





21st Century Landscape Sustainability, Development and Transformations: Geographical Perceptions

Giovanni Messina, Bresena Kopliku (Eds.)

Preface by Elena dell'Agnese

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5. Social media and the iconization of natural landscapes in tourism discourse

Simone Gamba

5. Social media and the iconization of natural landscapes in tourism discourse

Simone Gamba¹

Abstract

The chapter discusses the impacts of tourism and digital technology enhancements on natural and mountain landscapes. Over the past two decades, nature tourism destinations witnessed an increase in interest, more recently and partially driven by the pandemic that has favored outdoors and proximity tourism. Jointly, with the advent of Web 2.0, digital communication, and usergenerated content, visual storytelling is increasingly shaping tourism practices and places (Giudici et al., 2021; Piva & Tadini, 2021; Savi & Emanuel, 2021). The role of photography and video shooting shifted from being a mere playful act into an empowerment tool that iconizes reality. Given these premises, the chapter addresses the social media imaginary produced by tourists in visual representations of natural landscapes, notably mountain destinations, to understand the effects of geo-referencing and online sharing by e-communities committed to travel blogging. It is the case of Horseshoe Bend Canyon, Lake Braies, and Val Verzasca, where sudden popularity on social media caused overcrowding issues. As content sharing may result in the transition of an unspoiled place to a desirable destination, the focus is on the narrative devices employed since the origin of landscape iconography, from romantic paintings to contemporary post-photography; also, on the relationship between tourism and spreadability (Jenkins, 2013) and the concept of the social landscape in which images influence the perception of a place and its promotion, flattens tourism experience, standardize behaviors and the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Keywords:

Social media, tourist gaze, landscape photography, overtourism, mediatization

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1. Tourism and the mediatization of nature

Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a growing interest in nature tourism destinations. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an increase in the desire to visit open spaces with scenic views and to an intensification of flows to natural areas - considered safe because outdoors -, also boosting proximity tourism (Giudici *et al.*, 2021; Piva, Tadini, 2021; Savi, Emanuel, 2021).

Yet, the radical change in the perception of tourism's impact that emerged before the pandemic, (Dodds, Butler, 2019), has returned to arouse interest. To help provide a key for fragile ecosystems to face the risks induced by overtourism, it is appropriate to find answers to questions such as: what is the role played by visual media and social communication in the transformative processes of the territory, landscapes, and nature?

Media have become integral to almost all aspects of modern life and significantly impact how society functions, including how we perceive, understand, and engage with various phenomena. Indeed, *mediatization* refers precisely to the experience of the real as a result of the mutual coconstruction of technology, sociality, and spatiality (Leszczynski, 2015).

As a mediated object, nature isn't just a physical entity with material characteristics, it also carries a symbolic meaning. As represented, shared, and employed in user-generated content and visual storytelling, it plays a crucial role in shaping and influencing tourist activities, which affects the environment and human experiences. The result of this mediatization, in essence, is the transformation of a given portion of territory into a desirable landscape for tourist consumption.

In other words, when the tourist – in the following paragraphs often addressed as "user-tourist" - performs a mediated representation of a natural landscape, this becomes a background and either environmental or architectural spectacle for consumers supposedly looking for authentic aesthetic experience (Minca, 2002).

2. Theoretical framework

Digital communication is largely employed by tourists, particularly in younger age groups, more inclined to content-sharing through social media, providing specific spatial representations. Given the considerable pervasiveness afforded by modern technological devices, the use of these tools raises theoretical and practical questions, which fit into an ongoing debate begun, among others, with the *spreadable media* conceptualization (Jenkins *et al.*, 2013), about people's motivations for disseminating data and images online.

Users make socially contextualized decisions when choosing to spread the image of a visited location, based on questions such as: is it content worth spending time on? Is it worth sharing? Can it be interesting to some specific person or niche of people? Does it communicate something about me or my relationship with this location? What is the best platform to spread it, and how to maximize views? Communicating a destination means, conveying information and creating visual narratives (Robinson, Picard, 2009): photos, but also videos, reviews, and so on.

Social media like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and more recently TikTok have changed how tourists get recommendations, reviews, and insights from other travelers. These platforms are valuable sources of travel information because they allow travelers to access a broad array of user-generated content, such as images, videos, and personal narratives, which greatly influence their destination choices (Sigala, Gretzel, 2012). In other words, sharing information and images makes tourists co-developers of tourism products and promoters of territories (Savi, Emanuel, 2021).

Therefore, the current research draws on visual geography methodology, studies about media in tourism practices, and presents some case studies with the intention of a theoretical reflection. The next paragraphs aim to reflect upon the narratives conveyed by user-tourists on social media to understand how the mediatization of places and landscapes generates tourist icons, with a brief historical reconstruction of landscape imagery. The narratives provided by user-tourists are analyzed mainly through a selection of Instagram photos.

The geolocated posts to which the case studies refer are selected based on their popularity and *spreadability* to identify destinations of greatest interest to user-tourists and the common elements in the representation of geographical spaces. The content analysis is carried out according to keywords, categories, and hashtags related to recent tourist hotspots considered as new desirable "must-see destinations". Users who engage with travel-related content are targeted to identify patterns, motivations, and behavioral changes to question the material consequences of the massive presence of tourists in almost or unspoiled areas.

Secondly, the aim is also to give a short insight into social media storytelling's effect to comprehend how photo-sharing and geotagging may foster or, on the

contrary, hinder tourism planning. Photo-sharing is a topic already addressed in the literature to understand tourism preferences (Garcia-Palomares *et al.*, 2015), and the effects of social media on destination selection and decision-making have gained significant attention in tourism research. Scholars dealt with distinguishing residents' perspective from that of the locals (Garcia-Palomares *et al.*, 2015), mapped the intensity of photographs on photosharing services (Kisilevich *et al.*, 2010), and examined the effect of usergenerated content in tourism and travel information searches (Fotis *et al.*, 2012; Jacobsen, Munar, 2012; Xiang, Gretzel, 2010). As a result, a specific imaginary emerges from stories, comments, and images posted, which not only helps to understand the tourist's perception of a place but also conditions the fruition and planning of the tourist destination (Morazzoni, Zavettieri, 2021; 2023).

3. A controversial canyon

The enjoyment of the tourist experience begins on social media (Leung et al., 2013), even before the trip, and ends only once the experience is over when photographs and experiences are available to networks of friends or other potential tourists (Munar, Jacobsen, 2014). The growing tendency to share potentially attractive images during the trip, portraying certain places as evocative and worth visiting, has at least two consequences.

Firstly, as we will see, the imaginary produced and shared by individuals converges substantially toward an aesthetic uniformity, ending up in standardized models, forms, and structures in which the extraordinary, by a multiplicative effect, is soon reduced to the ordinary. A seemingly spontaneous act of taking a picture or filming a video is transformed into data processed by an algorithm that categorizes and distributes the data, assigning it a value and a position in the digital environment.



Figure 1. Horseshoe Bend. Source: Instagram, #horseshoebend.

The second consequence is related to the so-called "Instagram effect" which boosts the popularity of a point of interest or *Insta-spot* (Ungera, Grassi, 2020) when highlighted on social media, regardless of its accessibility and carrying capacity (Miller, 2017). As contents generated by other tourist users who have already traveled to the same destination are perceived as more reliable than official tourism websites, travel agencies, and mass media advertising (Xiang, Gretzel, 2010), it is not hard to imagine how rapid the spread can be.

Furthermore, a given location may become rapidly viral through *geotagging*. Such a practice has caused concern in America and spurred the emergence of the Leave No Trace movement². The easiness of geotagging, together with new media roles such as influencers and content creators provided travel storytelling with unprecedented power. A clear example of geotagging and content-sharing effect on social media is the case of Horseshoe Bend in Arizona (Shi *et al.*, 2021; Vanderberg, 2023). Around a decade

² Leave No Trace is a list of behavioral principles to keep in outdoor places compiled by the Leave No Trace Center of Outdoor Ethics (the principles are as follows: plan and prepare; travel and camp on durable surfaces; dispose of waste properly; leave what you find; minimize fire impacts; respect wildlife; be respectful of other visitors).

ago, this site on a meander of the Colorado River began to be identified by visitors as particularly picturesque because of its horseshoe shape - hence the name in English - and stunning panoramic views on the canyons (**Fig.1**).

Horseshoe Bend has gained such immense popularity that within just a few years, it has attracted an astonishing number of visitors. By 2018, the number of annual visitors had grown to about 2 million visitors, or about 5,000 visitors a day³. Local authorities claimed that the area was not remotely prepared to accommodate such an amount of people and that the lack of traditional security services normally guaranteed by the presence of rules and appropriate spatial delimitations, put safety at risk (National Park Service, 2018).

4. An historical imaginary of the natural landscape

The case of the aforementioned American canyon is neither geographically isolated nor without historical precedent. Media, particularly visual media, have long played a role in the social construction of outdoor experiences (Urry, 1990; Urry, Larsen, 2011). They can be viewed as a practice rather than merely a representation, actively participating in the world instead of just reflecting it (Crang, 1997).

Landscape painting and nature photography have influenced the way we visually represent open spaces since the earliest days. The very act of shooting is part of the historical process of shaping symbolic landscapes and imaginative geographies. In Western cultures, landscapes shifted from being a mere background to becoming a central theme in Flemish paintings from the XIV century onward (Berque, 2019). The influence on contemporary landscape imagery, however, comes from XIX-century artists who often portrayed landscapes as a rural idyll or the sublime, positing humans as solitary observers watching over the landscape (Smith, 2019). Artists such as J.M.W. Turner, John Constable, and Thomas Cole, each with their style, celebrated nature, emotion, and the sublime, often depicting humans as small and contemplative figures within the *grandeur* of the natural world. Plus, capturing images of visited locations has been a tradition for travelers since the era of the *Grand Tour*, often in the form of a pictorial portrait next to a monument or landscape. With the emergence of photography, the inclination

³ Charlotte Simmonds, *et al.*, "Crisis in our National Parks: How Tourists are Loving Nature to Death," The Guardian, November 20, 2018: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/Nov/20/national-parks-america-overcrowding-crisis-tourism-visitation-solutions.

to represent a subject according to historical aesthetic categories and the desire to visually represent experiences remains unchanged, although nowadays, with smartphone ad platforms like Instagram, the "tourist performance" has evolved (dell'Agnese, 2018).

Yosemite Valley, in California, became an iconic natural subject reproduced first in an oil painting (Fig.2) and, only a few years later, by a photographer (Fig.3), albeit the latter with a slightly different framing. Despite the subject being the same and photography being inspired by painting, something has occurred along the way, with the shift from analog to digital, from image production intended either for personal use or addressed to a limited network of viewers to wider digital content publishing.

From an aesthetic point of view, in the case of Horseshoe Canyon images, the subject, framing, and intentions seem to match the "romantic gaze" associated with the wild and majestic natural landscapes of the Yosemite Valley. Nevertheless, the compulsive sharing enabled by new media may contribute to unintended consequences. The overabundant proliferation of images available daily in the media seems to have progressively altered our processes of perception and signification.

Our actions are often the result of our ongoing relationship between ourselves - and our intentions - and the devices through which we tell our stories as subjects/objects in places that are experienced, co-constructed, and shared in media environments. A more complete understanding of this phenomenon has not only conceptual implications but also practical ones.





Figure 2 (left). Albert Bierstadt, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, 1865. Source:https://www.artsbma.org/collection/looking-down-yosemite-valley-california/.

Figure 3 (right). Carleton E. Watkins, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, 1872, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/264908.

5. The algorithm and the tourist gaze

The rapid growth of Instagram and its integration into everyday life have transformed it into a significant source of travel inspiration, recommendations, and information (Sigala, Gretzel, 2012). Every day 95 million photographs are uploaded to Instagram⁴, meaning that less than every two seconds people take more photos than were taken in the first 150 years of photography history. Can we browse this visual magma? Hardly so. The sophisticated algorithms underlying digital platforms' basic functions take care it on our behalf. Such a context of algorithmic dominance is inherently set up to the reassuring standardization of the gaze and confine user-tourists in a *filter bubble* that, in this case, is in all evidence that of a tourist postcard icon.





Figure 4. Insta repeat. Source: Instagram.

As the user-tourist imagery conveyed through social media follows aesthetic patterns and specific representations (Skinner, 2022), one will not be surprised when introduced to Insta_repeat (fig.4). This Instagram account serves as an aggregator of images in which natural sceneries in Canada and the United States are framed almost identically, showing the extreme homogeneity of posted content and a clear standardization of the gaze. Paradoxically, images taken to frame the beauty of a scenic view end up being reduced to ordinariness, matching representational clichés (Dondero, 2005). The authenticity of the experience is shaped by these representations, turning the landscape into a commodified product for tourist to consume (Urry, 1990). Although, as we know, the mimetic desire of tourists dates back to the Grand Tour, nowadays they can express their vision through more

⁴ https://earthweb.com/how-many-pictures-are-on-instagram/, last access: December 18, 2023.

advanced devices and the results are, as in this case, stereotypical narratives, where the plurality of possible subjects is reduced to a single dimension.

What Insta_Repeat has accomplished in Canada can be similarly replicated elsewhere, for example, in the context of the Italian alpine landscape. Through a procedure based on targeted keyword *tagging*, images that can be aggregated on the model of Insta_repeat are strikingly similar (**Fig.5**). They reveal a propensity for repetition that neutralizes the self-perceived originality of the experience to which the authors of the shots seem to aspire.

Such iconographic reiteration may be attributable to the very characteristics of the social media algorithms to spread repetitive tropes while showing relevant content to single users. However, there is another reason why we might have the impression of always seeing the same frames and subjects in social media photos. The reason lies in the fact that taking pictures is not simply an individual gesture, but a participatory action in a collective ritual (Bell & Lyall, 2005)—a typical ritual of the hypermobility era: shoot and share. User-tourists and, in particular, so-called influencers, travel bloggers, or "TikTokers", just like a professional filmmaker or photographer, perform an act by which they sacralize a place and make it a destination for pilgrimage by their worshippers – followers -, who will then repeat the same ritual of the shared snapshot or video (Jurgenson, 2019; Zhou, 2022; Trillò *et al.*, 2022).

6. The end of romantic contemplation?

Moreover, the moment a given panoramic view is considered photogenic enough to become "Instagrammable", the very sanctity of the place is compromised due to the risks associated with overcrowding (UNWTO, 2018). In this regard, the case of Lake Braies or Pragser Widsee in South Tyrol, initially popularized in Italy by the TV show "A un Passo dal Cielo" is striking evidence⁵.

While taking a photograph that has already been seen and seen again thousands of times in front of Lake Braies, user-tourists are perpetuating the well-established romantic pattern. In Caspar David Friedrich's "The Wanderer on the Sea of Fog" we recognize the figurative device known as *Rückenfigur*,

⁵ The same argument applies, for example, to Hallstatt, the Austrian village that inspired the Frozen cartoon. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2020/01/20/quality-of-life-has-deteriorated-mayor-of-austrian-town-taking-new-measures-against-overt, last access: December 18, 2023.

⁶ https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/sammlung-online/caspar-david-friedrich/

that is, a character seen from the back, lost in the contemplation of nature, with whom the observer identifies. This model is often adopted unwittingly by the many users who post images of people portrayed from behind, intent on admiring a valley or on the prow of a wooden boat in Lake Braies (**Fig.5**).



Figure 5. Lake Braies, South Tyrol. Source: Instagram.

Just as white sand, coconut palms, and crystal-clear waters are maritime icons showcased to attract tourists, in the same way, mountain landscape iconic views become central in the gaze of tourists or hikers, in a paradoxical relationship between tourist massification and the wilderness search (Sedda, Sorrentino, 2020). As in romantic picturing, leveraging emotion remains a current practice, with the difference that, nowadays, the subject's emotions and their contemplation are regulated by the inner logic of the digital algorithm, a computational system designed to enhance user engagement, satisfaction, and platform growth.

Nevertheless, when technical rationality leads to standardization, as in this case, the tourist experience's serendipity, that is the ability or need to discover something new and different from what we are used to, is neutralized (Tanca, 2019). This happens under conditions of overexposure to data, issues that are not framed into the dominant narrative end up blending into informational *fuzziness* (Turco, 2021). The experience of contemplation is eclipsed by

wanderer-ueber-dem-nebelmeer, last access: December 18, 2023.

the very same mechanisms involved in confirmation bias and filter bubbles attributable to algorithm curation.

Similarly, the tourist who witnesses a potentially "Instagrammable" event risks not grasping the deep and aesthetic density of the contemplation experience, rather is simply induced to the reproduction of a stereotyped image.

7. The material consequences of iconization

Since the 1990s, a discourse has emerged in fine arts studies around the concept of post-photography, which refers to photography that flows into the hybrid space of digital sociality as a result of visual overabundance (Fontcuberta, 2015). The spread of digital cameras, personal computers, and increasingly user-friendly graphics processing and photo editing features have long been signs that photography is entering a new phase.

An excess of images has long been considered a characteristic of the contemporary world, a sign of "supermodernity", (Augé, 1992). From a geographical perspective, the excess of images produced particularly by television, to which Augé referred, with the new media intensifies and causes spatial disorientation, challenging the possibility of mapping. The purpose of a map is to abstract and synthesize information to facilitate our orientation on the ground and, for that reason, it must filter the mass of big data to retain only those pertinent to a focused analysis. Borges' unrealizable map of the empire in his *A Universal History of Infamy*, which superimposes on every fold of the land its graphic transposition, hypothetically is now reproducible, only in the metaverse. We would be lost, however, should it be, in the indiscriminate amount of detail, as infinite information equals zero information.

Again, when and where user-tourists employ social media to share videos and photos of natural landscapes, not only an overabundance of images is produced, but also as a consequence a multiplier effect that conveys flows of visitors to those areas.

Therefore, to the five characteristics (innovator, informed, impatient, deluded, unfaithful) that tourism marketing ascribes to the contemporary tourist (Ejarque, 2011), one more might be added: flooded. Perpetually connected, the user-tourist floods— and is flooded— with a multitude of information and messages that affect his selection process and choice of destinations. In this sense, social media algorithms function as a compass: viral content directs flows toward a new destination in such a short period as

to cause overcrowding.

For example, in the summer of 2017, a valley in the Canton of Ticino, benefited from a spontaneous media campaign by a group of teenagers, that generated a faster increase in visitors than we might expect from Swiss territorial marketing. A video they shot in the clear waters of the Brione River in the Verzasca Valley went viral within hours, with the headline "The Maldives an hour from Milan", resulting in tourist flows far exceeding seasonal averages, as the spike in Google we research requests suggests (**Fig.6**).

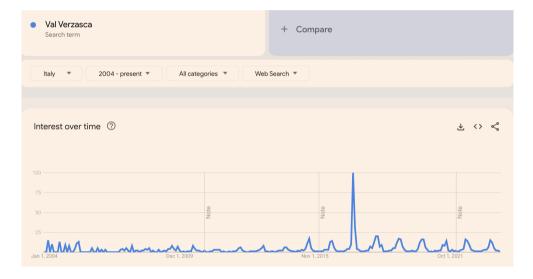


Figure 6. Val Verzasca results in web searches. Source: Google Trends.

Identifying representations by user-tourists during the exploration phase of new potential destinations, could allow public and private stakeholders to develop strategies to increase its value, plan access more consciously, propose new tourist itineraries, and stimulate the local community.

The problem is that the transcience of the trending topic makes long-term planning complicated. Since the role of photography and video footage shifted from a mere playful, memorial moment to a tool of *empowerment* that iconizes the real, some material consequences arise. Such iconization contributes to substantial demand volatility, frequency, and quantity of

⁷ La Repubblica, "Le Maldive a un'ora da Milano": la Val Verzasca invasa dai turisti dopo il video virale", https://www.repubblica.it/viaggi/2017/07/23/news/_le_maldive_a_un_ora_da_milano_la_val_verzasca_invasa_dai_turisti_dopo_il_video_virale-171449999/last access: December 16, 2023.

tourist flows challenges policy intervention by destination management organizations (DMOs). Moreover, although local policymakers and stakeholders have long considered tourism a large development opportunity for years, this perspective has been questioned and it is not taken for granted that tourism development must necessarily be pursued (Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2019).

8. Final reflections

We explored the transformative impact of technology on contemporary tourism practices by focusing on the role of social media and geotagging. The evolution of these technologies has significantly altered tourism, providing destinations with increased visibility and spreadability. A hybrid state between reality and virtuality is produced and communicated through a certain selection of images, a *cyberplace* (Albanese and Graziano, 2020), or, in other words, a space where personal interpretations spread massively through new media, transferring our visions to others. Social media users iconize nature, turning landscapes into alluring destinations, exemplified by Horseshoe Canyon. Destinations shared online are portrayed either as "must-see landscapes" or "places to see at least once in a lifetime".

Drawing parallels between modern tourist behavior and historical-artistic trends, particularly the romantic appreciation of landscapes in painting and then photography, we pointed out similarities with visual practices of the past. Nowadays social media facilitates the rapid and wider dissemination of destinations, reinforcing the standardization of subjects and the ritualization of practices, dividing locations into those deemed Instagram worthy and others not. This standardization results in a superficial and trivialized experience of a place, where the visual representation and content sharing of the location take precedence.

Also, an erosion of the indexical relationship between subject and image can be observed, in favor of digital fluidity (Gunthert, 2015), which involves immediate commentary and re-sharing. Two main consequences of this practice have emerged: the first, as already mentioned, is a stereotypical reproduction of naturalistic views to enhance the aesthetic qualities of the landscape; the second is that these representation patterns and rapid diffusion contribute to the success of a new tourist destination with transformative effects and potential overtourism issues.

User-tourists do not only offer and share their representation of places

through Instagram, but through their practice, they contribute to directing and re-directing tourist flows. Consequently, a pattern of intense and unstable place consumption can be identified, making tourism and environmental management challenging due to its susceptibility to trends. In summary, a complex interplay can be noticed between technology, social media, and tourist behavior, leading to a shift in the travel experiences and the challenges faced by territories.

The transformation of places into tourist destinations due to photo sharing, geotagging, and visual storytelling through digital platforms has both positive and negative consequences. First, the popularization through iconization of landscapes can attract a larger number of tourists, leading to increased revenue for local businesses, accommodations, and tour operators. The influx of tourists may drive local governments to invest in infrastructure development, improving amenities and services in response to the increased demand. Popularization may also lead to increased awareness of the need for conservation, prompting local communities and authorities to invest in preserving natural and cultural assets, in particular environmental management solutions such as spatial zoning, concentration or dispersal of tourists, and entry restrictions. This is due to high tourist numbers that can lead to overcrowding, and commodification, putting strain on local resources and ecosystems, resulting in environmental degradation and loss of the destination's appeal.

Understanding these consequences is crucial for tourism planners, policymakers, and local communities to develop sustainable tourism practices that balance the positive economic benefits with the need for environmental and cultural preservation.

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Territories continue to transform due to endogenous and exogenous development drives. The thickening of logistics and transport networks, large commercial hubs, energy supply options, agricultural and industrial policies, tourism and migrations constitute then, individually and in a systemic sense, some of the lenses available to read the transformative dynamics of territories in the crucial current geopolitical context. In addition, the increasing reach of digital technologies in the spaces and practices of our daily lives, has changed the way we perceive and use the landscape. These transformations find a reified outcome in landscape transitions, becoming a foothold for a trans-scale geographical reflection. We therefore want to insert this volume on this horizon. In fact, we have wanted to stimulate the geographical community to try their hand at landscape analysis to identify, through methodological and/or applied research contributions, problems, practices and trajectories inherent in the transformative dynamics of territories, compressed between the urgency of development and the need to change the energy and consumption paradigm.

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