

Learning from Austin Powers

How long do you spend looking forward to holidays and enjoying memories of a visit? Probably more than you realise. Jonathan Bignell looks at the representation of destinations in film and TV, and explains why image is so important in attracting visitors.

What matters to people about destinations is more their image than their substance. What draws visitors to somewhere is the way it has been represented, and what makes them come back is the image they hold in their memories when they get home. All of us are continually testing our experiences against the representations we already think we know. On the one hand, that explains the feeling of weary resignation that occurs when we see just how tacky the resort pictured in a holiday brochure really is. But on the other hand, it explains the delight we might feel when New York turns out less like it is in *Seven* and more like the romantic city of Woody Allen's *Manhattan*. One of the tasks of the destination maker is to reinforce some of the images of a place, and sideline others. Existing media images are the keys to this problem, and Austin Powers can help.

Austin Powers' London is a pre-digested destination: Carnaby Street and Soho are populated by girls in mini-skirts; this a place for sex, shopping and guilt-free hedonism. It is Swinging London, an unreal city made out of sixties movies, pop imagery, and Michael Myers' memories of his childhood. *The Spy who Shagged Me* contains self-consciously nostalgic recreations of a destination which was already a media artefact in the 1960s. This London is a copy of a copy of a place which only ever existed in film, television and advertising, and other world locations have been mythologised in the same ways. Remember how the TV series of the sixties, shot in studios in the Home Counties, habitually used library film footage of exotic locales: for *The Saint*, *The Champions* or *Department S*, Paris was

the Eiffel Tower, Rome was the Coliseum surrounded by a traffic jam, and Geneva was the lake. The cult popularity of these series, and of Austin Powers movies, has a lot to teach us about *how* places mean.

Capitalism is all about selling illusions, in the sense that what we desire are meanings and images, not the brute reality. What Austin Powers teaches us is two things. First, the image is also a product which gives pleasure. Keying in to the image of Swinging London, looking at holiday brochures, taking photographs and showing the photographs to other people are important pleasures in themselves. The anticipation of being in a place, and passing on our memory images of a place after the visit, override being there itself. The pleasure comes from recycling, re-editing, and re-presenting what the place meant for us, in order to tell stories to ourselves and others about it. The representation supersedes the reality, and is much more significant in the destination business.

It would be pointless to call for realistic representation of places, because no representation is properly realistic, and there are too many conventions of realism for any one to work convincingly for long. Consider the irony in *The Spy who Shagged Me*. The film, its director, and its audience all know that Swinging London is a myth. The TV audiences of the 1960s also knew that Danger Man, The Saint, or Jason King were not in Geneva or the Caribbean. The unreal place is pleasurable because it is unreal, an image, and that makes it all the more exciting. No tourist who goes to London will expect it to look the way it does in *The Spy who Shagged Me*, but they will want to visit those locations now rebranded as part of Cool Britannia. They will tell their friends, who will measure the anecdotes against Austin Powers too.

A destination is a media experience. Not only because successful destinations have, and work for, media images which give them meaning. But also because visiting a destination is about mediating experience through those media images, and then becoming a mediator yourself when you re-present your experiences to yourself and to others. Branding a place as a successful destination is just a special form of mediating it. Places which have no mediated meaning remain empty, because their value in anticipation, conversation and visitors' anecdotes is virtually nil. Without mediation, without the media, there is no meaning and no value.

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