

Relationships between text and image in western landscape postcards and
the formation of public perception of places

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Introduction

In this study I will explore the relationships of text and image in western landscape postcards and how the perceptions of the places they show are formed.

For this work a western landscape postcard is any image of North America and Europe. However, I believe you would find similar results from postcards of Australia, South Africa and Japan. The image must also be of an outside scene and since we are talking mainly about tourism, people should be present.

In the first chapter I show how postcards create particular views of a place, and how they act as tourist propaganda to attract people to places by omitting certain details and emphasising others to form an environment that is recognisable as the real place but more enticing than it actually may be. I will explore what encourages people to go on holiday and how postcard images and advertising for a place affects this.

In chapter two I look at actual examples of postcards in more depth, analysing the things that are done to make places more attractive including how printed text can emphasise and inform on this. I will also look at what people write on the back, assess how this impacts on the image and see whether the message backs up the idyllic image or negates it.

In the third chapter I look at how artists have responded to postcards, focusing on artists who use western landscape postcards and tourist related imagery as influences. I will consider how their works reinforce postcards as images and how they show the falseness of these 'perfect' destinations.

Chapter 1 - Purchasing Postcards

Before the mid 19th century few people other than the rich travelled for leisure. Travelling was done by people who had to travel for business or religious reasons, such as pilgrims, merchants and the military. Ordinary people didn't travel as they had to stay and work and the condition of roads and pathways were appalling, which hindered travel.

However by 1825 the first passenger rail service started serving Stockton to Darlington. In 1830 the Liverpool/Manchester railway opened. With the advent of steam travel (either by train or ship) much more of the United Kingdom and eventually the rest of the world were open to travel for pleasure. Although steam travel had been initially used for the transportation of goods or rich people, it was soon realised that you could charge a small amount but fit a lot more people into a carriage and get just as much money than by fewer rich people in the same carriage. The creation of travel agencies (such as Thomas Cook) at the same time all added to an already increasing tourist trade, by making travel easier and organising all elements of holidays.

The other aspect to this was the invention of the stamp (fig 1) used to pre pay postage, which replaced the original method of collecting postage from the recipient. This new method called the 'Penny Post' was invented in 1837 but wasn't introduced until 1840. It reduced labour costs and so letters and postcards could be sent for a diminished cost.



Figure 1- Penny Black stamp (circa 1840)

Advances in printing processes in the 1890's, including the collotype (a photographically based process involving chemicals), and chromolithography (a multi colour process relying on the properties of oil and water), allowed postcards to be made in larger quantities for less cost. This added to the resultant craze for postcards.

In the early days of postcards they were the only affordable means of having a photographic or realistic image of the place you had been. With the growth of the tourist industry people wanted souvenirs of the places they had visited. Tourists aren't necessarily too bothered with what images there are, just as long as there are some. Postcard manufacturers provide the consumer with a selection of views, often of the recognisable landmarks of a place. These provide the tourist with a tangible reminder of the place they have been.

McCannell argues that,

All tourists search for the verifiable markers of 'authenticity'- of evidence that they were 'really there' – and these are provided by photographs, souvenirs and the ubiquitous picture postcard.¹

¹ Urry in Stephen Brown and Darach Turley. *Consumer Research: Postcards from the edge*. London: Routledge, 1997, p17

From this I can see that a reason for buying postcards is as a reminder of the place you have been. As a result the images that sell are primarily the famous images of a place, ones that the public as a whole easily recognise. An example of this is the Eiffel Tower, Paris. In 1889 there were over 3000 different views of Paris produced from one postcard factory. Of these a large proportion were of the Eiffel Tower (fig 2). Urry talks about the tourist gaze and notes that seeing a unique object like the Eiffel Tower was an important draw for tourists to a place. “Most people living in the West would hope to see some of these objects during their lifetime. They entail a kind of pilgrimage to a sacred centre.”²

Figure 2 - Postcard of the Eiffel Tower (1911)



These famous images also often include images that promote nostalgia for a place. The Eiffel Tower, as a well known Parisian image, acts as a symbol for the place. You see a postcard of the Eiffel Tower and you instantly think of Paris, and all the romantic connotations that have been formed of that place. Similarly a postcard sold in Paris of two people kissing in a Parisian environment acts as a sign, showing the stereotypical image of a romantic

² John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage, 1990, p12

city. Nostalgia is a longing for something either experienced first hand or through anticipation created by the vast amounts of imagery and writing about a place.

Nostalgia is an important factor in this, people want to remember the past especially times that were enjoyable. Holidays often fall into this category as they are times to relax and do new and interesting things, often to do with personal hobbies or interests. People want to have reminders of these events, either through photography but also souvenirs like postcards that contain both images of the place and information about the place in a cheap format.

This was especially true in the early 20th century when postcards were at their height of popularity. The postcard at this time was cheap and easily produced. It was also cheap to send due to the introduction of stamps and the Penny Postage system. Postcards were also the only easily and cheaply available photographic image. This new way of communicating was easy and fun and so they were often used to write short messages on, about other things than just when on holiday. The Edwardians went a little postcard crazy, using them for noting everyday things. They would use the benefit of having many postal collections in a day to write notes to each other to organise outings, often like how we would telephone each other these days. As a result people would receive many more postcards than we do these days and those received would become the beginning of a collection. People would look for particular cards about their particular interests. Many people had topographical collections of a certain place or places.

These early postcards already formed a specific idea of a place. They were the popular imagery of their day along with newspapers and journals and as such formed the stereotypes of certain places. However, imagery from newspapers was commonly black and white while increasing numbers of postcards were done in colour, making them more eye catching. Also the novelty value of colour and the ability to send them in the post added to their popularity and their influence on popular imagery.

In more modern times other things have replaced the postcard such as the telephone, e-mail and Internet, glossy magazines and television. Digital technology allows tourists to take their own photos, edit and attach them to emails, overall an easier and less costly process than sending many postcards. There are also sites where you can send free 'e-postcards'³. Therefore postcards are becoming redundant.

Urry believes that the public are provided through television programmes, travel brochures and films with an existing popular imagery of a place.⁴ Therefore by creating postcards including these images they sell more. The public looks for these images as they are the well known representations and so they can show that they have been there. The very popularity of these images means that more people see them and so these popular images are reinforced. Urry suggests that, "much contemporary tourism becomes the

³ www.ePostcard.com

⁴Urry in Stephen Brown and Darach Turley. *Consumer Research*, p 18

search for the photogenic; travel is a strategy for the accumulation of photographs”⁵

If a lot of photos are taken of a particular site this will raise its popularity. It doesn't matter if the site is particularly important or amazing, the sheer amount of photographic images will make it popular. If it becomes visually popular you can be sure that professional commercial photographers will photograph it and make sure that it looks amazing. It is this visual popularity that turns a site into a sight. As Urry says,

The objects and technologies of cameras and films have constituted the very nature of travel, as sites turn into sights, they have constructed what is worth going to 'sightsee' and what images and memories should be brought back.⁶

Tourists want to travel to these places that popular imagery deem necessary to see. These places become objectified through photographs and postcards of them and people need these images as a form of proof that they have been there.

Urry goes on to talk about,

Tourism in the late 20th century is largely hermeneutic, since holidays involve tracking down pre-formed photographic images, capturing them

⁵Urry in Stephen Brown and Darach Turley. *Consumer Research*, p17

⁶ John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage, 1990, p129

for oneself and comparing the captured images with the images examined prior to departure.⁷

He is implying here that modern holiday makers spend their whole vacation doing the same things as every other tourist. These things they do are also fed to them through the media, i.e. going to the Taj Mahal to take the same photo as on every postcard in every tourist shop in the whole of Agra. These stock images that every tourist knows are also not indicative of the actual place as they can be altered to look more amazing than they are. Crouch wrote that, "Tourists do not necessarily respond to economic and social realities: they do however respond strongly to the images that are in circulation about their touristic destinations."⁸

This backs up my previous points; people want to conform to what constitutes a holiday and it is the images they have access to that help to tell them what a holiday is and what it should contain. However it also brings up some other reasons why people buy postcards and other similar imagery of places. This is because often the images are constructed to create a particular view of a place. Imagery of, for example, temples and palaces create an idea of culture and cultural identity.

Anticipation is a large part of why people want to go on holiday. These particular views that are created form a kind of third party nostalgia. Though you have never been to a place the sheer volume of positive images of a place cause you to want to go there because you anticipate the wonderful

⁷ Urry in Stephen Brown and Darach Turley. *Consumer Research*, p18

⁸ David Crouch and Nina Lubben, *Visual Culture and Tourism*. Oxford: Berg, 2003. p.4

time you will have. Alain de Botton talks about this in the first chapter of his book *The Art of Travel*.

The longing provoked by the brochure was an example, at once touching and bathetic, of how projects (and even whole lives) might be influenced by the simplest and most unexamined images of happiness; of how a lengthy and ruinously expensive journey might be set in motion by nothing more than the sight of a photograph of a palm tree gently inclining in a tropical breeze.⁹

Anticipation of a journey can be created through the stereotypical views of the place you're visiting. Advertising, holiday brochures and other glossy images of places help to form and enforce particular views of a place. Images of gorgeous, white sandy beaches look so unusual and appealing when we are in cold, rainy and familiar Britain. Though we may have no journey planned, the anticipation is still there of an amazing holiday in the sun. Whether it turns out to be the fantastic get away is debatable and is discussed further in the next chapter.

Tourist propaganda is anything that sells the place and a particular idea about that place. Postcards, holiday brochures, television adverts and other similar advertising products show the popular images of a place and create particular views of the place.

⁹Alain De Botton, *The Art of Travel*. London: Penguin, 2002. pp 8, 9

However, this isn't the full story. It isn't just well-known sites that are depicted; many postcards show other not so well known things. These are there to create particular views of places; these things include hotels, shops and leisure establishments to promote the luxury aspect of the holiday, while religious buildings, museums and markets promote the area's culture and possibly landscape views to show off its natural beauty. Tourism is meant to be seen as a seductive process, trying to make people want holidays and want what is suggested on postcards. Crouch wrote, "people are allured to go touring, enticed to particular cultures, sites and sights across the world through visual culture."¹⁰

The public are persuaded to visit certain places by making these places desirable. People want to travel to have experiences that are out of the ordinary, away from their usual surroundings.¹¹ It is the anticipation of a good holiday created by popular imagery, like postcards but also through movies, television, magazines and the Internet that helps to form this feeling.

Images of people lying on a beach create ideas of a hot relaxing holiday, with beautiful weather, a gorgeous clean beach and the hotel really near. Images of museums and art galleries give impressions of culture, as do large, stately buildings full of important things. This kind of thing enforces the stereotypical images of places.

As a rule consumers don't want to go on holiday in dark dreary places with nothing to do. Postcards depicting the place they are in a positive light make

¹⁰ David Crouch and Nina Lubben, *Visual Culture and Tourism*. p.8

¹¹ John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage, 1990, p12

them more desirable to visit. The weather must be good or add something positive to the imagery; the landscape must be photographed in such away to hide ugly bits. For example, images of Corfe castle on a postcard create a feeling of history and culture (fig 3). However, if these images were taken in the classic English weather i.e. rain and cold rather than sunshine, the castle and village would not look nearly as appealing. The imagery on postcards can also be altered to make it more inviting, colours can be heightened and made more vibrant and certain elements can be omitted or added to emphasise the desired message.

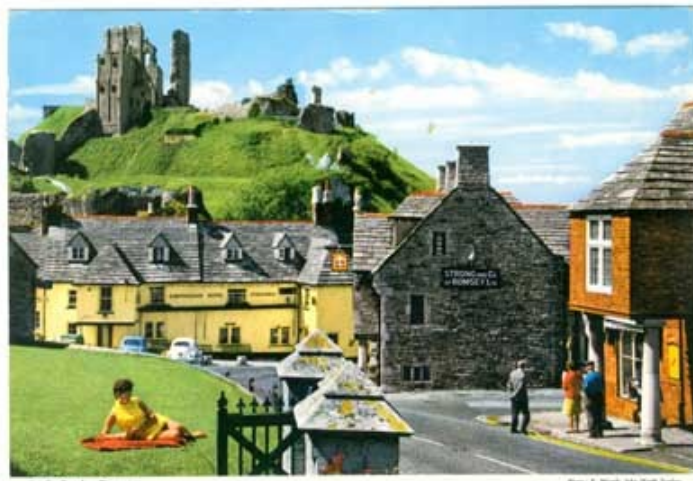


Figure 3 - Postcard of Corfe Castle (circa 1980)

These tactics affect tourists as they want their friends to believe that they are having a wonderful time. They want to give this impression so they'll send the postcard with the most amazing views, most famous landmarks and best weather. These postcards become adverts for the place attracting others to the destination and leaving themselves as glamorised memories of amazing holidays. This is truer, however, of the golden age of postcards when they were the most powerful advertising tool countries had.

As technology progressed, glossy full colour large photographs, television and the Internet allow for a deeper look at places round the world. As such postcards have lost a lot of their power, but the novelty of sending and receiving them still exists which makes them a more personal form of advertising. The receiver can see that a friend is having a wonderful time in this wonderful looking place, producing anticipation and possibly a little envy. The postcard creates this glamorous advert for a place, attracting new tourists to it.

This is particularly true of western landscape postcards, as most travellers for pleasure are those with money to spend on expensive items like holidays and as such are from the more prosperous Western world. These postcards depict the famous landmarks of places such as New York, Paris and London and also the smaller places. Overall they depict places in such a way to emphasise its positive characteristics; quaint English villages, enormous city blocks, sunny beaches. The greater disposable income of western tourists means they can travel more and will want to tell everyone about their holidays. Tourist destinations in the western world have more money to create postcards and other advertising. They can sell their destination with glossier postcards, more amazing than the competitors, extolling all the virtues one place has over the other.

There is information that is more impartial than the imagery and information produced by travel agents and countries but it is often less visually appealing and less obviously available because tourism is such a vital industry in so

many countries. Companies like Thomas Cook have a lot of money and can create amazing and visually strong images.

I believe that the main reason for buying postcards is to send them to friends and family. As a tourist myself on occasion I don't just keep postcards. Sending them to other people to show where you are and what you're doing is half the fun of going on holiday. The practice retains the connection with people while you are in a place where telephones may not be as easy or as cheap as this country. There is also something nice about getting an image of the place your friend is in. It gives you a little taste of their holiday and may persuade you to visit the same place.

Chapter 2 - Purchased postcards

In this chapter I will discuss examples of actual postcards, all of which are from the United Kingdom and the United States of America and follow the conventions of a landscape postcard set out in my introduction.

The first example I have is a printed postcard of Lyme Regis based on a real photograph (Fig 4). This is a card printed circa 2000 by J. Salmon Ltd; the oldest established postcard manufacturer in the United Kingdom. They specialised, like other manufacturers, in local view and landscape postcards.

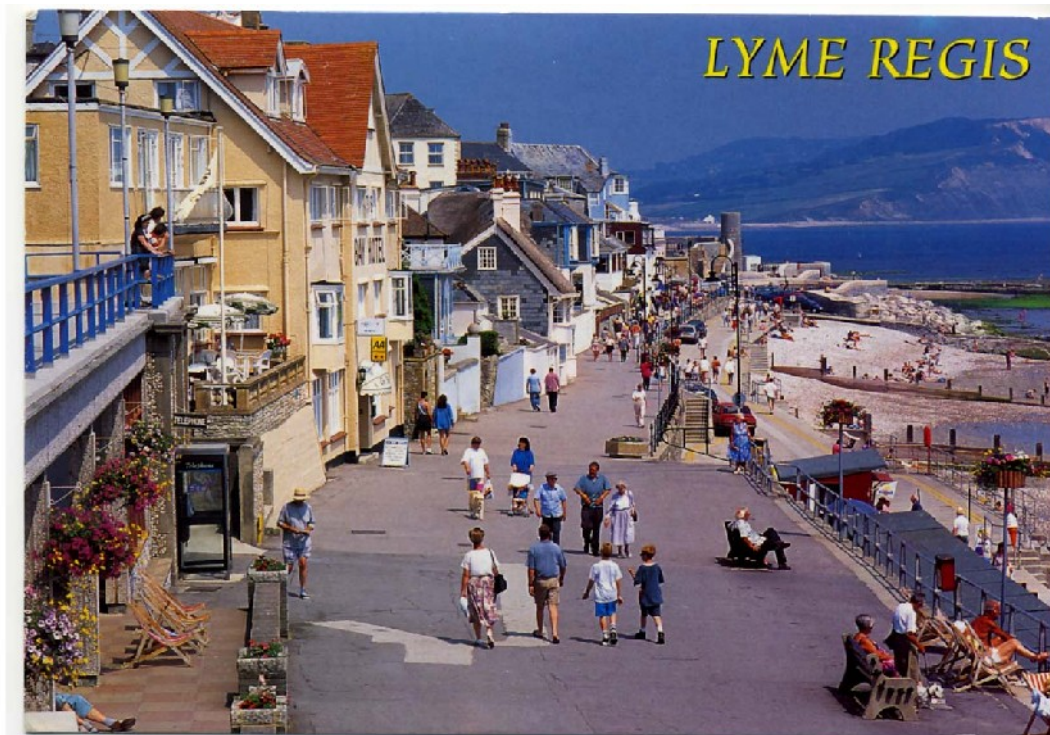


Figure 4 - Postcard of Marine Parade, Lyme Regis (circa 2000)

This postcard, sent to me in September 2005 shows a modern view of Lyme Regis. The image of the marine parade and beach shows a classic view of the stereotypical British seaside. People of all ages are shown walking along the parade in summery clothes. The image itself is bright, so much so that I believe that it may have been doctored in an image editing programme. The

light in the image does not seem to match the far background hills that seem extremely faded out and blue. The sky looks blue but not clear, it would either have been a day of sunshine and showers or the background was doctored to create a less obtrusive background allowing the middle and foreground prominence. This is important in postcards trying to sell a particular lifestyle or type of holiday. In this postcard the middle and foreground contains the parade with people walking along it.

It also gives information as to what is available there including cafés, hotels and shops. The buildings in the postcard all look freshly painted and there are no noticeable wires or aerials to spoil the view. The stonework and pavement all look clean with no litter or grime on them. Either this is a very well kept town or some selective editing has come into it. Urry comments that, "In particular there is an attempt to construct idealised images which beautify the object being photographed."¹²

He also says,

The photographic tourist gaze produces aesthetics that excludes as much as it includes. It is unusual to see postcards or tourist photographs containing 'landscapes' of waste, disease, dead animals, poverty, sewage and despoliation.¹³

This shows that the camera can lie. It can be used to omit unsavoury elements in landscape and as such create glamorised views of places.

¹² John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage, 1990, p128

¹³ John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage, 1990, p129

Although this can be easily done in an image editing programme it can also be done just as easily using just the camera. Things can be temporarily removed, hidden or just left out of shot. The amount and duration of light you allow onto the film and even the quality and type of camera and film can affect colour saturation and brightness of the final image.

The beach also looks very white and although at first glance it looks almost like sand, it is in fact pebbles. However it is the impression the postcard gives, rather than the reality that is important. If the image creates this view of white sandy beaches, clean pavements and tidy houses people will be more inclined to want to visit this place. They would also be happy to send similar images to friends showing what a good choice of holiday they made.

The place also looks accessible with wide pavements but not too busy. When a place's main source of income is families and the elderly, a bustling crowded scene may not appeal as families want space and quiet to relax rather than a busy scene or noisy nightlife.

It is also an example of the collective tourist gaze rather than the romantic tourist gaze. An image of a classic English beach has connotations that don't generally include solitude. This seaside scene would look very strange without people. The people who want to visit this place want to because of the stereotypical view of English seaside resorts which the postcard plays up to. The amount of people shown in a place show how popular a place is. Urry discusses this, "Other people also viewing the site are necessary to give

liveliness or a sense of carnival or movement. Large numbers of people that are present can indicate that this is *the* place to be.¹⁴

The people in postcards help to show what kind of place it is. In this particular card there are many old people but also some families, babies in push chairs and pre teenage boys. By showing these kinds of people in the image it becomes appealing to these kind of people who buy the postcards. They see people they can associate with as peers doing similar things to their interests and so want to do these things in this place. There is also a lack of disreputable looking youths and the place looks wholesome and safe which would encourage the kind of people whom this card is targeting.

In this particular card there are images of people on the beach sunbathing or possibly reading, walking along the promenade, walking dogs or buying ice cream; all very stereotypical English seaside things to do. There is an element of nostalgia in this classic idea of the British seaside. The elder generation are reminded of the past and the good holidays they had when they were younger. For families, children enjoy the seaside especially if they live inland and the adults associate the seaside stereotype with good feelings and ideas of a relaxing holiday.

However because of stereotypes many British seaside places can all look the same. The postcard manufacturers need to make it clear where this postcard is from. On the front of the postcard it says 'LYME REGIS' in yellow. This text is in a fairly standard Times New Roman style font, slightly italicised. The

¹⁴ John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze*. London: Sage, 1990, p128

yellow stands out on the blue of the sky and it has a small shadow, which makes it stand out more. It is small enough not to take emphasis from the imagery yet large enough for people to instantly see it's from Lyme Regis.

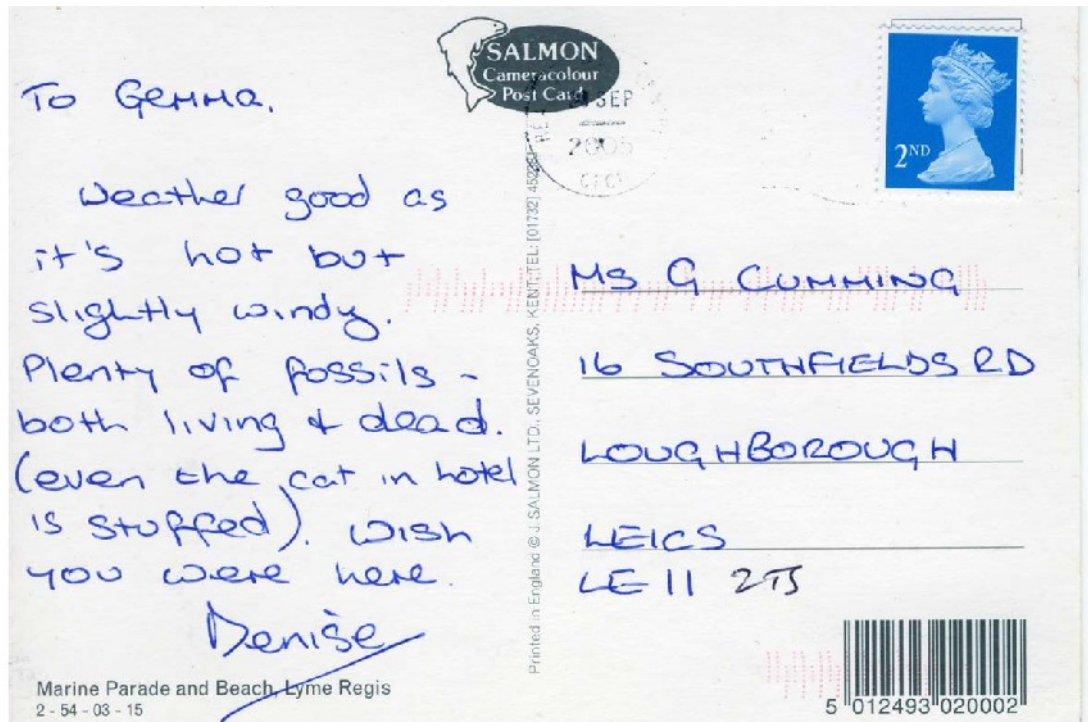


Figure 5 - Text side, Postcard of Marine Parade, Lyme Regis (circa 2000)

On the back there is very little printed text, just the manufacturers stamp and address and where the place is (fig 5). The quantity of information on the back of postcards seems to depend on the manufacturer of the card more than anything else. Looking through my collection, I find that many manufacturers, including Salmon and Colourmaster, give only the name of the place and where it is. Other manufacturers, such as John Hinde, may give in addition a small paragraph with some interesting details about the place and a map of where it is in relation to its country. On this particular card I believe it is not as important because all the things that the receiver needs to know are shown visually on the front of the card.

The message on the back of this card reads;

To Gemma, Weather good as it's hot but slightly windy. Plenty of fossils – both living and dead. (even the cat in the hotel is stuffed).
Wish you were here. Denise

This text is informal and obviously hastily written, what you would expect from a quick note written in a spare minute of a day on holiday. It has the expected comment on the weather and the cliché 'wish you were here'. It also has a small fact about the place and possibly what the people have been doing and it is done in a joking manner. Lyme Regis is famous for having many fossils including a large proportion of dinosaur finds in relation to the rest of the country. Many people spend their days on the beach scouting for fossils. This is also a joke about the large proportion of the older generations, who can be seen on the front of the postcard.

Anticipation plays a large part in the desire to travel. In this particular card the blue sky and clean landscape create the impression of a nice place. To those who are attracted to this view, this card plays a part in attracting them. The desire to travel there is formed through many different places. The senders of the card may have received a similar card, or seen a television programme, or read an article in a newspaper supplement or seen a glossy advert in the travel agents window. All of these things create anticipation of a wonderful holiday filled with the images and the connotations we ascribe to them.

From the message on the back of this particular card it seems that one of the reasons may have been to hunt for fossils and by what is said, 'there are plenty of fossils', it has been fulfilled. However the question remains, was this holiday all they expected? There doesn't seem to be anything to say it wasn't, even the shortness of the message implies a busy and enjoyable time is being had. However as De Botton says, "We are inclined to forget how much there is in the world besides that which we anticipate."¹⁵

There are so many other things that form ourselves and impact on our daily lives. The anticipation of an event rarely includes our physical selves; it is like a dream and we don't experience things like tiredness, hunger or the minor irritations of daily life. Nor in anticipation do we imagine the building site across the road from the hotel or the litter in the streets. So the question is not whether they are having a good time but if it was what they anticipated. Is this postcard an accurate representation of the place? Would this postcard be an accurate representation of this place if it was a photo taken that included bad weather, litter and the telephone lines?

The second postcard I have is an image of Anstey's cove, Torquay from circa 1975 (fig 6). It was posted in June 1977 and shows a view of the cove and headland on one side. The image was probably photographed from the opposite headland. The people in this image are a lot further away from the camera than in the Lyme Regis postcard and as a result it is harder to see them individually. However you can still get an impression of what they are like and you can also see more of the cove and surrounding scenery.

¹⁵ Alain De Botton, *The Art of Travel*. London: Penguin, 2002. p14

Like many postcards from the 1960s' and 70's it has this quality that instantly tells you it is from these decades. The colour and contrast has been tuned up to create an almost tropical atmosphere. In this way it shows similarities to the Lyme Regis card but goes beyond the impression of a sunny day. At first glance this card almost looks like it could be of a Mediterranean country. The sea and sky are almost luminous blue and the land looks baked. The card is also smaller than more modern cards and was created using less sophisticated printing techniques, so the colour is cruder than more modern cards. It is by these qualities that you know it's a card from the 1970's.



Figure 6 - Postcard of Anstey's Cove, Torquay (circa 1975)

MacCannell talks about how by 1975 the number of tourists out numbered the number of hotel rooms and aeroplane seats. Everyone wanted to go abroad and postcard manufacturers, especially in the UK, had to push Britain as a

destination making it look more like the continent that was pulling in the crowds.¹⁶

At this time manufacturers were obviously targeting young to middle age people, as this was the group of people who were going on holiday. Also the postcard shows many relatively youthful people sitting on deck chairs. I say 'relatively' because the people are so far away that it is hard to tell quite how old they are. It is possible that they are all quite young since the water sports include sailing, rafting and possibly some more high speed activities not generally associated with the older generation.

These high speed activities also add to the collective tourist gaze seen in the Lyme Regis postcard. The fact that the postcard is a longer distance shot also shows a lot more people and so a busier place. With the activities going on this creates a more carnival like environment. This makes it more attractive to the younger generation who want to be part of the popular crowd.

Like the Lyme Regis postcard, the people buying the postcards need to associate with the people in the postcard. This is also true to some extent with the people who receive the card; if they associate with the people in the card they may feel inclined to visit this place. If you add to this the hyper-real but enticing sunshine and implied promise of a brilliant holiday it may emphasise this point.

¹⁶ Maccannell, Dean. *The Tourist*. London: University of California Press, 1999, p195

With the deckchairs and beach style changing huts you are reminded of classic ideas of British holidays. Like the Lyme Regis postcard there are elements of nostalgia and these may entice people to go there if they have good memories of childhood holidays or good feelings possibly from other less direct sources. Though they may want a more exciting holiday, doing watersports and other things in a more alien environment, a small amount of the familiar will make the experience less intense and more fun.

On the back of the card there are only the publisher's details, the name of the cove and where it is (fig 7). This is similar to the Lyme Regis postcard with very little detail about the place. This may have been intentional however, so that the fact that it is in the UK rather than on the continent isn't immediately apparent.

The message on the back of this card reads;

To Mum and Pam, well we made it, the weather is not to bad, but room for improvement, the guest house is good and the scenery is lovely, we are having a good time. From Dick and Jill

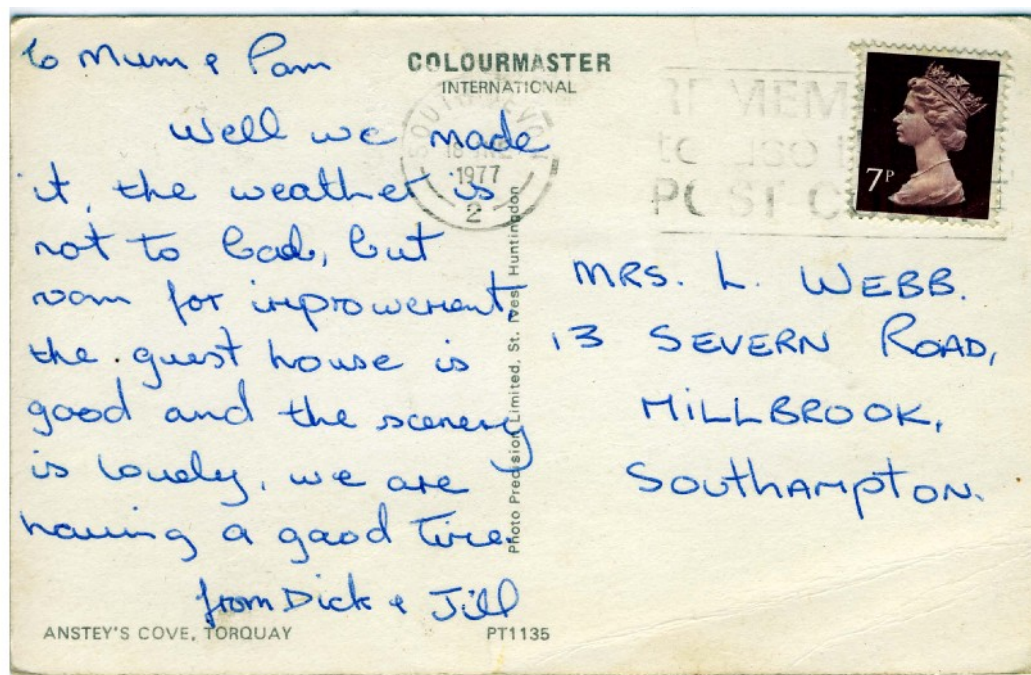


Figure 7 –Text side, Postcard of Anstey's Cove, Torquay (circa 1975)

Again, like the Lyme Regis postcard the message is informal and chatty. A quick note to remind people at home that they are having fun but have not

forgotten them. Again standard comments about the weather, hotel and the environment being nice. The interesting thing is that they say there is room for improvement in the weather, however on a holiday in England there is often room for improvement with the weather, especially when compared to the stereotypical Spanish holiday. If the weather has 'room for improvement', it isn't perfect, which is something the postcard doesn't show. It only shows perfect weather.

This is unlike the Lyme Regis postcard because it shows failed anticipation. They expected better weather, however they didn't get it, the perfect holiday they anticipated and which the postcard shows didn't happen. But they don't want to make a big deal of it by using the words 'room for improvement'.

They live in hope of an improvement in the weather to rescue their anticipation of the perfect holiday. They also don't necessarily want to own up to disappointment in a holiday they have spent money on and so much time anticipating how good it will be.

The third postcard I have was sent to me from New York in May 2005. It is of Times Square photographed in 2005 (fig 8). Unlike the previous two postcards this one is of a bustling city. Times Square is a good example of this being one of the busiest parts of the city. The photograph was taken at night on a long exposure. The exposure was long enough to allow the car headlights to blur but not so long for the electronic light signs to blur. This would have been necessary as it is a night scene and would have needed a little more light to be able to see the buildings and the people as well as the bright signs and lights. The blurred headlights make the cars look as if they're

moving quickly and this adds to the exciting feeling. The bright, lit up advertising signs call to mind other similar images. Some of these images may be from media in general but others may be actual knowledge of similar places such as Piccadilly Circus, London.

It is better to show Times Square at night as this is when the lights are at their best and it looks busiest. This also gives the impression that New York is a 24 hour city, always busy and interesting. This is important in a postcard that shows very few people. The people you can see seem young but they are so

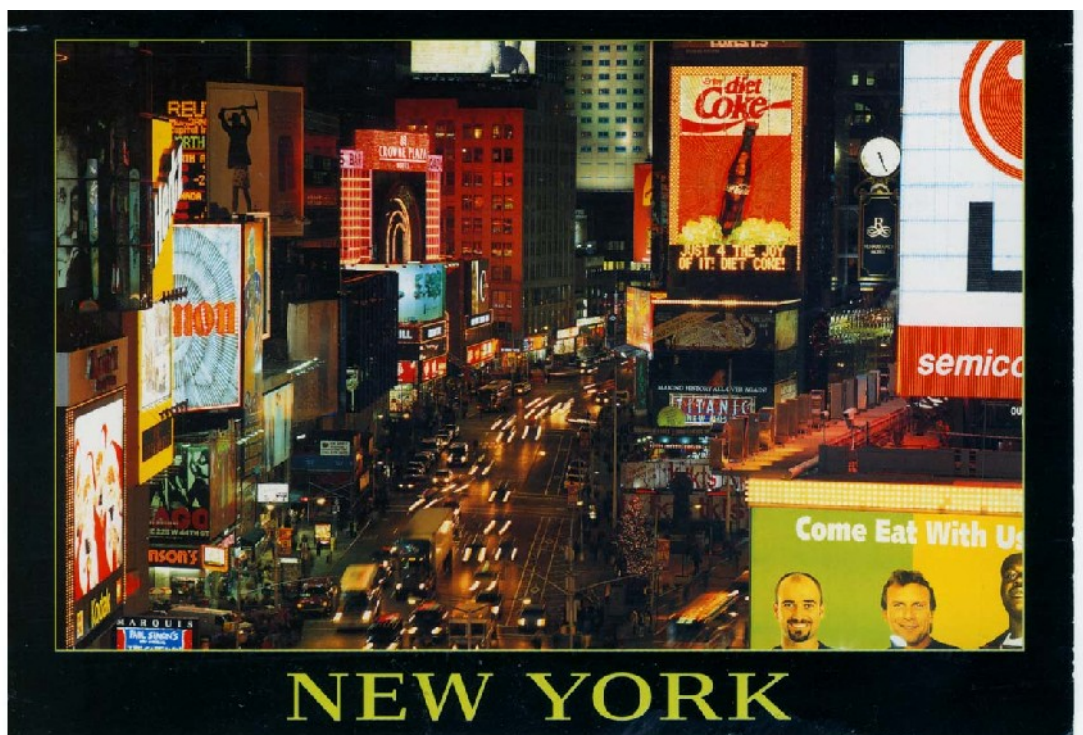


Figure 8 - Postcard of Times Square, New York (circa 2005)

far away it is hard to tell and as a result this isn't as important as it was in the first two postcards. However the advertising shown in the postcards does cater towards the younger generations. Images of celebrities, Diet Coca Cola and Kodak are in big bright colours, invading the space and making it brash, energetic and appealing to the younger generations. This leads me to believe

that the sender and/or receiver of this postcard would be young. This card would appeal to people and so make them want to visit this kind of place.

This card also gives an impression of the collective tourist gaze. Although there are not so many people the various techniques I have been talking about make up for it. All the bright and colourful lights are reminiscent of carnivals and the fast moving traffic adds to the busy atmosphere. Even though you can't see the people you know they are there through the large amount of advertising and other human related activities.

The photo is surrounded by a thick black border, which makes the colours in the image stand out more, especially in a stand with other postcards. There is text on the front in a Times New Roman style saying 'New York', this gives the impression that the whole of New York is like this, making it even more appealing to the people who like this kind of thing.

On the back there is the publisher's information and a statement about New York (fig 9). This reads;

New York.

Times Square and Theatre District are a mecca for entertainment, dining, and shopping. They revolve around the intersection of Seventh Avenue, Broadway and 42nd Street and extend for several blocks in every direction.

This text again implies that the whole of New York is like this by putting 'New York' in bigger letters, on a line to itself. It then goes on to talk about Times

Square giving facts about the place. The interesting word is mecca, originally a place in the Middle East and a spiritual place of pilgrimage for Muslims. It is now used in popular language indicating a place with the best and most of a certain type of thing, in this case the spiritual home of entertainment for New York City, and possibly by implication the rest of the world.

The message on the back reads,

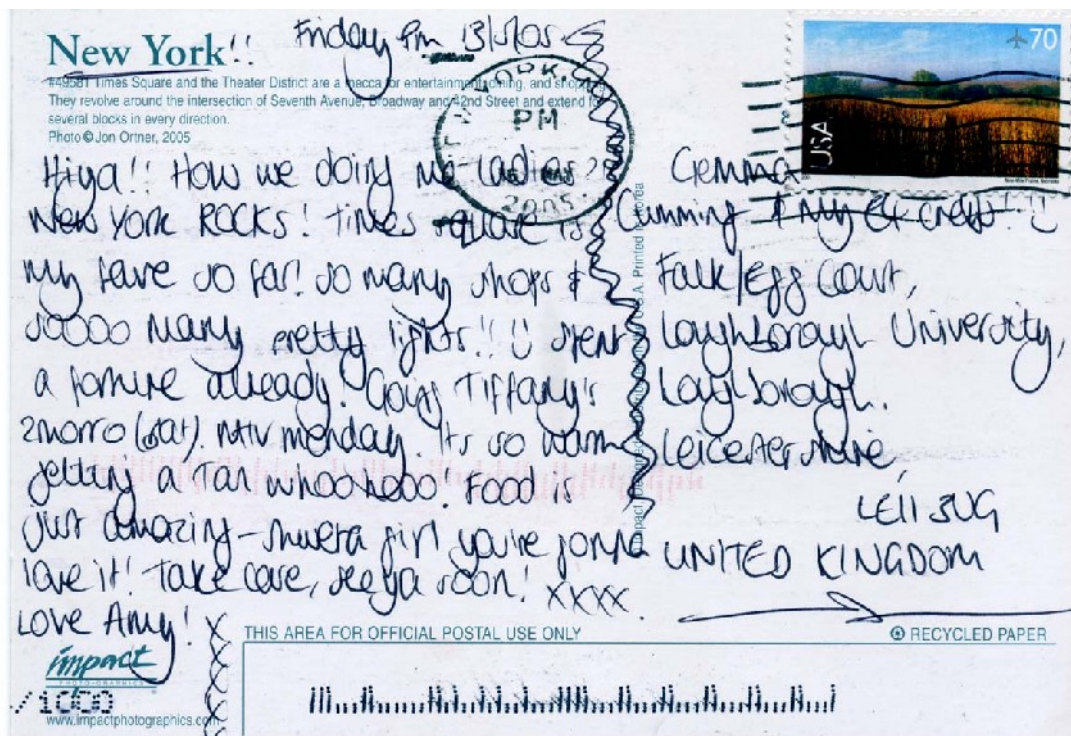


Figure 9 – Text side, Postcard of Times Square, New York (circa 2005)

Hiya!! How are we doing me ladies?? New York ROCKS! Times Square is my fave so far! So many shops and sooooo many pretty lights!! Spent a fortune already. Going Tiffany's tomorrow (sat). MTV Monday. It's so warm getting a tan whoohoo! Food is just amazing – Shweta girl you're gonna love it! Take care see ya soon! Love Amy!

As with the other two postcards the message is chatty, written quickly without too much deep thought. Unlike them it says more about what Amy's been doing than what the weather's been like, although these things are still mentioned. She is obviously enjoying herself and thinks others would have an amazing time. This message works with the image and other text to create an idealised view of the place.

The question is did she really have such a good time? Certainly when this card was written it seems she is but once the excitement of the place had worn off, was it still as good as she anticipated? De Botton talks about how our ordinary lives intrude into these journeys we go on.

I had never tried to stare at a picture of Barbados for any length of time. Had I laid one on the table and forced myself to look at it for twenty-five minutes, my mind and body would naturally have migrated towards a range of extrinsic concerns.¹⁷

We may go to a place that is as perfect as it is shown to be, however we are still bound to our own familiar lives. Worries cross our minds, some settle to spoil the calm, little irritations we didn't foresee appear to distract us and the boredom of suddenly not being as active as we once were all impact on the enjoyment we get out of a place.

After speaking to the sender of this card when she came back I found out that she had become bored and quite acutely homesick by the end of the holiday.

¹⁷ Alain De Botton, *The Art of Travel*. London: Penguin, 2002. p23

The anticipation that she enjoyed was by far the most enjoyable part of her holiday, but if it wasn't fulfilled would have become frustration. The problem is these images are shown to create anticipation, it doesn't necessarily matter if they are accurate or not, they are there to sell a place. The real place will never live up to the anticipation of it created through glossy images.

People write what they do on postcards because these things have become conventions to be written. These conventions are passed down through receiving and writing postcards. At the turn of the century, in the early days of postcards, there were many more deliveries of mail and people could use the cards like we would use phone calls. They started off as informal notes and so carried on as such. The nature of the postcard also meant people weren't necessarily inclined to write about deep and meaningful things as everyone could read what had been written. Also, informal writing was more popular as it meant less schooling was needed as the conventions of letter writing were very formal at the time.

Tom Phillips writes,

The postcard message while being informal developed its own prescription and tacit rules and rather like haiku, contained necessary elements. The greeting, the weather, health of the writer, enquiry as to health of the correspondent, signing off; such was the standard pattern.¹⁸

¹⁸ Tom Phillips, *A Postcard Century*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2000, p13

All of these things written on the back of the postcards are not particularly important information about the cards senders. They work with the image because they talk about the place and the environment. People don't want to tell their friends or relatives that they are having an awful time so generally bad things are ignored or receive a positive spin. Or otherwise the holidaymaker is having a marvellous time as the postcards must have a grain of truth in them for them to be believable. Either way the message works with the imagery emphasising the good points about places.

Chapter 3 - Artists Postcards

Many artists are collectors of postcards including Martin Parr, Tom Phillips and Mark Lancaster. Postcards generally haven't been used much in art. The postcard is very much an art object already, its compositional elements are taken from a history of painting, and they can be seen as a particular kind of photograph. However their routes in popular culture give them kitsch elements that some artists don't want to pursue.

Their cheap and easily posted qualities make them good vehicles for Mail Art and most of the artists that use postcards are Mail Artists. However they rarely use the particular kind of card I'm interested in. More commonly they create their own or use portraits that they alter. However, there are some other artists who have used postcards and postcard imagery in their work.

Malcolm Morley's¹⁹ paintings from 1965 to 1979 range through two key aspects of Morley's work, his so called Super-Realism (known more widely as Photorealism) and the more expressionistic stage after about 1970. During both of these phases he used postcards as source material. He also used other tourist-aimed imagery including advertising.

¹⁹ Born - London 1931; Educated – Camberwell 1952-3,RCA 1954-7; Moved to New York 1958

In 1965 he painted *SS Independence with Côte d'Azur* (fig 10) and this became not only one of his first Super-Realist paintings but also the beginning of a series of cruise liner paintings. Sarah Whitfield talks about the origins of these paintings,



Figure 10 - Malcolm Morley, SS Independence with Côte d'Azur (1965)

Morley followed Artschwager's advice, but when it came to painting a cruise ship he found himself overwhelmed by the difficulty of registering the mass of a huge vessel all in one go ('one end is over there, the other end is over there, a 360 degree impossibility'). He gave up on the idea of painting a ship from life, walked into a nearby shipping office and bought a postcard.²⁰

²⁰ Sarah Whitfield, *Malcom Morley in Full Colour*. London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2001, p32

Morley's primary reason for starting painting from postcards was because he couldn't see how he could paint a ship from life. However these postcards also interested him as images that were full of information and colour. Morley was also looking for his niche; he saw Warhol and his soup cans and Lichtenstein's comic strips. The 'Pop' art that was going on at the time influenced him to find the object or objects that he wanted to paint. He had in the past painted in a more modernist style but rejected this in favour for the more flexible postmodernist principles. His ships embraced traditional elements as they were realistic paintings in a time when modernism dictated that painting should be based on abstraction and form. But they were also paintings of a mass produced object, the postcard. His paintings take reference from popular commercial imagery and are so much more connected with the post-modern. However the early photorealist works are connected to modernism in the way they are painted. The change of scale from postcard to poster size meant he used a grid to scale up. This meant that each square became a painting in its own right, which, because of the smallness of the original square, was abstract.

Morley wanted to bring these postcards to life, painting them so detailed that they looked like real photos, even though they are scaled up to enormous size. *SS Amsterdam in front of Rotterdam* (1966)(fig 11) was a postcard that was scaled up to 161.3 cm by 212.1 cm. To paint it accurately he used a magnifying glass to get every last detail.

The idea of perfection is not only built into Morley's technique at that time but also his choice of image. These photographs are images of perfection that do not exist in real life. The postcards and other imagery are marketing tools designed to sell places or feelings. They are staged perfection showing specific glamorised moments, - sunny days with no clouds, and colours tuned



Figure 11 - Malcolm Morley, SS Amsterdam in front of Rotterdam (1966)

up to painful levels of saturation. However these are done with such perfection on such a scale you are even more aware that they are false impressions.

Beach scene (1968) (fig 12), while not a postcard, deals with similar kinds of imagery. The sky is pure unsullied blue and the sand almost white and not a stone, seashell or piece of rubbish on it. It is painted so realistically that even the folds and patterning in the material look real. The family in the scene look

to be having the perfect time but they are looking straight into the camera and this gives it a very staged look. You are aware that this is too good to be true.

By 1970 Morley had created a trend towards Photorealistic painting.

Photorealism was a new movement of which Morley was one the first



Figure 12 - Malcolm Morley, Beach scene (1968)

exponents. Other prominent photorealists include Chuck Close and Richard Estes. The paintings created were meant to resemble the photographs they came from as closely as possible so as to look like photos themselves. However Morley by this time wanted to escape the slow process of that work and paint more impulsively and uniquely. The more abrasive style he created suited his new imagery more. *Goodyear* from 1971 (fig 13) is much more textural. It is fuzzy and indistinct and while the colours are still tuned high they aren't nearly as extreme as his previous paintings. It has an almost



Figure 13 - Malcolm Morley, Goodyear (1971)

nostalgic quality, like some image from a past holiday not quite remembered correctly, fuzzy and indistinct, glamorised without any obvious hints of falseness that the Super-Realist paintings had.

In *New York City Postcard* (1971) (fig 14) Morley paints a fold out postcard of New York. The painting, almost 6 meters in length, is a representation of the original postcard. Morley also did another free standing version almost 8 meters in length including both sides of the card.

In this one the looser brush strokes seem more fitting to emulate the griminess of the city. Though less realistic than the original postcard aesthetically, this less formal way of painting seems more related to the actual city. The colours, like all his paintings I'm looking at, are heightened exactly like in the original postcard. The imagery used in the original postcard has its own visual code used to sell the place to a sector of the population in general. However, Morley captures this with a sense of being aware of this and creates a feeling that there is more to this city than the surface image the media wants you to see. You look beyond the folds and the paint and see the actual city underneath. The painting he has produced is just a hazy, slightly nostalgic memory of the place. The size of the piece helps as it begins to seem city sized, rather than pocket sized.



Figure 14 - Malcolm Morley, *New York City Postcard* (1971)

The final piece I want to discuss is *Disaster* (1974) (fig 15). This is a return to the cruise liners, in particular a copy of the Super-Realist painting of SS Amsterdam in his new more painterly style. It is a copy except that the top of the postcard has been painted as creased and torn, three dimensions painted in two dimensions. It is like he is taking original images and turning them into less false images. It also looks almost grey in comparison to his previous paintings. Although the sky is still unsullied there is a lot more black and that dulls the image. The sky is the area that is ripped and bent making it hard to read; the purest part of the painting is the bit most damaged. Not only is he making this image more real but also rejecting the falseness of the notion of cruise ships as a perfect holiday by painting it in this new style and also damaging the card. The ship can't stand up to it though because it is created to be a perfect environment, there is no reality behind it. Unlike all the other paintings done in this new style, this one doesn't look hazy and nostalgic. It just loses coherence and becomes an almost formless mass of brushstrokes.

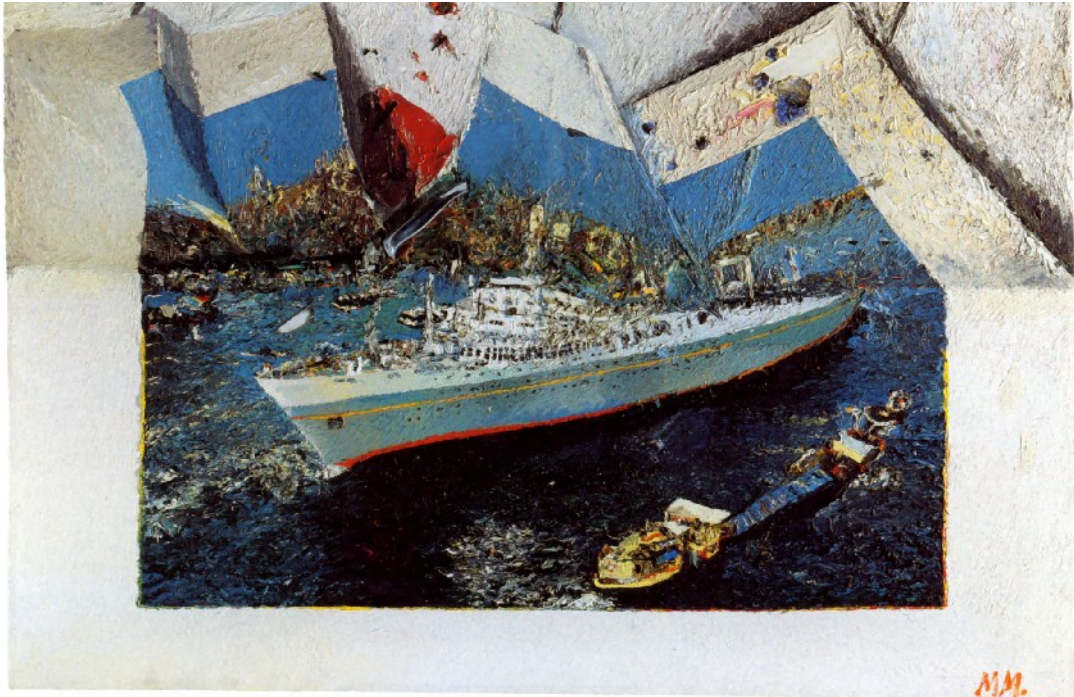


Figure 15 - Malcolm Morley, *Disaster* (1974)

Tom Phillips²¹ work also deals with postcards. Although he does a large number of other artworks, postcards have influenced many of his pieces. An avid collector he wrote a book on the subject called *The Postcard Century*. His postcard related works include *Benches*, *The Quest for Irma* and *The Flower before the Bench*. The use of collage and popular culture references link the works to that of the Pop Artists. However some of his work is also modernist such as the *Terminal Greys* as it relies on colour and form rather than real images. Phillips however did many different kinds of work all at the same time and didn't conform to one set of ideas or principles.

His interests in postcards stem from the little details he finds in them, especially postcards that epitomise what he calls the postcard vision, a series of rules or characteristics that photo based postcards show. These include; -

²¹ Born – London 1937; Educated – Oxford 1958-60, Camberwell 1961-4

Postcard reality has a higher incidence of red cars and a higher incidence of people dressed in bright red or bright blue than 'real life'.²²

Life aspires to the condition of the postcard more than a postcard aspires to the imitation of life.²³

The miracle (levitation, rendering the body transparent, walking upon the waters) is the commonplace of the postcard.²⁴

The postcard is to the world as the dream is to the individual²⁵

All of these statements emphasise the points I have made in previous chapters about the staged reality of postcards. Postcards don't fully epitomise real life; they create a nicer reality to sell particular places.

The details Phillips is interested in are often ones containing colours and attributes that reinforce the subject of the postcard. Commonly these include people as they form the core of the images. He sees the unreality of the postcard imagery making them like theatre. These people inhabiting postcards are just actors playing parts, these details of the people summarise the overall feeling the postcard creates.

²² Tom Phillips. *Tom Phillips. Work and Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992, p48

²³ Tom Phillips. *Tom Phillips. Work and Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992, p48

²⁴ Tom Phillips. *Tom Phillips. Work and Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992, p48

²⁵ Tom Phillips. *Tom Phillips. Work and Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992, p48

However it is not the aspects of consumerism in the postcards he finds most interesting but the people in them. Their nature as unknown images in the cards interests him through their mortality. These people in the postcards could be living or dead there was no way of knowing. The trigger for this idea was a postcard of Battersea Park where he saw the bench and people in the foreground as,

They were the assembled cast of a tragedy and/or its spectators: the ironic brightness of council flowers and the drab gaiety of the surrounding concrete parkland reinforced these impressions.²⁶

This work called *Benches* (1971)(fig 16) contains many images of benches taken from many different postcards. These original postcards are all western landscape postcards and interestingly enough a large proportion are from seaside resorts such as Brighton, Bournemouth and Southbourne. Phillips' used benches as a motif because for him they were 'Stationary vehicles of mortality'²⁷. The stark and fake brightness of the original images benches was a contributing factor, but he also felt this way because of the bench provided by the Ashton undertakers outside their shop in SE London. It was for the use of tired old people, which it resulted in trade if they died there²⁸.

²⁶ *ibid* p.37

²⁷ Tom Phillips. *Tom Phillips. Work and Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992, p.36

²⁸ Tom Phillips. *Tom Phillips. Work and Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992, p.36

The discovery of another postcard of Battersea Park also added to this view. This other card shows the same bench although this time the bench is empty and the vibrant flowers are overgrown, almost hiding the bench from view. It allowed Phillip's to create symmetry in the piece that highlighted his ideas of mortality. It leads us to wonder where these people have gone. In the fake world of postcards have they gone back to their real lives or have they died.

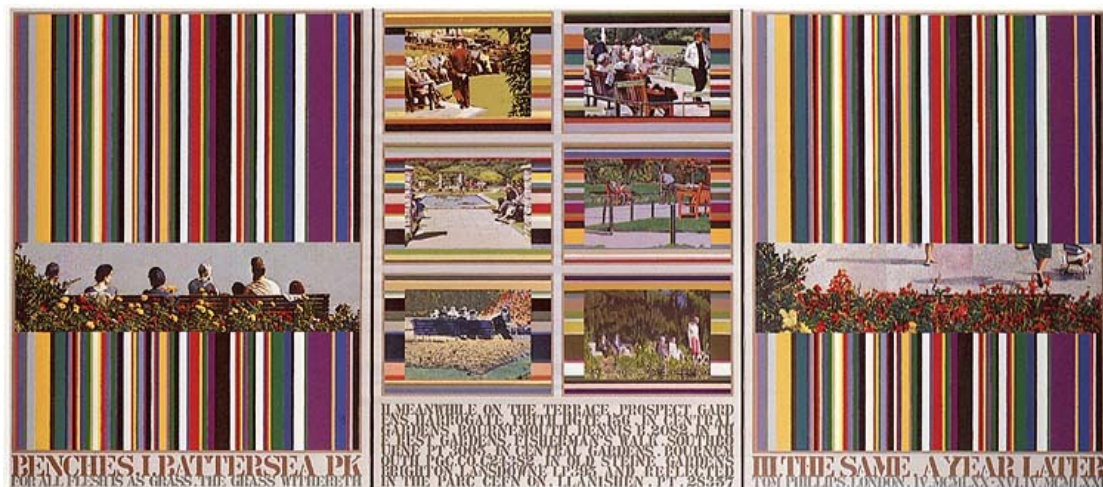


Figure 16 - Tom Phillips, *Benches* (1971)

The coarse grained look of the painting is caused by blowing up the original postcards to a much larger scale. It adds a reminder of the original material and also an element of falseness. People don't look like they have been made up from lots of dots. It is said in his biography on the Tate website that,

He used postcards as source material as a means of relating the processes of painting to those of four-colour commercial printing, examining the imagery not for its implications about consumer culture but in support of themes of human mortality.²⁹

²⁹ www.tate.org.uk

The broken nature and imperfections of the offset printing process are reflected in the notions of mortality he addresses.

His work is similar to that of Malcolm Morley as he highlights the falseness of the postcard. Morley's work however shows this through the impossible perfection of his earlier work and the more impressionistic later work as discussed. In a similar way the falseness of the postcard type image can be seen in the photographs of Martin Parr.

Though not an artist using actual postcards, the photos and imagery Martin Parr³⁰ uses have strong postcard roots. He worked as a photographer at the Butlins resorts in the 1970's, initially taking black and white photographs in 1971, then being promoted to a colour photographer in 1972. At this time John Hinde Studios were producing highly saturated colour postcards of the Butlins resorts which influenced Parr and he began to collect them. However it wasn't until the 1980's that he began to photograph in colour as colour photography had previously been seen as unprofessional and only suited to commercial or domestic snapshots.

Parr takes his inspiration from images of holidaymakers and tourism, but the photographs he takes are much more realistic impressions of places. The high level saturated colour he uses make his photographs seem like the postcards of the John Hinde Studio. They look glamorous and exciting; however he doesn't omit the more grimy nature of British holidays. He

³⁰ Born – Epsom, 1952; Educated Manchester Polytechnic 1970-3.

incorporates the kitsch elements in everyday life but doesn't celebrate them, unlike the Pop Artists. His work is contemporary as it relates directly to issues that affect our world.

In a talk in Tate modern on the 25th June 2003, Martin Parr talked about his influences including the John Hinde postcards, Tony Hancock's ironic humour and issues relating to expressing society's vulnerabilities. He expressed an interest in how postcards reflect how social attitudes change. Because postcards show current attitudes and habits of the time, a postcard from 1910 wouldn't show women in bikinis unlike more modern postcards.

In the series *The Last Resort* (1986) (figs. 17 – 19) he took photos around a seaside town called New Brighton near Liverpool. At the time of taking these photos he described New Brighton as "a faded resort". It was also seven years into the reign of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, the working classes had high unemployment and the privatisation of many previously public industries didn't help. It seems that at a time when Thatcher was extolling how great the country was, Parr was creating images of the unglamorous holidays of the working classes.

The photographs in *The Last Resort* show the minute details of these holidays. They contain imagery taken from the conventions of postcards but they are more upfront and detailed. These are images of people having fun by the seaside, doing things such as sunbathing, paddling and eating ice creams and burgers. However unlike past and to some degree contemporary photography they show the imperfections in daily life of the time.



Figure 17 - Martin Parr, *Last Resort* (1986). Photograph



Figure 18 - Martin Parr, *Last Resort* (1986). Photograph

Previously much contemporary documentary photography was in black and white, while colour photography has only recently been regarded as serious. These high saturated photos no longer had a veil of nostalgia the black and white photos maintained. They didn't hide the aspects of life that dealt with mass consumerism, glossy logos and adverts that became so strong a part of the decade. In fact, these advert-like photographs accentuated these issues in a way black and white couldn't, and remind me of the postcards that advertise places.

Martin Parr's images show New Brighton in an unforbearing light. There is trash everywhere and the holidaymakers are lounging not in the stereotypically gorgeous sandy beaches but on stones and concrete. This is



Figure 19 - Martin Parr, Last Resort (1986). Photograph

a more realistic view of seaside resorts at that time and to some degree modern day resorts as well. There are fewer sandy beaches than pebble

beaches in England, and like the rest of the country concrete is everywhere as it is a cheap and sturdy material. The vibrant colours of Parr's photographs reflect modern postcards from the 60's onwards (though the postcards of the 60's and 70's will always be the most vibrant). However in all these images of more unpleasant resorts the people are still having fun and enjoying themselves. The images highlight the mass consumerism and excesses of modern first world living but also show how much people enjoy this culture.

Parr's photographs show the reality of the consumer society we are living in. Adverts, branding, cheap mass production all create an environment in which we are told that this is the modern, wealthy and best way to live. It is an environment in which the seedier side is ignored and although we are aware on one level that it exists, it is consciously ignored.

All of the artists discussed recognise postcards and postcard imagery as being fake. Morley's work recreates on a much bigger scale perfectly the postcards and other images he took his inspiration from. The scale of the works makes the imagery more powerful and so it becomes easier to see that the original image is too good to be true. In his early work the images he picks seem staged whereas in his later work they gain this nostalgic quality, both of which emphasise the falseness of this holiday imagery.

Phillips' postcard compositions are easily recognised as having been constructed. By using bits of cards and painting them on a bigger scale like Morley he emphasises their falseness. He, unlike Morley when painting his

postcards large, paints the individual dots that make up the printing process. This also accentuates the falseness of an image and causes you to recognise that it is a reproduction of a scene.

Parr's photographs create postcard-like scenes with the high saturated colours that we expect from postcards and other imagery from holiday brochures. However the falseness of these images is accentuated as the scenes Parr's photographs include the more unpleasant elements that are removed from postcards.

Conclusion

Ever since postcards were first produced they have been altering perceptions of humankind, from the first images of people and their activities to the more recognisable images of places and people on holiday. Through my discussion I have found that the images of places are important in shaping our perceptions of places. The imagery found in postcards, travel brochures and television programmes are adverts for places and need to make the place seem appealing.

As printing processes have become more sophisticated postcards were produced in greater quantities, more photorealistically, for less money. This increase in quality allowed postcards to create images that would persuade the more sophisticated viewers to want to go on holiday in the places they show and believe what these images portrayed.

As travel becomes a greater part of life people want the perfect holiday. Places that rely on tourism create images of beautiful beaches and exciting nightlife. The photos of these places are doctored, either physically when the photo is being taken, or later digitally, or in the printing process to remove unpleasant elements like rubbish. The weather in these images is always sunny and warm and the water sparkling blue. The perfect holiday calls out from postcard racks and travel brochures. These images are there to create anticipation of a perfect holiday, that if we go to this place with its beautiful weather we will have the dream vacation we need.

As noted in chapter two, it isn't just the image that affects impressions of the perfect holiday destination but the printed text is also important. Printed texts are used to inform where places are and can also emphasise the feeling of perfect holidays. The hand written text can also be interesting, revealing or hiding the writer's opinions of the place. Looking at responses on a number of postcards I found that they are for the most part positive, and any negative comments are short. Though the anticipated vision of the place may not have been fulfilled the writers are not willing to show they have had a bad time. As such the written message can back up the image on the front, showing that real people who have been there are having a good time.

I have found that the images on the postcards are false, emphasising tropical sunshine and utopias of spotlessly clean streets that don't exist, which is exemplified in the works of the artists I have chosen to discuss. Their works emphasise the falseness of the postcard and the tourist aimed imagery it is

related to. Though they do it in different ways the result is still the same; they show how the imagery is false and leads you to question the validity of the original imagery, the imagery that creates these perfect holidays.

How do postcards affect public perception? It is not just the postcard but all tourist aimed imagery that creates these idyllic holiday destinations. High saturated colours and an edited environment create aspirational destinations. These images are designed to sell places and to sell themselves. However people don't just want to collect souvenirs of a place to prove they have been there, they also want to tell people about it while they are there. The postcard becomes an even stronger advert for the place, and the written text on the back becomes a testimonial for the place making it seem that it is just as good as the image suggests.

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