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Tourism and natural imaginary in Sicily: an ecolinguistic perspective

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Abstract: In the modern period, tourism is one of the most important global industries. It often appears to guarantee contact with nature, claims to protect habitats and respect principles of ecological sustainability. This paper explores Sicilian tourism and its representation in publicitary material from an ecolinguistic perspective. It asks what kind of imaginary of nature in modern Sicily can be viewed through such shots of the natural world, how these imaginaries might reflect current ecosophy, and how compatible they might be with ecological principles. It applies the heuristic notion of ‘imaginary’, current in social sciences such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology, to the context of ecolinguistic enquiry, asks how our ideas of a place and its ecosystems may be socially or culturally determined, and how these factors play into a mindset which may, or may not, be ecologically sensitive. The findings suggest that tourism photographs tend to present place images that conform to strict generic criteria, responding to public expectations and pragmatic, commercial requirements. They neither present reliable images of Sicily, nor contribute to the propagation of a specific sense of place, but rather conform to a generic pattern that tends to homogenize tourist destinations at a global level.

Keywords: ecolinguistics; image; imaginary; nature; Sicily; tourism

1 Introduction

Under the multiple pressures of modernity our relationship with nature has fundamentally altered, not only in the breaking of centennial agricultural connections, but arguably also in intimate, personal fields like art, mythology, religion, philosophy, therapy, leisure, and contemplation (Bergmann and Clingerman 2018; Duguid 2010). Where Keats and other Romantics opposed an idealized, bucolic ‘nature’ to a weary human world (Löwy and Sayre 2018; Williams 1975), today the solace that nature can provide has become a commodity for the tourism and leisure industries. The great mysteries of nature, as well as Romantic conceptions of a

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pantheistic natural world that surrounds and sustains human existence (Günter Heimbrock and Persch 2021) appear to contract almost to a vanishing point under the impact of mass tourism in its various forms (van Heezik and Brymer 2018).

This paper focuses on natural photos taken to promote tourism in Sicily. It asks what kind of imaginary of nature in modern Sicily is construed by such shots of the natural world, and how this might depend on the perspective of the taker, as well as the pragmatic dimension of intentionality that underlies the photographs. The paper recognizes that ‘nature’ in itself is a contested, fluctuating concept, one that serves multiple functions that shift with human social change (Millington 2013). As Smith (1999: 361, cited in Næss 2008: 69) says: “Almost inevitably, the conclusion of such studies is that there is no singular ‘nature’ as such, only a diversity of contested natures; and that each such nature is constructed through a variety of sociocultural processes”.

As Thurlow and Jaworski (2011: 222) say, tourism is semiotic in nature, “simultaneously a mediatized and a mediated activity”. It is a cliché that the camera cannot lie, and hence must simply show ‘what is there’. Peirce, for example, thought that a photograph is “physically forced to correspond point by point to nature” (Peirce 1965: 143, cited in Winston 1998: 54). In anthropology, however, the inescapable subjectivity of photographic work is acknowledged (Crowe 2003; Henley 1998), and in photography too, as will be seen, selection is key (Clarke 1997).

The first part of the paper focuses on the imaginary itself, and contextualizes the notion within the more language-based approaches current in critical discourse studies. In the words of the International Ecolinguistics Association (IEA), one of the key aims of ecolinguistics is “to show how linguistics can be used to address key ecological issues, from climate change and biodiversity loss to environmental justice” (<https://www.ecolinguistics-association.org/>). This paper focuses on whether the natural imaginaries in tourism photography reflect current ecosophy, or whether they respond to a different internal logic.

2 Modern environmentalism and ecolinguistics

Ecolinguistics explores the relationship between language and the environment; how patterns of thought and expression highlight attitudes towards the natural and the non-human world (Fill 2001; Fill and Mühlhäusler 2001; Fill and Penz 2018; Stibbe 2012, 2014, 2015). It can thus be seen as a manifestation of the ecological awareness that has emerged in the late modern period, as part of a collective awakening to the devastating effects of industrial capitalism on the biosphere in the Anthropocene period (Ponton and Sokół 2022). At a popular level, this awareness has led to the introduction of many eco-friendly practices such as urban cycle ways, recyclable

materials, and green energy. Activist groups such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Extinction Rebellion, and Just Stop Oil have emerged. However, just as ‘nature’ may be a heterogeneous, multi-faceted concept, there is no unitary understanding of ‘ecology’ (Ponton 2022), which may range from what (Naess 1973) terms ‘shallow’ to ‘deep’ ecology:

1. *The Shallow Ecology movement*: Fight against pollution and resource depletion. Central objective: the health and affluence of people in the developed countries.

2. *The Deep Ecology movement*: (1) Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the *relational, total-field image*. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations. [...] The ecological field-worker acquires a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life. He reaches an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life. (Naess 1973: 95–96, italics original)

The former type of ecology is pragmatic, and could potentially motivate all kinds of social actors, including politicians who may adopt green policies for superficial political reasons. The latter is more radical, and involves religious and philosophical convictions that re-position humanity among the other animals in a ‘biospherical net’ in which the latter are ‘respected’, or even ‘venerated’ (Bratton 2008; Gottlieb 2006), as is the case in some indigenous cultures (Robinson et al. 2021). It seems that, while the second group of ecologists would share the objectives of the first, since pollution is harmful to the whole animal kingdom including humans, there is no reason why this should be true of the first group. The key difference appears to consist in humans’ relations with what has been termed the ‘non-human’, especially with other sentient beings. Shallow ecology may re-produce habitual exploitative relations and practices, while deep ecology acknowledges animals as conscious beings that share many human characteristics, including personhood (Ross 2019), political organization (Meijer 2019), and complex vocal interaction (Suzuki 2016; Todt and Naguib 2000). Some have the capacity to name each other, play games and use tools (Thompson 2019). Again, there are echoes here with the way some traditional societies have regarded the non-human world (Bringhurst 2007; Stibbe 2015; Thompson 2019).

The pressing question of the actual environmental character of tourism needs to be answered. Though it increasingly incorporates environmental statements in its advertising discourse, this practice has been critiqued as greenwashing (Bowen 2014; Hall 2015). The environmental impacts of tourism are increasingly contested, for example in the case of cruise tourism (Ponton and Asero 2018); phenomena like overtourism and tourismphobia have drawn attention (Hugues et al. 2018; Milano et al. 2019). Moreover, tourism is an industry with a significant global presence: according

to the World Travel and Tourism Council, in 2019 it accounted for a quarter of all new jobs created globally, 10.3 % (333 million) of all jobs, and 10.3 % of global GDP (US\$ 9.6 trillion). Given the ample power of images to influence human responses to phenomena (Freedberg 1989), pictorial representations of nature in such a conspicuous industry deserve attention.

3 Methodology

The paper analyses a corpus of 45 photographs, consisting of the webpages obtained by a google search for the prompt ‘Visit Sicily’ (see Appendix A). For comparative purposes, and to see how far the results typify the genre of global tourism photography, two reference corpora were assembled. The first of these is a collection of images from the Trip Advisor site for Marina di Modica, a beach resort on the South-East coast of Sicily. The second consists of three webpages promoting tourism in other global contexts, those of Visit Malta, Visit Spain, and Visit South Africa. These corpora are used purely as additional resources, to check the insights obtained from the main analysis. For example, one finding was that there were few images featuring architectural heritage in the corpus; this was checked through the reference corpora to see if it might figure as a generic feature of tourism photography.

Images are “an essential component of the process of destination branding” (Ponton and Asero 2022: 184), a key feature of the tourism industry (Morgan et al. 2004; Roesch 2009). The images are viewed from a pragmatic perspective (Bara 2011; Kecskes 2016; Wilson and Sperber 1990), assuming that in tourism photography the image has a clear purpose which all the elements combine to advance; namely to attract tourists, to sell destinations and associated tourism products (Kefala 2021). In selecting features of a destination to include in publicity material, the companies collectively affect the way it will be seen by prospective visitors, and by exercising such an influence, the images play a role in the creation of an imaginary of a destination. By focusing on these images, we learn something about the cognitive processes of both producers of these images and their consumers.

To view the images systematically, it was decided to check them for the presence or absence of categories listed as tourism ‘attractions’ in tourism research literature (Francesconi 2012; Pan et al. 2007). That of Kušen (2002) appears to be one of the most complete available:

Geological features/Climate/Water/Flora/Fauna/Protected natural heritage/Protected cultural heritage/The culture of life and work/Famous persons and historical events/Special events/happenings/Cultural and religious institutions/Natural spas/sanatoriums/Sport and recreation facilities/Tourism paths, trails and roads. (Kušen 2002: 61)

Each image was examined and the presence of these features recorded. From the point of view of tourism providers, these are all factors which experience has shown to be successful in contributing to tourist flows towards the destination; it therefore seems a reasonable hypothesis to expect them to feature in photographs of the places. The study also devotes some attention to a consideration of what has *not* been photographed, highlighting selectivity and proposing significant absences as a category worth investigating. Multimodal research tends to focus on the content features of images, in other words on what viewers see, rather than on what they are not shown. van Leeuwen (1996: 39) describes a phenomenon he calls ‘exclusion’, ‘suppression’, or ‘backgrounding’, where discursive selection allows writers to downplay certain categories of social actors or exclude them altogether. In analyzing photography, which has pretensions to show simply ‘what is there’, this perspective cannot be ignored. It will be seen that there are significant absences in the corpus; there are very few human figures, and none from the non-human world, where this term refers to animals, insects, birds, etc.¹ In Stibbe’s terms, these absences figure as ‘erasure’ (Stibbe 2012, 2015), a significant semiotic feature contributing to discriminatory representation.

The heuristic of the ‘imaginary’ (Strauss 2006), current in social sciences such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology, a notion that reflects the “ocularcentrism of modernity” (Garlick 2002: 294), is mainly used to analyze the data obtained. Alongside analytical linguistic tools in the tradition of multimodal research (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021) it adds two dimensions: firstly, it offers a means of theorizing findings as part of a broader picture relating to the way nature is seen within a specific society. Secondly, it draws on nuanced understandings at an individual, psychological level, to account for the choices of image creators in tourism discourse.

The aim of the research is twofold: firstly, to identify the elements that characterize Sicilian tourism photography, and secondly to see what the patterns reveal about the tourism imaginary, specifically that of Sicily. A later section (Section 6) discusses how far this may coincide with a more general ‘ecological imaginary’. Other research questions regard the pragmatic factors that might account for choices of what to represent, and finally the more speculative question of how far the imaginary of modern tourism in places like Sicily conforms with eco-friendly principles.

1 One might critique this finding as overly subjective, i.e. that the analyst’s prejudices determine which ‘absences’ are regarded as ‘significant’. As a *reductio ad absurdum*, it could be objected that there are no pianos in the images, no watering cans, etc. However, our world knowledge tells us that in any holiday destination, in a sunny season, there are always crowds of tourists (which does not apply to pianos or watering cans); we also know that animals and birds are found in natural contexts, that it is quite usual to see a variety of boats – the subject of a later example – in most stretches of the Mediterranean, and so on. So these findings are not wholly subjective, but based to a degree on common experience.

4 The imaginary

4.1 Imaginary and image

Salazar (2012: 864) summarizes what are perhaps the main strands in the concept of imaginary, as relating to “a culture’s ethos or a society’s shared, unifying core conceptions (Castoriadis 1987), a fantasy or illusion created in response to a psychological need (Lacan and Sheridan 2004) and a cultural model or widely shared implicit cognitive schema (Anderson 2016; Taylor 2004)”. The breadth of these fields of reference illustrates the pervasiveness of the imaginary for social science research, as well as hinting at the diverse applications of this fertile concept. Salazar also provides his own version, which leans towards the more familiar terrain, for linguists, of cognitive studies,² conceptualizing imaginaries as “socially transmitted representational assemblages that interact with people’s personal imaginings and are used as meaning-making and world-shaping devices” (Salazar 2012: 864). This study follows this definition, finding usefulness in its socio-cognitive connotations.

Roland Barthes’ well-known example of a black soldier saluting the French flag, in *Mythologies* (Barthes 2006: 115), is intended as an account of the Saussurian concepts of signifier and signified, in the context of his theories of modern myth (see Figure 1). As he says:

I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. (Barthes 2006: 115)

The applicability of this approach to the notion of imaginary, as described above, is clear. Where Barthes uses the verb ‘signifies’, we can read ‘means’, and understand Barthes’ mythical dimension of meaning, developed in the work as a whole, as the terrain of the imaginary. The additional, connotational meanings Barthes refers to are all generated in viewers’ minds thanks to their shared knowledge of the context of French social history. Without this knowledge, the picture is just an image of a young man saluting.

The same could be said for other images which have a certain currency in mediascapes – for example, the UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party)

² Broadly speaking, linguists with a social orientation are familiar with theorizations of “the extra-communicative background information or knowledge, the frames, or the higher order schemata and mental representations which discourse participants draw on and use in order to make appropriate interpretative inferences” (Thibault 2004: 31).



Figure 1: Barthes' soldier.

“Breaking Point” poster (see Figure 2) which claimed, textually that “the EU has failed us all”, beside an image of an endless, snaking line of migrants, many with Islamic features. The poster’s effectiveness as propaganda depends on the activation of multiple cognitive cues, built up in viewers’ minds by media over decades, that relate to uncontrollable immigration, ‘hordes’, ‘floods’, ‘invasion’, and the like (Baker et al. 2008; Mantello and Ponton 2018). The poster could be thought of as representing a far-right, populist ‘imaginary of immigration’, concentrating latent emotional reactions around a unique political proposition. It is worth noting that the effectiveness of the poster is arguably not limited to voters who share a particular ideology. While the latter may be convinced to vote with UKIP, other viewers will only understand the image if they are aware, to some degree, of certain propositions current across the speech community: “uncontrolled immigration to Britain is a bad thing”, “the EU is soft on migrants”, “Islamic migrants are potential terrorists”, etc. Thus, even passive understanding of an imaginary confirms that these ideas are dialogically active (White 2003) within a certain social group.

Not all imaginaries have such an overt political message. Consider Andy Warhol’s celebrated work, “Coca-Cola 3” (see Figure 3), in 1962. Like the Brexit poster, this work depends on the contribution of unseen factors operating in viewers’ minds. Thanks to these, it constitutes itself as an imaginary of modern consumerism, a popular product that claims the right to usurp the place of traditional models of fine art – landscapes, portraits, historical or religious scenes, etc. (Hennessey 2022). Its subversion of aesthetic canons is in keeping with the spirit of the modern period where art, like soft drinks, can be mass produced, distributed in adverts from which there is no escape.



Figure 2: The UKIP “Breaking Point” poster.



Figure 3: Andy Warhol’s “Coca-Cola 3”.

4.2 The romantic imaginary

In discussing ecological imaginaries current in the tourism sector, a useful starting point is the Romantic period, and ideas on nature that have arguably influenced thought and behavior down to the present day (Urry 2002). One relevant factor in accounting for this was the Grand Tour, whose latter days saw the first beginnings of mass tourism (Heafford 2006); another, a reaction to the dramatic side-effects of industrialization (Cloudsley 1990). Under such influences, Romantic thought reached out to the natural world in philosophy and poetry that emphasized the ‘sublime’, described by Burke as “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke 1998). These feelings may have been of a pleasurable absorption in the mind’s

capacities, as in Wordsworth's *Daffodils* "that is the Bliss of solitude",³ or joy, most famously in Schiller's *An die Freude* but also found in many English Romantic poems, for example, "being too happy in thy happiness"⁴ (Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*); or a kind of terror inspired by darkness, by the unknown, destructive potentials latent in certain types of landscape. For example, in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*: "But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted/Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover! A savage place!"⁵

Landscape and its features were also foregrounded in poetry that tried to capture an ineffable essence, a spirit that was felt to inhabit them and was the invisible source of their charm or power (Scaramellini 1996). Significantly, in such writing the landscape "becomes the mirror of the interior world" or the means for "transmitting personal emotions instead of offering only place descriptions" (Scaramellini 1996: 51). Thus, Romantic poetry offered "a vision of nearly sacred wholeness to replace the apparently fractured vision of contemporary being" (Oerlemans 2002: 19). This is the pantheistic imaginary of nature expressed in Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparell'd in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream⁶

Such lines contain the essence of the Romantic natural imaginary. Even if we subtract the pantheism from Wordsworth's lines (Levine 1994; Wood 1985), what remains is a transcendental perspective, a vision of natural features – especially meadows, forests, and streams – as objects touched by the light of an inherent divinity. Normal perceptions are heightened in such poetry, and the natural objects of the world imbued with deeper meanings, additional layers of intensity, as in Shelley's well-known lines on the sea:

3 Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45521/i-wandered-lonely-as-a-cloud> (accessed 10 May 2023).

4 Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44479/ode-to-a-nightingale> (accessed 10 May 2023).

5 Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43991/kubla-khan> (accessed 10 May 2023).

6 Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood> (accessed 10 May 2023).

The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
 Lull'd by the coil
 of his crystalline streams,
 Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
 And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
 Quivering within the wave's intenser day⁷

For the modern tourist Shelley's subjective experience of intense delight, the Romantic sublime indicated by the reference to the 'wave's intenser day', has altered. Modern tourism products center on providing 'intense' experiences that involve natural features like beaches, seas, sunshine, sunsets, country walks, forest trails, mountains, and so on. However, the focus is on consumption rather than contemplation. The natural features are commodified (Young and Markham 2020) through their inclusion in experiential 'packets' that guarantee more mundane bodily satisfactions such as relaxation and other health benefits and most of all, a tanned skin (Pritchard and Morgan 2011).

4.3 Ecological imaginaries

Since, as was discussed above (Section 3) ecologies are variegated, there can be no single 'ecological imaginary'. Figure 4 shows images suggestive of a 'deep ecological imaginary', in the sense used by Salazar, which takes for granted that social meanings, axiological positions, and deontic propositions may be activated among viewers of certain images.

Pragmatically, these images refer to latent environmental notions regarding the effects of human industrial activity on animals, that lodge in viewers' memory because of their repetition in media. As in the transmission of memes (Wiggins 2019), they work implicitly to convey specific discourses, connecting representations of reality with the realm of deontic propositions. From the perspective of deep ecology, humans are not at the top of creation, or apart from it. The polar bear looks directly at the camera in what Kress and van Leeuwen (2021: 118) term a 'demand' picture, claiming the right to a 'relationship' with the viewer (see also Stibbe 2015: 156). The message is that we do have responsibilities towards animals, whose suffering matters, especially when we provoke it. As with the Brexit imaginary (Section 4.1), interpretation involves the mental act of *disambiguation* (Griffiths 2006), or

⁷ Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45134/ode-to-the-west-wind> (accessed 10 May 2023).



Seagull and oil

Polar bear, shrinking ice

Turtle and plastic

Figure 4: Ecological imaginaries.⁸

rapid, mainly unconscious calculation of possible correspondences that produce satisfactory interpretations, with incalculable effects among viewers which may depend on factors like their ideological outlook.⁹

4.4 The imaginary and tourism discourse

For our purposes, it is important to note that the imaginary has a double aspect that varies according to the analytical perspective. In the case of tourism, for example, we may be concerned with how destinations are conceived of by those operating in the industry – tourism service providers, hoteliers, destination marketers, and the like. Such social actors tend to conceive of imaginaries as brands (Almeyda-Ibáñez and George 2017), and disseminate images and discourses likely to attract potential consumers to their tourism products. Their imaginaries may feature aspects of destinations that relate to descriptors from lists of ‘tourist attractions’ (see Kušen 2002;

⁸ ABC News. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna22729382> (accessed 28 January 2023); WWF. Available at: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/what-do-sea-turtles-eat-unfortunately-plastic-bags> (accessed 28 January 2023); Vox. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/down-to-earth/23168326/polar-bears-sea-ice-glaciers-extinction-greenland> (accessed 28 January 2023).

⁹ Images like these have a strong dialogical charge (White 2003), that is to say they clearly involve dialogue between an invisible figure who berates the reader with an implicit message like: “look at this poor turtle chewing plastic. This is all our fault. We should be using eco-friendly material for our packaging, if we go on like this we will end up in a world with no turtles, etc.” In order to arrive at this interpretation the viewing subject needs to have relevant discourses somewhere in their memory (Barrett 2021; Kress and van Leeuwen 2021). What is not yet clear from research is the degree to which the mere fact of performing these cognitive operations may contribute to the images’ persuasive force (its perlocutionary effect).

Pan et al. 2007). In this sense, an imaginary would indeed be a kind of ‘representational assemblage’ – it regards how a place is conceived of in the popular consciousness, thanks to the cumulative effect of numerous textual and pictorial representations. On the other hand, imaginaries clearly have a personal dimension, too, encompassing subjective processes, ideas, or fantasies concerning destinations that operate at an individual level since, as Salazar (2012: 865) points out, “the agents who imagine are individuals, not societies”.

In some theorizations of the imaginary it is suggested that such processes result in the creation of a collection of filters through which subjects are accustomed to viewing reality, if it is admitted that there is such a thing as objectively existing ‘reality’ (Olivier 2004; Strauss 2006: 328).¹⁰ A tourist motivated more by bodily relaxation than cultural stimuli (Cetin and Bilgihan 2016), for example, may be indifferent to the Mexican, Cuban, or Thai culture that surrounds their eventual destination. It may be questioned whether a tourist whose main aim is to get a tan, and spends a fortnight sunbathing on a beach, can be said to have ‘visited Mexico’ at all.

These issues are also important in movie tourism, the variety of tourism arguably most dependent on the ‘image’ for its promotion, where the subjects’ interest in film may filter out other priorities. Sicily, for instance, is rich in the attractions featured in Kušen’s list of categories (see Section 3). However, a movie tourist, drawn by the Godfather movies or the more recent global television phenomenon *Montalbano*, may find the ‘Sicilian crime’ imaginary so powerful that these other attractions fail to register fully (Asero and Ponton 2020a, 2020b, 2021). Movie tourists find themselves so bound up in their screen-related imaginaries that the actual realities of the loci visited may have little or no impact on them (Jewell and McKinnon 2008).

This may be an overstatement or better, an inaccurate picture of the motivations of movie tourists. It has been argued that they are drawn to movie destinations precisely because the fictional context coincides with tourist ‘attractions’ of a more traditional kind (see, e.g. Busby and Klug 2001; Gjorgievski and Trpkova 2012; Macionis and Sparks 2009; Suni and Komppula 2012). People, it is suggested, decide their holiday destinations because they are struck by beautiful natural scenes in movies like *The Beach* or *The Lord of the Rings*, and specific holiday packages, tourist guides, etc., spring up as a result of such films (Jewell and McKinnon 2008). As yet, however, little research has pondered the subjective dimension of such tourism (cf. Beeton 2005; Larsen 2007). It could be asked, for example, whether movie tourists

¹⁰ A lengthy discussion of the imaginary (in the everyday sense of ‘that which can be imagined’) would be useful; its relation to ideas, for example in the phenomenological philosophy of Descartes (Detlefsen 2013), Berkeley (Doney 2019), but this is beyond the scope of the current paper.

who visit New Zealand because of *The Lord of the Rings* return convinced that they have seen the authentic ‘plains of Rohan’, and whether such convictions may imply a type of cognitive deficit. The hypothesis underlying this line of thinking is that there exists some kind of ‘real’ locus – an ‘authentic New Zealand’, for example, accessible only to especially sensitive tourists (for authenticity in tourism see MacCannell 1999).

The question is relevant because, in this study, imaginaries are seen, from the personal psychological perspective, as filters that determine how the subject views reality, and how they interpret the world around them. It is clear that a New Zealander who grew up in the real ‘plains of Rohan’, before the films were made, will have a very different understanding of these natural features to the Tolkien lover. Again, if we accept the idea that there is such a thing as an objectively existing, extra-mental ‘reality’, the local person’s conception of their homeland may be closer to this than the observer who views the mountains, trees, rivers, and so on, through the emotive lens of a fictional filter. Here, for example, is Beeton’s account of her visit to Doune Castle, in Scotland, used by Monty Python for their film on the Holy Grail:

In terms of pilgrimage to a ‘sacred’ site; it is not merely the humour of the movie that attracts, but more importantly the stage in one’s life that it represents – for me it was a coming-of-age experience, being accepted into an ‘elite’ group (of Python fans – or those who ‘got’ it). The movie and the site become representations or simulacra of something else, as do many religious pilgrimage sites. (Beeton 2005: 18)

Though she does pay due attention to the psychological motivations of the film-induced tourist, Beeton’s remarks confirm that the experience includes aspects that have little to do with the place in itself, as a historical building, a site of traditional culture. Importantly, her description of the individual psychological experience uses the terms ‘representation’ and ‘simulacra’: it is not the *haecceity* (St.Pierre 2017) of Doune Castle that she experiences, but a personal meaning shared by other Python fans, touching realms of psychological experience that are inaccessible for visitors who have not loved the film in question. To labor the point somewhat, we can imagine Beeton and other Python enthusiasts during their visits to Doune Castle, mentally reliving scenes from the film while walking around, and even congratulating themselves on becoming members of an imagined community, for which the visit is a rite of passage. Her specific imaginary, then, could act as a powerful filter that guides and mediates her entire experience of the place.

5 Analysis

In tourism photography, it has been suggested (Section 3), the image has a clear pragmatic purpose which all the elements combine to advance; namely to attract

tourists, to sell destinations and associated tourism products (Kefala 2021). It has also been suggested that, in selecting features of a destination to include in publicity material, the companies affect the way it will be seen by prospective visitors, and that by exercising such an influence, the images contribute to the creation of an imaginary of a destination. Since nature and natural objects play a significant role in many such images, we can also learn something about how nature is understood; in other words, about the *natural imaginary* in tourist discourse.

The predominant role played by natural features in the Sicilian images was the most noticeable result of the first stage of analysis outlined above (Section 3), as can be seen by observing which of Kušen's list of potential attractors occur in the photos (Table 1).

Table 1: Visit Sicily. Categories of tourism attractions (from list of Kušen 2002: 61).

Feature	Instances	%
Geological features/climate/water/flora/fauna	41	91
Protected cultural heritage	6	13
The culture of life and work	3	7
Tourism paths, trails, and roads	1	2
Famous persons and historical events	0	0
Special events/happenings	0	0
Cultural and religious institutions	0	0
Natural spas/sanatoriums/sport and recreation facilities	0	0

The high value for such natural elements, as can be seen from a Google search of the corpus relating to tourism in other global contexts (*Visit + Malta, Spain, South Africa*), is not specific to Sicily but rather appears to be a generic feature of tourism images. To the layman, this appears curious, since one would expect that destinations might compete by promoting the specific features that make them unique, rather than emphasizing factors that they have in common with all the others. Sicily, for example, is rich in archaeological treasures, boasting many Greek buildings that arguably rival the Acropolis in Athens, but these hardly appear in the corpus at all.¹¹

There are a few methodological issues to report concerning these figures. It was not possible, regrettably, to note features that concern the technical qualities of the images such as camera angle, perspective, and most of all, the use of filters, all of which could provide relevant insights. Recording of geological and natural features is straightforward, but many of the categories present insoluble problems. It is

¹¹ The best-preserved Greek temples anywhere in the world are found in Agrigento, and do not appear at all in these adverts. This state of things applies to Greece as well; *Visit + Greece* will produce very few images of the Acropolis and a glut of views of beaches, sparkling sea, sun, etc.

problematic to identify ‘protected natural heritage’ or ‘tourism paths, trails, roads’, since a simple image does not necessarily reveal these aspects. ‘The culture of life and work’ is rather vague, and if it means shots of local industry, offices, workshops etc., then this category too would be empty. I have interpreted it broadly to cover shots of town streets with cafés and people going about their business. Shots of fishing boats (see Figure 5), though perhaps relevant to this category, were excluded. The boats in this and similar shots, from my perspective, do not convey an implicit message that relates to the commercial activity of the place; rather, they appear as decorative elements in an attractive tableau whose dominant theme is nature. This is underlined by the fact that there are no people visible in the picture – no fishermen mending nets or standing about discussing the weather.

As indicated above (Section 3), absences are not pragmatically inert. Naturally, the absence of people is not relevant to Kušen’s list, which registers what is present in tourist destinations, rather than what is not. However, these absences are also found in both reference corpora, of Visit Sicily and TripAdvisor, and could thus perhaps be seen as another generic feature of tourism photography. There is something paradoxical in such human absences, since several items on Kušen’s list denote an interest in human beings and their activities – the culture of life and work, famous



Figure 5: Fishing boats.¹²

¹² Available at: <https://www.escape.com.au/destinations/europe/italy/9-things-to-know-before-you-visit-sicily/news-story/86bac94468993f1da0fc2f70af2604e7> (accessed 24 January 2023).

people, cultural and religious events, sport and leisure, etc. One might expect images to show crowds of tourists flocking to museums or participating in these events. By the same token, it is not clear why images of beaches should not foreground happy tourists visibly enjoying the pleasures of sun and sea.

Pragmatically then, the implicit message could be that these beautiful natural worlds are all there *for you alone to enjoy* – they are pictures of an individual paradise, with neither crowds of local people nor coachloads of noisy tourists to disturb your visit. This interpretation of absences can be seen at its most evident in the following image (see Figure 6) of a lone woman, in a pose that recurs across the *Visit + sites*, and could thus be seen as a cliché of the genre:

The figure is shown from the back, thus the ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry 2002) is directed at the scenery before her. It does not engage the viewer in any sense (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2021), rather the woman becomes a token for the viewer by a process of corporeal identification (Taggart 2007), which is assisted by the model’s youth and attractiveness. Not only are viewers invited to admire her, but they are also drawn in



Figure 6: Woman in Ragusa.¹³

¹³ Available at: <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/best-time-to-visit-sicily> (accessed 24 January 2023).

Table 2: Lack of representation in Visit Sicily corpus.

Feature	Instances	%
People	9	20 %
Non-human world	0	0 %

to share her meditative wonder at the beauty of the scene before her. Table 2 shows these comparative ‘absences’ in the Visit Sicily corpus.

Figure 6 is the only one in the Visit Sicily corpus in which a human figure is foregrounded. In many, people are tiny, insignificant figures in a vast panorama. In others, they appear simply as props in landscapes, such as beaches or towns, which represent the images’ dominant dialogical charge, as in Figure 7. Here viewers see a picturesque street scene and, as in the previous image, their gaze follows that of the central female figure, engaged in ‘walking through’ this pleasant townscape. The cluster of people at front left are mainly shot from the back, avoiding engagement

**Figure 7:** Street view.¹⁴

¹⁴ Available at: <https://sunset-travel.com/wp-content/uploads/Streets-of-Sicily.jpg> (accessed 27 January 2023).

with the viewer and thus lowering their dialogical significance. They are simply a scenic element, another part of this place's attractions.

Significantly, animals, birds, and other non-human social actors make no appearance at all in either corpus, nor do they generally appear on the *Visit + sites*. The exception is South Africa, where exotic animals represent a significant pull factor for tourism; even here, though, there are only few (6/45 = 13%), with the overwhelming majority of images featuring natural scenery.

Comparison with the Trip Advisor reference corpus relating to Marina di Modica (Appendix B) reveals findings that correspond very closely to those for the Visit Sicily corpus (Tables 3 and 4). The correspondence of these patterns across the two corpora is suggestive of a generic regularity in tourism photography.

Table 3: Trip Advisor Marina di Modica. Categories of tourism attractions (from list of Kušen 2002: 61).

Feature	Instances	%
Geological features/climate/water/flora/fauna	44	98
Protected cultural heritage	1	2
The culture of life and work	0	0
Famous persons and historical events	0	0
Special events/happenings	0	0
Cultural and religious institutions	0	0
Natural spas/sanitariums/sport and recreation facilities	19	42
Tourism paths, trails and roads	0	0

Table 4: Trip advisor Marina di Modica. Significant absences.

Feature	Instances	%
People	0	0
Non-human world	0	0

6 Discussion and conclusion

Since the overwhelming majority of images in the corpora analyzed refer to natural features such as sunshine, beaches, trees, and the sea, an impression could be conveyed that tourism itself – at least in Sicily, but this is equally applicable to the other contexts examined – is all about the natural world. This inference is the more persuasive since, as shown above, other supposed pull factors for tourism such as special events, cultural and religious institutions, natural spas, sports, and recreation

facilities, simply do not appear in the images. Moreover, the representation of human beings in tourism images underlines this message, through their almost total elision of anything resembling tourist buses, crowds, queues at popular sites, busy restaurants, crowded pavements, and so on, to say nothing of airport scenes or other ‘traveling to the destination’ scenarios.

A typical scene promoting Sicily is that in Figure 8. As in many other shots, the main protagonist is the sea, which shimmers with (possibly filter-enhanced) light. It is a spotless image, and no human figures or even boats are allowed to disturb its purity. This is carefully staged, because the Mediterranean is well-known as an extremely busy waterway. The imaginary of Sicily that emerges is that of a ‘natural paradise’ with striking seas and skies; picturesque, though apparently uninhabited, villages that nestle by the seashore; occasional exotic plants and flowers, with plenty of green to set off the dominant, intense shades of blue. This imaginary echoes the Romantic imaginary of nature discussed above. The trope of intense sunlight and sea, encapsulated by Shelley’s phrase “the wave’s intenser day”, recurs throughout the two corpora, and the Visit + sites. It appears to offer the potential tourist an experience of ‘sublimity’, where this consists of an unadulterated immersion in pristine natural surroundings, undisturbed by troublesome mingling with one’s fellows.



Figure 8: Scala dei Turchi.¹⁵

¹⁵ Available at: <https://www.gossipwine.com/en/visit-sicily/> (accessed 31 January 2023).

Although the concentration on natural features might suggest that these images have something ‘ecological’ about them, a comparison of the Sicilian ‘tourism imaginary’ with the ecological imaginaries discussed above dispels this idea. The more-than-human world of animals, insects, fish, birds, etc., has been totally eliminated from these representations. Far from pragmatically suggesting that we have ecological responsibilities, the tourism imaginary perpetuates notions that in an ideal world – in an ‘island paradise’ such as Sicily – there would be no animals at all, no birds, no bugs. This is disturbing given the economic power of the tourism industry, and hence its potential to influence consumers’ hearts and minds, which are both immense.

As we have seen from the data from the *Visit* + webpages relating to other countries, the phenomena described are not specific to Sicily alone. Since the tourist industry has been operational for centuries, we can assume that these images represent the best possible business practices, i.e. they offer consumers exactly what they want, and thus maximize the commercial success of the enterprises. From a pragmatic perspective, the Sicilian tourism imaginary is explicable in terms of the chicken and egg relationship between supply and demand. It both reflects what consumers desire and transmits messages that condition their future expectations. As in the case of other imaginaries discussed above such as the visit to Doune Castle, the Sicilian tourism imaginary acts as a kind of cognitive filter that conditions the ways consumers will respond to the places they visit. For the non-human world, then, the imaginary confirms Coleridge’s words, and works to perpetuate the cognitive and emotive deficits he critiqued: “We have eyes that see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand”.¹⁶

Regrettably, the holiday-making presented in the Sicilian tourism imaginary, though it apparently proposes to immerse consumers in pristine natural environments, reflects the shared mindsets of producers and consumers alike, and actually conflicts with ecological principles. This finding should arouse concern, especially as it is not applicable to Sicilian tourism alone, but appears to be a feature of the industry as a whole. The presence, in tourism photography, of more ecologically sensitive imaginaries could significantly affect both our practices of holiday-making and attitudes towards nature in everyday life.

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¹⁶ Available at: <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Coleridg/bl14.html> (accessed 10 May 2023).

Appendices

Appendix A: Visit Sicily corpus¹⁷



17 Available at: https://www.google.com/search?q=visit+sicily&rlz=1C1CHZN_enIT958IT958&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwicgerf-9_8AhXKSfEDHf3eCd4Q_AUoAnoECAEQBA&biw=1536&bih=763&dpr=1.25 (accessed 24 January 2023).

Appendix B: Trip advisor corpus, Marina di Modica¹⁸



¹⁸ Available at: https://www.tripadvisor.it/Tourism-g3159990-Marina_Di_Modica_Province_of_Ragusa_Sicily-Vacations.html (accessed 31 January 2023).

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