural landscape themes account for a half of all the images in posters. They mostly include place symbols such as seaside, islands and scenic coastal views. Most of them present isolated, intact nature, without the presence of people, sometimes with historical villages in the distance. These images are followed in number by the images of historical towns and buildings. Rural life and traditions are represented in smaller proportion. They refer to traditional crafts like lace making, traditional gastronomy and tasks such as wine production, salt making or traditional ship building. There are few images of people wearing traditional outfits and playing instruments. Regardless of a great number of images representing sea scenery, just six images are depicting beach activities and recreational activities like yachting and diving. We can note the accentuated absence of people and everyday activities in the images. There is only one poster having as main theme the representation of people in everyday activities, in this case fishermen.

The images in the examined posters fall into different groups of symbolic images or motifs. The qualitative analysis highlights the fact that they are built around four myths that form the image of Croatia as a tourist product. These myths can be seen as stereotyped aspects of the modern society which form ready-made significations: the myth of pure and idyllic nature, the myth of history and identity, the myth of church and religion and the myth of tradition.

The myth of pure nature is represented by a domination of images of sterile, uninhabited spaces, unspoiled by the presence of contemporary people and technology. Both natural and rural landscapes are represented as virgin, ecologically preserved, attractive and unpolluted. They are related to the motives of authenticity, uniqueness, mysticism, escape, tranquility and relax with only a slight reference to challenge and adventure. The common visual method of depicting nature is the refining of landscapes, natural forms and objects into abstract or near abstract patterns and serial forms: the lines of vineyard photographed from above, the regimented patterns of line and colour of buildings, fields or sea surface. The idea is to reveal the unchanging structure of the world whose essence lie in some underlying order. The landscapes feature vastness of the sea with islands and small boats to suggest wilderness, grandeur, solitude and silence. In the representations of natural landscapes and heritage in the posters, people appear in only few images. The absence of people is intended to suggest a desert, idyllic environment, where tourists can explore the nature without contact with civilization, in total freedom. It highlights the opportunity of escape and a journey of self-discovery, leaving the everyday stress behind and getting close to nature.

The myth of history is represented by the images of historic old villages, remaining of palaces, temples and amphitheatres of the Roman age and fortified mediaeval towns. This markers are related to the spirit of authenticity, uniqueness and mystery as they are often depicted using blurred colours, for example images of towns in the morning mist. The history is shown as an important segment of national identity. Some of the posters depict serious photographic studies of Croatia's heritage which provides an authority and authenticity enhancing aura.

Another important myth is the one of religion and spirituality. Religion is represented as the important part of Croatian identity as a lot of images depict church buildings, religious art and traditions related to church. The Roman Catholic religious component stands out as one of the key elements of the creation of the Croatian symbolic space. The myth of religion represents in some way the neutralisation of the chaos accumulated by the presence of Balkan as a wild space and establishment of the myth of security. The religious symbols suggest an atmosphere of spirituality, mysticism, purity and connection to the origins.

The myth of tradition and rural space is represented by the images of rural traditions and gastronomy as
relies of an extinct way of life, „the Mediterranean as it one was“. Local people are romanticized, suggesting a lifestyle that is close to nature and highlighting the motives of simplicity and hospitality. The images, carefully selected in order to represent the atmosphere and the local colours, want to stress the relaxed rhythm of life of Croations that tourists can enjoy when visiting the country. Symbolically, the Croatian space is impregnated with past and tradition offering ease and stability, the qualities opposite to a modern urban lifestyle. Overall, the image of Croatia as promoted through the posters is one of a natural space from a different period, with unspoiled landscapes, villages and churches that highlight the importance of faith and traditions. Tourists are welcomed to experience an atmosphere of freedom, nature and rural world in a journey of self-rediscovey, reconnection with the origins and adventure. The brand does not feature any images with modern connotations. Even the images presenting town views are rooted in traditionalism, featuring traditional house styles, specific rustic elements and warm, familiar colours. They clearly suggest something different, diverse, unique and authentic.

The images used in the posters can be related to the central motivating structures of the tourism process. MacCannell [1] claims that the tourist quest is the quest for the authentic. This desire, he argues, arose from the alienation of modern society and the need to retrieve the authentic. According to Culler [23] the distinction between authentic and non authentic is the natural powerful semiotic weapon in tourism. The idea is to see the “real” Croatia and the real life of its people. Of course, this authenticity is never the real local reality, but marked attractions. A series of markers in Croatian tourist posters serves to express authenticity and thus desirability. They are not necessarily exclusive to Croatian tourist images. Cohen [24], for instance, has shown how “unspoilt”, “primitive”, and “remote” are used almost universally as markers of desirability. However, despite the universality of such markers, in the case of Croatia, there are specificities which shape the precise ways in which nature and heritage are depicted. Representations evoke the romantic view of the Mediterranean, its climate and environment, centred on blue seas, empty landscapes and a long history. The main reference in posters is Croatia as quiet, natural place, associated with the term “paradise” and suggestive of an escape from the mundane to the idyllic freedoms of “elsewhere”. A number of images play on the sun, sea, and sightseeing theme. They mostly include place symbols such as seaside and scenic coastal views, but unlike other Mediterranean destinations such as Greece or Spain, they don’t include beach images associated with sports or images of tourists engaged in sightseeing. They rather want to give an impression of escape of the crowds, going off the beaten tracks to a different kind Mediterranean space. These themes are emphasized with the slogans used on the posters: “Mediterranean as it one was”, “Natural stress relief” and “World of difference”. The text of the slogans reinforces the message of the posters. Barthes [21] termed such text that provides the link between the image and its context – the anchorage. It is used to control the reader’s interpretation of pictures. In the event of multiple interpretations, the attached text assists the reader in choosing one interpretation of a picture in preference to another.

Images used in Croatian tourist posters could be described as an auto-ethnographic visual text, in that it is a “text a culture has produced about itself” [25]. Croatia is positioned between the East and the West, as the “otherness” of Europe, a border for the geographical, political and cultural periphery of Europe [26]. It is not sufficiently developed to lose the old world charm and the spirit of the East. At the same time, the East recalls the vision of the disordered Balkans with its troubled past. In transition countries, creation of destination image holds a special significance. Branding and promoting of the country is supposed to reinvent the image, mitigate the communist legacy and reimagine the countries. Besides of its ideological component of creation of national identity, it is also used to counteract negative images of the country [22]. The main functions of destination branding in these countries are: to distance the countries form the old communist system, to change negative or false stereotypes of poor infrastructures, conflicts and instability, to redefine and reconstruct unique national identities, to project a safe and friendly environment for international tourists and recreate a new modern national image by emphasizing the Europeanness [22].

The Croatian brand is also aiming to develop niche tourism products in response to the changes in the global demand and the segmentation of the tourist market [22]. There is a trend towards the development of new kind of touristic products and while Croatia still remains heavily reliant on sun and sea holidays, it is also trying to represent itself in terms of other types of tourism such as cultural and experiential tourism, where visitors look for culture, heritage, new experiences, adventure and self-discovery.
4 Conclusion

Visual images, from travel brochures and television commercials to internet advertisements, represent a powerful component of tourist destination marketing. They are arranged into discourses or frameworks that embrace particular combinations of narratives, concepts and ideologies related to certain spaces and cultures. In this article, I have investigated how these visual narratives are privileging certain stories of place, culture and identity in touristic image of Croatia. The analysis of three series of Croatian poster revealed four myths that were used in the creation of the country image. They represent Croatia as a natural, pure and traditional space connected to history, heritage and religion. Many posters are depicting images which appeal to the tourists’ desire for “real” or “authentic” experiences of Croatian culture. They participate in firming prejudices about Croatia as nearby, but exotic space with intact, paradise nature and rich cultural heritage. Croatia on the posters is a quiet, natural place, perfect for the escape from the mundane to the idyllic freedoms of “elsewhere”. This impression is reinforced with the slogans “The Mediterranean as it one was”, “A world of difference” and “Natural stress relief”.

Images used in destination marketing are not value-free expressions of a place's identity. They are constructed expressions of destinations' cultural and political identities and can reveal much about social construction of space, cultural change and self-understanding. There is a potential for further detailed research on this subject and meanings of touristic images in general. Studies focused on individual tourists’ responses to particular motifs could offer an interesting insight into the effects of representational strategies and cultural construction of places.

References: