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Tartan, Shortbread, Whisky and the Stag: Representations and Realities of the Scottish Highlands and Islands

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ABSTRACT

The people and landscapes of the Scottish Highlands and Islands have a long history. This history of occupation and inhabitation combined with some of the most stunning and impressive upland and coastal landscapes in the world, fine cuisine, traditional and contemporary arts, crafts and culture means that they are popular as a destination for tourism. However, tourism as well as the representation of the region, its histories and people in film and TV, creates impressions and expectations that are either construed in a mythical past or devoid of contemporary references to and portrayal of the realities for the people who live there all year round. This paper will analyse how both tourism agency discourses and the depiction of the Scottish Highlands and Islands in fictional film create what Urry has called *The Tourist Gaze* (1990) and what Berger emphasised as *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and how this conflicts with the realities of living in the region.

KEYWORDS

Tourism, Representation and Reality, Scottish Highlands and Islands, film and TV fiction

RÉSUMÉ

Les gens et les paysages des Highlands et des îles écossaises ont une longue histoire. Cette histoire d'occupation et d'habitation combinée à certains des paysages les plus impressionnants de montagne et de littoral dans le monde, à une cuisine raffinée, des arts traditionnels et contemporains, de l'artisanat et de la culture, sont populaires comme destination touristique. Cependant, le tourisme ainsi que la représentation de la région, son histoire et ses populations dans le cinéma et la télévision, créent des impressions et des attentes qui sont soit interprétées dans un passé mythique, soit dépourvues de références contemporaines et de représentation des réalités pour les personnes qui y vivent toute l'année. Cet article analysera comment les discours des agences de tourisme et la représentation des Highlands et des îles écossaises dans les films de fiction créent ce que Urry a appelé le *regard touristique* (1990) et ce que Berger a souligné comme *façons de voir* (1972) et comment cela peut rentrer en conflit avec les réalités de vivre dans la région.

MOTS CLÉS

Tourisme, représentation et réalité, Highlands et îles écossaises, fiction cinématographique et télévisuelle

INTRODUCTION

The people and landscapes of the Scottish Highlands and Islands have a long history. Whilst there is a clear connection and expression of an indigenous culture there have also been a long list of invasions and migrations that have influenced the distinct character of the region. This history of land use, occupation and inhabitation has at times been viewed as marginal to the development and experience of modern social and political structures. This has led to

and left a legacy of outward immigration, depopulation, low population densities and limited educational and employment opportunities. Further, legislation and economic priorities have created vast private and publicly owned estates which have been organised and developed for a range of economic activities based on a rural agriculture and industry serving the needs primarily of forestry and commercial hunting, shooting and fishing. Whilst there is some industry and small scale craft manufacturing, the economic base of the region has required heavy subsidy and support from local, national and European Union investment in public services and infrastructure.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF TOURISM FOR A RURAL ECONOMY

The relative geographical isolation and small population of the region, combined with some of the most stunning and impressive mountain, upland and coastal landscapes in the world, historical and heritage sites, fine cuisine, traditional and contemporary arts, crafts and culture means that the Scottish Highlands and Islands have become popular as a destination for tourism. This is reflected in marketing and advertising strategies that are used to represent the region as a relatively uninhabited “wildscape” on the periphery of Europe which offers a range of outdoor leisure and recreational pursuits, in unspoilt landscape with the promise of the opportunity to “leave the world behind”, explore nature and oneself in relative isolation, removed from the crowds, pace and pressures of modern urban existence. Thus tourism has become an important industry generating significant income revenue and employment in the region. However, tourist marketing and advertising discourses most often represent the landscape and the region as an ideal typical destination for a wide range of outdoor pursuits and activities, with the opportunity to experience “traditional” culture, heritage and history. In many if not all of these tourist descriptions and discourses, the landscapes and region are featured as being devoid of any mention or representation of the indigenous population who lives in the area all year round (Visit Scotland Tourism in Northern Scotland, 2011; Pateman, 2012). The paucity of representation and discussion of the local population reflects a prioritisation on the needs of the visitor and the role of locals as service providers or as stereotyped characters (replete with bagpipes, beards, kilts, odd accents and an insatiable taste for whisky).

Similarly, and one which is used by the tourism industry in its marketing strategies, Highlands and Islands region is featured as locations as well as the source of narratives and historical context, in a wide range of films and TV, both fictional and documentary. In most of these, the landscape, or the historical struggle for independence, clan society and warfare, romantic struggles against foes or nature, depict the region in aspic or as historical stereotypes, or a natural wildscape devoid of modern local inhabitants. In these film and TV representations, impressions and expectations are created and promoted that are either construed in a mythical past or devoid of contemporary references to and portrayal of the realities of the people who live there all year round, and not just as visitors. The highlands and islands have become a movie set against which a relatively small number of plots and narratives are played out.

2. REPRESENTATIONS VERSUS REALITIES

In both cinematic/TV and tourism marketing approaches what is presented is what John Urry called *The Tourist Gaze* (1990). A particular set of expectations of experience of what will be found when one visits. Specific sites and locations are promoted from which the visitor can collect photographic and memory panoramas as highlighted in tourist guides, itineraries, routes and planned journeys. John Berger emphasised that these *Ways of Seeing* (1972) are social constructions operating within narrow parameters that effect how one understands and

experiences what is represented in what one “sees”. The argument here is that this may well conflict with the realities of living in the region.

This paper will present examples of both tourism agency discourses and the depiction of the Scottish Highlands and Islands in fictional films, which create an “imagined” and “mythical” expectation of the Highlands and Islands. It will be argued that these dominant representations and narratives ignore how landscape and place as a social construction is rife with juxtapositions and conflicts (Cosgrove, 1984; Mair, 1999; Stewart & Strathern, 2003) that impact on visitor expectations and the lived experience of local populations. This reflects not only conflicts within modernity in which rurality has been marginalised to the overwhelming priorities and importance of the urban, but also increasingly how material artefacts, cultural legacies, products and landscapes are reflected and represented in dominant marketing discourses and fictional accounts of the people, the history and the region. As such, they often do not take account or acknowledge the struggle for social, economic and community survival and sustainability. These included a range of social, economic and health issues that are exacerbated by the difficulty of providing infrastructure and services in such a region that is not only geographically isolated but also covers a very large land mass with a dispersed population. These factors have not only left indelible marks on the predominantly rural landscape of the Scottish Highlands and Islands but also on the people who live there as permanent residents (McKendrick, *et al.*, 2016). These aspects of infrastructure inadequacy, essential service provision and rural poverty are underplayed and ignored in the dominant representations of tourist industry discourses and rarely, if ever, covered in film and TV depictions of the region. The needs and priorities of the tourism industry and visitors will be explored using a range of examples drawn from textual analysis of media campaigns and news reports to provide evidence of the consequences of over-popularising particular locations and experiences without adequate or appropriate investment in infrastructure and services or sensitivity. The everyday lived experiences and priorities of the permanent population will be investigated using official statistics, survey data and semi-structured interviews to contrast their lived realities against the “mythic” representation of their rural existence.

3. DISCUSSION

This paper will demonstrate through a series of illustrated examples (from film/TV and the tourism industry) how specific “images” of the Highlands and Islands are promoted and marketed. Ones that focus on leisure and recreation and an unspoilt and (uninhabited) landscape “open” to the tourist for their enjoyment. I will contrast these with the reality of rural poverty and (under)employment, expensive or inadequate services and infrastructure, isolation, depopulation, absentee landlords and corporate owned estates, etc. That is, the “mythic” idealism of the unspoilt Highlands and Islands countryside which promotes the idyll of second homes and holiday cottages, “wild” untamed nature, and a packaged culture of kilts, tartans, bagpipes, shortbread, whisky, and solitude will be contrasted with the “reality” of Highlands and Islands life for the settled local population, using a range of social and economic empirical data as well as illustrated examples, photographs, literary and cultural sources combined with a textual and discourse analyse that employs a sociological imagination to demonstrate the competing realities of the region and the impacts and effects of the imbalance between them.

Whilst this paper is a “case study” of a particular region of Scotland, the parallels with other “popular” tourist destinations and regions, in which their representation in popular media and in tourist marketing discourses contrast with local experience, provide insights into how symbolic

production contributes to «tourism attractiveness» which can both ignore the realities of life in the regions/areas or contribute to pressures on stressed social and physical infrastructures. It thus, reflects and analyses themes and issues relevant to the stated aims and themes of the session, and extends the focus by using a range of perspectives and multidisciplinary data and approaches.

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