# The poetics of travel through unravelling visual representations on postcards: A critical semiotics analysis

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**Abstract:**

***Purpose***: *Visual representations, as the mechanism of tourism discourses, are vital to the constructed realities of tourism. This paper aims to contribute to ongoing research on tourist postcards and tourist imagery, exploring how contemporary photographic tourist postcards act as narratives of cultural representations and national identities, and how they constitute a 'poetics of travel' by communicating 'myths' about particular destinations.*

***Methods***: *The methodology has followed the semiotic analysis along with a critical approach, focusing on a corpus of approximately 4,200 picture postcards issued between 2003 and 2019. In addition to adopting a discourse approach, the study can be considered as 'auto-ethnographic' since it analyses the postcards as visual texts of Greece, which have been produced within Greece (by Greek editors and Greek photographers) and as the analysis has been made by a Greek researcher.*

***Results***: *The findings present some similarities and differences to those outlined in previous exploratory research, and clearly establish that throughout the years contemporary Greece keeps focusing on its self-representation as a historic, authentic and romantic tourist destination; as a the 'cradle of western civilization" and as an "unchanged paradise on earth".*

***Implications***: *Findings indicate that visual representations as the mechanism of tourism discourses are essential to the constructed realities of tourism, constituting a 'poetics of travel'. The fact that Greece is presented as a 'museum-like' destination, requires, however, special attention because the exaggerated language of the tourist discourse limits Greece in an eternal "unchanged" present, partly cancelling the potential image of modern progress.*

**Keywords:** *postcards, Greece, visual representations, tourist imagery, semiotic analysis, tourism discourse*

**JEL Classification:** *R41, L83, Z39*

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## 1   INTRODUCTION

We live in an era where the experience of modern tourism is mainly the experience of a world created by, transformed and projected through the travel industry and mass and social media. Taking into account both practitioners and clients, and especially actions of promotion, tourism has its own discourse and language, making use of written text, static and moving pictures, and audio-visual material (Dann, 1996; Christou, Sigala, Gretzel, 2016). Seen in this light, 'hegemonically-scripted discourses' (Mellinger, 1994), including films, television programs and advertisements, books, travel guides and illustrated magazines, brochures, posters and postcards, and, of course, the World Wide Web, determine the way that places are being expected, seen, transformed and experienced. They also structure both our sense of reality and notion of our own identity, whether as 'hosts' or 'guests'. Furthermore, the way destinations are represented inevitably influences the type of visitors they attract. At the same time, these multiple representations contribute to the formation of a 'poetics of travel' by defining the boundaries of the 'tourist gaze' which, in turn, according to Urry (2002), lies at the heart of the tourism phenomenon and tends to be directed towards sights and attractions that differ from everyday experience.

In Greece, tourism development has been a historical coincidence that put its mark on the neohellenic ideology and landscape photography (Papaioannou, 2005). The independent Greek State (1830), photography (1839) and tourism (1841) were all 'born' approximately during the same period, along with the establishment of archaeology as an institutionalized discipline in Europe and the beginning of state legislation and antiquities in the Greek State (1834).

Their objectives and aspirations, therefore, have been affiliated with the landscape and its representations both commercially and ideologically (Sakellariadi, 2008). Acknowledging that tourism constitutes a meeting point of the local with the global (Yalouri, 2001), this paper draws upon the author's ongoing research of Greek postcards (Bonarou, 2009; 2012a; 2012b; 2017), focusing on aspects of national identity that the contemporary Greeks externalise for tourism purposes and the ways they understand and handle/manipulate the sense of 'Greekness' through the tourism representations of cultural landscapes.

The term 'poetics' derives from the Greek word 'poïesis' that means 'to make' and implies 'creation' or 'production'. There is no doubt, that postcards are sold to make a profit. However, their visual representations, as the mechanism of tourism discourses, are vital to the constructed realities and transformations of tourism. Given that, the aim of this paper is: a) to gain through semiotics an understanding of the way that photographic tourist postcards act as power-laden narratives of cultural representations and national identities, and b) to explore how postcard images constitute a 'poetics of travel' by communicating 'myths' about a country destination, in particular Greece. In this research context, the following questions will be discussed: a) how does contemporary/modern Greece perceive and, eventually, promote itself towards the 'others' via postcards imagery, aspiring on the one hand to be diversified within the world tourism context and on the other side to satisfy foreign visitors' expectations? and b) what is the role of ideologies, biases, omissions and stereotypes in the formation of the country's 'tourism myth' through the years?

## 2    THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given that postcard images are not reflections of the world, but culturally and socially constructed and conceptualised representations, the essence of their analysis lies in the communication and the attempt to understand and discuss their deeper meanings. People, after all, as Chandler (1994:2) highlights by using the term Homo Significans, are inspired, as a species, by the desire to find meaning, also known as signification, a concept which lies at the heart of semiotics. In particular, semiology or semiotics – considered more of a theoretical approach with an accompanying analytic method (O' Sullivan et al., 1994:281; Barthes 1979:39) – is based on a western way of thinking, having as its main idea that people think and communicate with signs – that is, with anything that can be used to represent something else (Berger, 1984). The key-idea in semiotics is a conception of the sign, defined as a bond between a 'signifier' and a 'signified' (MacCannell, 2000). As Echtner points out (1999:47), since signs are used to create and convey meaning, semiotics has also been referred to as the study and structure of meaning, examining the communications of meaning in its direct, indirect, intentional and unintentional forms. Within a post-structural perspective, by revealing the structure of sign systems, semiotics contributes in the more thorough understanding of human communication and behaviour, constituting at the same time a tool to record society's ideological values.

Images of destinations, peoples and landscapes have attracted significant research attention over the past decades, but related social scientific interest can be traced back to at least as early as the 1970s (Kanemasu, 2013). Semiotics has emerged as a well-adapted approach for the study of communication, but also behavior in tourism settings and there are various contributions to tourism research focusing on the value of semiotic methods, dating from Dean MacCannell's chapter (1989a) on 'The semiotics of Attractions and several papers collected in the special issue of the 'Annals of Tourism Research' on 'The semiotics of tourism' (MacCannell, 1989b, 2000; Chami and Kaminyoge, 2019). Since then, the majority of postcards' studies have focused primarily on the analysis of representations in bodies of postcards that usually have a common, ethnic topic (Cohen 2000). There are various studies that discuss the complex interrelationship between the postcards' imagery with the colonial discourse, orientalism, imperialism or even racism, such as Moors and Machlin (1987), Schor (1992), Alloula (2001/1981), Geary and Webb (1998), Yee (2004), Burns (2004) and Zwegers (2018). Scenic postcards are associated with a dual location in geographical space: the point of sale and the landscape, site or place they depict (Foltête and Litot, 2015), while at the same time they can also be used as a tool for advertising (Karabacak, 2014). Among the researchers who have examined postcard imagery and reached the conclusion that postcards play an important role in the construction and representation of destinations are Albers and James (1983, 1988), Mellinger (1994), Edwards (1996), Markwick (2001), Waitt and Head (2002), Pritchard and Morgan (2003), Garrod (2009), Mayes (2010), Milman (2012), Stylianou-Lambert (2012) and Yu (2018).

According to Urry (2002), the gaze is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs; as for the tourist sites, they can be classified in terms of three dichotomies: whether they are an object of the romantic or collective tourist gaze; whether they are historical or modern and whether they are promoted as authentic or inauthentic. When tourists notice two people kissing on a Greek island, what they capture in the gaze is an aspect of the 'timeless romantic Greece'. Being a photographer means that one also becomes an amateur semiotician. Any tourist who photographs, or buys a postcard that depicts a golden beach, believes that through this they will keep the memory of 'a paradise on earth' (MacCannell, 1989a; Urry, 2002).

The act of photography (or owning a photographic postcard) authenticates the experience of the possessor (Sontag, 1979:9): it was there, I was there and I saw it with my own eyes. Like photographs of the tourist's own making, postcards are part of the guarantee of the 'correctness' of the immediacy experienced (Edwards, 1996:211). Taylor (1994) has argued convincingly that such images protect in a way the tourist from the anxiety of having failed to identify the desired object. By considering tourists as 'amateur semioticians' interested in everything as a 'sign' that stands for something else (Culler, 1981; Urry, 2002; Rojek and Urry, 1997; Amanatidis et al., 2020), we begin to understand why postcard imagery relates significantly to tourist's expectations and experiences. The postcards' images seem to symbolise desires and fantasies that motivate travelling.

Moving from poetics as the general theory of literary discourse to a 'poetics of travel' as a theory of tourism discourse, the focus goes on the sophisticated visual language deployed by tourism editions to represent Greece as a tourist

destination. Therefore, far from being trivial 'ephemera' of tourism, photographic postcards have a key role in sustaining the tourism industry. Postcards, being a type of 'text' used to represent tourist landscapes, do not present reality impartially, with 100 per cent accuracy but, rather, project 'aspects of reality' depending on the cultural and social conditions, involving issues of politics, ideology and identity, while the rules and conventions of the representation systems are learnt each time in the framework of a given culture (Sturken and Cartwright, 2003; Milman, 2012; Chronis, 2012; Gretzel et al., 2012). Postcards, as photographs in general (Garlick, 2002:301), are never transparent with regard to the destination they depict, since they re-present it in a particular way, so that our knowledge for the said destination is never independent from postcards.

Travel, tourism and photography are inextricably connected, while picture postcards are among the most widely disseminated tourist icons, serving both as personal souvenirs of the travel experience and as a means of extending it to others, namely the potential tourists who receive a friend's postcard (Markwick 2001; Servidio, 2015; Misirlis et al., 2018). Photographic postcards have been fundamental to the proliferation of the tourist gaze that has emerged in the late nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, they are vital to successfully creating and communicating images of a destination since, as Urry argues (2002:78), what people 'gaze upon' are ideal representations of the view that they internalize from magazines, guidebooks, postcards and other mass-mediated images that in fact shape the visual perception of tourists and determine how they see and understand the objects of their gaze.

To better understand the power of the picture postcard, we should relate it with the power of photography as a fundamental part of the contemporary tourist experience (it is not a surprise that especially with recent trends in technology and the growing online culture that promotes the sharing of 'selfies', photography has even been associated with injuries and deaths within tourist environments (Weiler, Gstaettner and Scherrer 2021)! As Sontag (1979) and Edwards (1996) have noted, the photograph can bring the 'invisible' and the 'unnoticed' forward and make it 'visible' and 'noticed'; photography can also add complexity to simple things and simplicity to the more complex ones, enabling the postcard to signify or convey messages to the viewers. Tourist photography has its own ethics (Fennell and Yazdan Panah 2020), while tourists in their trips, always collect photographs as they collect souvenirs. Besides, tourist practices are tied up both with material objects and physical sensations (Haldrup and Larsen, 2006). However, while personal photos focus on the recording of the tourists themselves, their friends and families, postcards as photographic souvenirs focus on the destination and its "highlights", such monuments, natural miracles, unique view, local people, aspects of local life etc. (Bruner, 2000).

## 3   METHODOLOGY

Photographs and therefore photographic postcards offer visual knowledge about people, objects and places, which in part, means that the tourists/viewers can have power over them, even if only momentarily. Photographs tame the object of the gaze. Being a still picture, photographs freeze the image in space and time and can also de-contextualize the object of the gaze by transposing it to other contexts. The symbolic power of postcards can go far beyond the photographic theme. In other words, postcards as 'fragments' in both space and time can become symbols or metaphors which reify culturally shaped images as observed realities, rendering them 'objects' (Markwick, 2001; Edwards 1996).

Tourist postcards in the Greek market are in their vast majority reproductions of photographs claiming to provide realistic representations. The term 'representation' covers a whole spectrum of concepts and interpretations but, literally, the verb 'represent' means to present again. However, representation should not be considered as a reflection, but rather as an act of re-construction (Hall, 1982). In the context of the present paper, representation is understood as the ability of a 'text' to use elements of the world as a source of supply, showing them to the spectator not just as reflections but as constructions (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2002; Sturken and Cartwright, 2003: 12–6). The term 'text' is widely used in modern cultural studies to include, in addition to the written/printed text, maps, tables, photographs or even landscapes themselves (Jenkins, 2003; della Dora, 2009).

To unravel the symbolic meanings of 'Greekness' in contemporary tourist postcards, the methodology has followed the semiotic paradigm (Echtner 1999), combining procedures from sources such as Barthes (1979) and Collier and Collier (1986), along with a critical approach (Hall 1982), analysing a corpus of approximately 4,200 picture postcards issued in Greece between 2003 and 2019. Access to a representative corpus of postcards' images, has raised various questions, with perhaps the most critical being the following: are we interested in a representative corpus of contemporary tourist consumption – in which case we must collect material from tourist shops,  or in a representative corpus of contemporary tourist production – in which case we need to speak with publishers (Rose 2001: 58–9, Jokela and Raento 2012)?

Given that the focus has been initially set on the production of the contemporary tourist image of Greece, the collection of a representative corpus of postcards' images began with material and catalogues provided by the largest printing companies in Greece: Toubis, Haitalis and Summer Dream editions which have head offices in Athens and own the largest variety of Greek postcards, the largest distribution networks and the largest market shares, as well as Rekos editions, with head offices in Thessaloniki and mostly active in the areas of Northern Greece. It should be noted that a significant number of the postcards collected from the editors during the period 2003-2009 (3,700 images) have been still available in the Greek tourist market at the time of writing this paper. In addition, this corpus has been enriched over the years with postcards bought from souvenir shops in various places all over Greece (author's personal collection); therefore, the final corpus of approximately 4,200 picture postcards has combined the aspects of tourist production and consumption. At this point, it should be underlined that there are no available data regarding the total number of tourist postcards that are printed or sold annually in Greece. Each company keeps its own statistics. According to Toubis editions, the largest printing company, the demand for postcards decreases in the digital age: 'In the year 2000, our

company sold approximately 7 million postcards, while in 2017 our sales were approximately 2.5 million' (Kourellou, 2018).

Postcards are considered multifaceted objects, that through their images can reveal multiple ways of presenting places and trigger imaginative travel (Andriotis and Mavrič, 2013; Pirnar et al., 2019). Acknowledging the opportunities for visual autoethnography in tourism research (Scarles, 2010; Mavragani et al., 2019), each postcard has been defined as an auto-ethnographic visual text, in that it is a 'text a culture has produced about itself' (Dorst 1987: 4, cited in Macdonald 1997: 155). Therefore, following Pritchard and Morgan (2003: 120), in addition to adopting a discourse approach, the study can be considered as 'auto-ethnographic' since it analyses the postcards as visual texts of Greece, which have been produced within Greece (by Greek editors and Greek photographers) and as the analysis has been made by a Greek researcher. The postcards' images were analyzed and sorted according to their pictorial content (Milman, 2012), focusing on repeated symbols, using the main photographic typologies employed in previous research (Bonarou, 2009; 2012a; 2012b; 2017). The postcards' representations form an apparatus via which tourist locations are reinvented based on the image of particular tourist motivations and wishes (Waitt and Head 2002: 320). Thus, it is desirable for postcards to be dealt with as 'popular cultural texts' which shape and promote particular characteristics for each destination and its identity; that is, as texts favouring specific representations of each culture, definitions of identity and specific aspects of the national history of the locations (Pritchard and Morgan 2003: 111–2).

## 4  FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The noteworthy increase of tourism flows to Greece that were experienced in the late 1970s and 1980s was facilitated by both natural and cultural resources, as well as by the existing airport infrastructure in major islands in combination with the lower cost of living in comparison with other European countries (Buhalis, 2001:440; EIU 1990:49; Fotiadis and Williams, 2018). Although Greece has been the focus of small-scale cultural/historical tourism for many years, mass tourism and sun-loving visitors have flooded into the country since 1974 (when Greece returned to democratic rule after a 7-year military dictatorship), reaching a record of approximately 34 million people visiting Greece in 2019. In attempting to attract as large an audience as possible, postcard producers seek to incorporate elements they expect to be attractive to different publics.

As it happens with repeat photographs, sequences of postcards throughout the years can be used to explain changes on the landscape (Christou, 2010; Sawyer and Butler, 2006), but also on the cultural space as well (Yu, 2018). Based on previous relevant research conducted by the author (Bonarou 2009; 2012a; 2012b; 2017), the present study re-affirms that during the last 16 years, Greece is self-represented mainly as a historic, authentic and romantic tourist destination, while four dominant discourses are shown about the country: a) Greece as the birthplace of European civilization; b) Insularity as the quintessence of the Greek Spirit; c) Tradition as an integral part of the Greek identity;

and d) Greece as a 'sea, sun, sand and sex' tourism destination. Archaeological, pastoral and insular landscapes – with emphasis on the Aegean Sea – are dominant in the postcards' representations, often from the aspect of Orientalism. These images formulate a 'poetics of travel' by 'creating the destination' and they seem to have been gradually established in the Greek consciousness and memory and the collective unconscious, as well. Behind such a poetics lie three traditions: (a) the writings and paintings of western travellers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the tourist guides and travel literature, which continue to reproduce the same expectations until this day; (b) landscape photography, both professional and amateur, as well as the work of intellectuals mostly of the so called 'Generation of 1930s'; and finally, (c) cinematography – namely foreign and Greek productions, particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s, praising the picturesque Greek landscapes – along with the Greek National Tourism Organization's campaigns, which create and promote the 'official' tourist myth of Greece.

In particular, the semiotic analysis of tourist postcards has traced the elements of Greek culture emerging as markers and symbols of Greekness – antiquity, nature, sky, sea, islands, folk architecture and decoration, churches, elderly locals and animals (cats, dolphins, donkeys) – and has revealed that the language used by Greek postcard editions is highly pictorial, combining aspects of the 'classical', the 'romantic', the 'picturesque', the 'pastoral' and the 'oriental'. In most cases, there is a strong depiction of primary colours and brightness: blues and whites (also colours of the Greek flag), oranges, reds, purples (colours of the sunset) and of course greens are typically overstated. This representation evokes the romantic view of the Mediterranean: its climate, nature, bright skies, blue seas and sandy beaches, in opposition to the climatic and emotional greys and depressions of northern Europe (Selwyn 1995:4).

*Image 1: Greece is self-represented mainly as a historic, authentic and romantic tourism destination. Part of a postcard stand by Summer Dream Editions (photo by author)*



Objects of the tourist gaze have been categorized by Urry (2002) in terms of romantic/collective, historical/modern and authentic/inauthentic. Following consideration of this categorization, contemporary Greece is self-represented in tourist postcards mainly as a historic and authentic

destination of the romantic gaze, which emphasizes upon solitude and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze (Urry, 2002:150). These three concepts – historicity, authenticity, romanticism – coexist in several postcards, although there are also representations of the country as a destination of the collective tourist gaze, which entail cheerfulness and movement and promise enjoyments of the spirit and intense pleasures of the body.

*Image 2: Tradition, romanticism and insularity are in the core of the Greek summer myth. Part of a postcard stand by Summer Dream Editions (photo by author)*



In detail, Greece's representations as the 'birthplace of European culture' through the selection of monuments and archaeological sites covering all known eras of Greek history – with the Classical Antiquity as centrepiece, the spirit of which is transcended in a supernatural tone by the Acropolis' monuments – promote the country's historicity and provide a sense of continuity in time. It has also to be noted that via postcards, Venetian monuments or monuments of the English Occupation are positively and particularly romantically appraised, considering obviously that they 'reflect a common European past' contrary to the Turkish ones which are set aside or are absent, possibly being 'the symbols of a past misfortune' (Herzfeld, 1991:232–3). Taplin (1992:22) argues that Greece is in a way the homeland of every child of western civilization, while quoting the psychologist James Hillman who points out that 'we return in Greece so that we discover again the archetypes of our mind and also our civilization'. As depicted in a great number of postcards, Greece is a destination in which the tourist journeys backward in time to the Classic Era of the fifth and fourth century BC and more specifically the 'Golden Era of Pericles' (460–429) – the historic era with the greatest charm not only for tourists, but also for Greeks themselves. The built attractions of relics and ruins are the primary focus for the tourist gaze. Through visual representations, which highlight remaining structures and monuments, the visitor expects to find a historic destination, or even a land of myths; to uncover its mystical secrets and to marvel at the wonders of its glorious ancient past (see for the 'Myth of the Unchanged' as analysed by Echtner and Prasad, 2003:669).

Representations of insularity as the 'core of Greek spirit' (Elytis 2000), through separate aspects of insular living (simultaneous sensation of the limited and the infinite, privileged way of natural living, ideal shelter and a sense of utopia) in combination with sunset as an integral part of the Greek summer myth, showcase the country as a destination for those seeking romanticism. Postcards, which almost identify insularity with folk tradition – often 'staged' – without of course missing images of traditional continental Greece, highlight as symbols of the folk culture the local architecture and the presence of elderly locals, marking Greece as a 'pre-industrial' society, an 'authentic' destination where life goes by lazily and carefree. In particular, postcards with white chapels and blue cupolas or Meteora and Mount Athos showcase, on the one hand, the significance of Orthodoxy for Greek society and, on the other hand, the unbreakable connection between the Greek orthodox tradition and the development of architecture and its harmonization with space.

Despite the fact that Greece is a country with a long food and wine tradition, numerous vineyards and related tourism storytelling (Bonarou, Tsartas and Sarantakou, 2019) this aspect is not illustrated in contemporary postcards. With regard to postcards with nymphs and satyrs – ancient, as well as modern ones – they promote ancient Greece as an 'erotic heaven', while at the same time attempting to retain, with a humorous attitude, the myth of 'sexual liberation' of tourists visiting Greece, including clear references – often sometimes self-sarcastic – to the now declining 'philosophy' of the 'Greek kamaki' (Greek for harpoon) which peaked in Greek tourism during the 1960s–1980s.

The simultaneous release of various postcards addresses both the romantic and the collective tourist gaze. In addition, the co-appearance of both 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' representations mark Greece as a destination contradictory at first, but governed by a deeper unity. The Apollonian spirit (logic, spirituality, mental approach of the world) is embodied in postcards which praise harmony, the glory and all supernatural aspects of classic monuments, while the Dionysian spirit (body, instincts, passion, pleasure) is very much present in pictures related to the love life in Ancient Greece. If it is true that those visiting the country and tourists in general seek pleasure in its various aspects: esthetical, emotional, bodily, spiritual, sensual and sexual (Wickens, 1994; 2002; Ma, et al., 2017), then Greece seems to be the 'ideal' vacation spot. The country is considered a mature destination of mass sun tourism. However, in the tourist postcards representations, it looks more like a country in the first stages of tourist exploration or in the development phase of its life circle (Butler, 1980). As a result, the negative effects entailed by 'cheap' mass sun tourism (the '4s' kind), such as downgraded environment, improvident building activity, inappropriate tourist behaviour, and so forth, are silenced. A complete appraisal of Greece's representations via contemporary tourist postcards leads to the conclusion that the photographs selected – and always digitally processed, especially with regard to colours – place the destination in another era; in an era where there's always

summer, uniting dream space with history, legend, culture, nature and tradition.

*Image 3: Infographic on the 'poetics of travel' in Greece through contemporary tourist postcards (by author)*



**INFOGRAPHIC**

## The "poetics of travel" in Greece through contemporary postcards

**GREECE**

is self-represented, mainly, as:

**a historic and authentic destination of the romantic gaze**

**MARKERS & SYMBOLS**

of Greekness

antiquity, nature, sky, sea, islands, folk architecture and decoration, churches, elderly locals and animals (cats, dolphins, donkeys)

**PICTORIAL LANGUAGE**

a) combines aspects of:

classical, romantic, picturesque, pastoral & oriental Greece

b) combines colours and brightness:

blue and white (also colours of the Greek flag), orange, red, purple (colours of the sunset) & green

**CONTRADICTORY WORLDS**

existing side-by-side in postcard stands

- West and (the familiar) East
- Europe and Greece (on the borderland of Europe)
- present and past
- modernity and tradition
- universality and locality

**DOMINANT DISCOURSES**

about the country:

a) Greece as the birthplace of European civilization
b) Insularity as the quintessence of the Greek Spirit
c) Tradition as an integral part of the Greek identity
d) Greece as a 'sea, sun, sand & sex' (4s) tourism destination.

Created in canva.com by author (C.Boharou)

As Coleman and Crang (2002: 3) characteristically insist, the truly authentic, unspoiled location is always displaced in space or time – it is spatially placed in the next hill or has temporally lasted a generation ago.

Human presence rarely participates in the formation of 'age-old images' except for cases in which people are considered as a decorative element of the pastoral landscape. The representation of monuments and archaeological sites without people seems to imply a 'rupture' between modern Greeks and their glorious past. This suggests a form of decline for the modern country, rendered even more intense with the lack of contemporary urban life or European orientation images. The Greek culture is de-historicized and a poetics of timelessness and steadiness is dominant (Lalioti, 2009), while at the same time Greek nature frames the past monuments and emphasizes mysticism, harmony and the timelessness of the destination. It is a nature of high esthetical value, experienced mostly spiritually and not as suitable for pleasures of the body, even when the main theme of the postcard is not a glorious monument, but an endless, unspoiled shore. On the other side, of course, the absence of people does not seem to create a sense of discontent to the viewer, given that Greece has been established, already from the period of the first excursionists, as a country of the romantic view, encouraging meditation and the creation of a semi-spiritual relation with the viewed objects. A trip to the country-precursor of Europe is filled with a sense of nostalgia and melancholy, being a sort of 'holy' trip: tourists will visit it more as 'pilgrims', to invest themselves in the worshiping of the 'holy relics' (monuments, locations and people) and to experience a supernatural, invigorating experience. Images of mass tourism, night life and contemporary urban life would then constitute a degeneration of the magic of the moment or even some sort of 'sacrilege'.

The calling to the authentic and romantic Greece is made via representations of insularity and tradition, signalling the country as a picturesque location, as a pre-modern, 'museum-like' society and sometimes as an uninhabited land with notions of orientalism (Said, 2003). Even boats in harbours, used by local fishermen on a daily basis, are displayed as 'works of art', without any functional significance. The unspoiled beauty of the natural and man-made environment is promoted via bright or idyllic colours, and the almost 'vacant' space is friendly, accessible and available to become a leisure paradise for tourists (see, also, representations of Ireland in O'Connor and Cronin 1993). The 'couleur locale', the local colour of Greece, is now dominant not only in the landscape of Athens, where the first excursionists sought it among antiquity, but also on Greek islands, where the traditional, almost 'primitive' state of the areas offers visitors the opportunity to become more identified with the alternative, more natural way of life (Chtouris, 1995: 52).

The tourist representations of contemporary postcards call tourists to become excursionists and endorse more the discourse of education and spiritual cultivation and less the discourse of entertainment and game. Foreigners are invited to admire on the one hand the remnants of a glorious past and on the other hand to experience the simplicity and authenticity of the Greek islands, without, of course, missing suggestions for sensual pleasures of the body. Feelings of nostalgia and romanticism, which had motivated the first journeys to Greece make a 'comeback' via the artistic display of themes in order for the country to acquire, once more in the minds of these contemporary travellers, the image of a

mythical location – an ideal. These are the images that Greece tries to sell to tourists in the form of postcards as representative of their trip, so that they can either send them to relatives and friends (advertising the country) or retain them as souvenirs; as memories they wish to remember, and are worth remembering, years later.

# 5    CONCLUSIONS

Visual representations as the mechanism of tourism discourses are considered of vital importance to the constructed realities of tourism, constituting a 'poetics of travel'. The aim of this paper has been to explore how photographic tourist postcards act as power-laden narratives of cultural representations and national identities by communicating particular myths about the country destination, in particular Greece. Through tourist postcards, Greece is self-represented mainly as a historic, authentic and romantic tourism destination, while four dominant discourses are discussed about the country: a) Greece as the birthplace of European civilization; b) Insularity as the quintessence of the Greek Spirit; c) Tradition as an integral part of the Greek identity; and d) Greece as a 'sea, sun, sand and sex' (4s) tourism destination. The signification of the 'poetic message' exists only when we assemble the elements and examine them in correlation with each other (Prud'homme and Légaré, 2006). Given that the tourist gaze is constructed through signs, the portrait of contemporary Greece in the postcard imagery is a mixture of sandy beaches, blue skies and red sunsets, romantic island scenery, ancient and … modern Nymphs and Satyrs and, of course, classical monuments –with the symbol of the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis in prominent place.

The Greece of ratio, measure and harmony on the spiritual and socio-political levels, has been the 'country – precursor' that the Europe of Humanism and Rationalism needed, the Europe of the rising urban class and the forming of national countries, the Europe of developing technology and colonialism (Andreadis, 1989; Broeder and Gkogka, 2020). Europe interpreted Ancient Greece according to its needs to create a common western identity and established contact with the combination of 'Greek culture – Greek nature' as a baptism in the culture of antiquity for the young noble men which made the Grand Tour during the eighteenth century. Until the 1950s, tourism in Greece was mostly 'cultural' as travellers continued, in some way, the tradition of the first excursionists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the last two – three decades, however, the spirit of mass consumption, as cultivated and expressed in the framework of mass tourism, contradicts the 'impenetrable uniqueness' of monuments, which are rendered prey to the 'tourist gaze', converting them from privileged locations to ingredients of a routine itinerary (Galani-Moutafi, 2002; Lyons and Branston, 2006; De Ridder and Vanneste, 2020). The fact that Greece becomes understood as a whole in the form of a 'museum-like' location, however, requires special attention. The exaggerated language of the tourist discourse in Greek postcards, directed by the dominant discourse of the West about the country, predisposes tourists for a 'total reformation' of their self, but limits Greece in an eternal present, displaying it as unchanged in time, removing any

right for development (Bruner 1991; Galani-Moutafi, 1995). In general, the formulated 'poetics of travel', through the postcards' discourse, expands two contradictory worlds: the West and the (albeit familiar) East, Europe and Greece (on the borderland of Europe), the present and the past, the modern and the traditional, the universal and the local. Greece is an endless open museum and postcards function as the museum showcases via which tourists can admire the 'authentic' and 'unchanged' by time exhibits: history, nature and tradition. The question is to what extend do the tourists acknowledge the symbolic values of these (visual) 'exhibits'? Production and consumption of tourist images, including postcards, have always been involved in a mutually sustaining relationship. As it has been highlighted through the present paper, postcards depicting the 'authentically different' seeking to employ on tourists' expectations, facilitate at the same time the reinforcement of perceptions about the destination, lending weight to photographs and stereotypes that have already been established and are still circulated through books, magazines, brochures and other mass & social media (Markwick, 2001, Chatzigeorgiou and Christou, 2019; 2020). Since the study has been qualitative in nature and focused on one particular country destination - namely Greece, attempts to generalize in the context of other tourist countries is problematic; however, the findings and related discussion and conclusions can be generalized and used in the context of the ongoing process of branding Greece.

Any given image carries multiple and multi-layered meanings, that require systematic unravelling and unpacking for the several messages to be communicated and 'revealed' (Markwick, 2001; Christou and Kassianidis, 2005; Milman, 2012). Within the present paper, it has been possible to indicate dominant illustrations of contested meaning in Greek postcard imagery related to the concept of Greekness and the country's 'tourist myth'. By gaining insight in the country's visual representations through the semiotics of 4,200 picture postcards issued between 2003 and 2019, valuable knowledge is created for Public Authorities, Destination Management Organizations (DMO's), as well as individual tourism enterprises and other related stakeholders interested in the country's image and branding. Undoubtedly, however, primary research focused on individual tourists' responses, regarding the reasons they prefer and buy/send postcards with specific themes, would contribute vitally to the dialogue on the construction of meanings of postcard imagery and of the tourist image of Greece. In addition, it would be interesting to compare contemporary Greek tourist postcards with contemporary postcards of other destinations, especially Mediterranean countries.

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