

Nation-Branding: A Critical Evaluation. Assessing the Image Building of Iceland¹

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Abstract – Icelanders have long been image conscious. But only recently with Icelandic companies expanding abroad has a concerted effort towards image building been set in motion. With the budding expansion, the Icelandic Trade Council invested in an analysis of “the image of Iceland,” which was conducted by the Office of the Prime Minister and is now being perpetuated as “communicative defence strategies” by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This article provides an analysis of image building and claims that its underpinnings lie in the idea of “nation-branding,” with Iceland receiving a place on the *Nation Brand Index* (NBI) devised by Simon Anholt. This article seeks to critically evaluate the Icelandic image building effort with reference to geographic literature on place-making, placing, and notions of belonging, ideas integral to an image of anywhere.

Keywords – Iceland, image, nation-branding, place brand, geography, space, place, ethics, post-structuralism, politics, foreign affairs

Introduction

We also have to take care that Iceland does not become a brand; Iceland is naturally like...life.²

Above the artist Ólafur Elíasson expresses his thoughts about Iceland when asked about his relationship to the country in terms of his art in the news programme *Kastljós* on Icelandic national television (RÚV), 23 June 2008. He emphasizes that a country and its people are not

¹ I would gratefully like to acknowledge input from my colleagues Doreen Massey, Anne-Mette Hjalager, and those participating in the INOR meeting in Hólar, 28–30 May 2009. The Icelandic Research Council I thank for their support in this research.

² “Við verðum líka að passa að Ísland verði ekki svona brand, Ísland er náttúrulega eins og...líf?” (my translation).

brands or “raw material” for image building, but alive and thus unpredictable.

This article is set in the context of recent efforts of image building in Iceland.³ More specifically, it is about the marketing of Iceland as a tourist destination and the ways in which branding is an integral part of such efforts. These marketing efforts are critically evaluated and I will demonstrate how they draw on recently promoted ideas of nation-branding. Thus the image building is critiqued through stating that branding can never surmount the inherent tension within the socio-cultural reality of the destination being promoted, in this particular case Iceland. The main focus of the critique is placed on this last point, Iceland itself as space and a place.

As a number of my colleagues demonstrate in other articles in this book, there is undoubtedly something about Iceland. Islands in general do have a special allure, as John R. Gillis observes: “In Western cultures, islands have always been viewed as places of sojourn [...] from the beginning they were seen as remote liminal places,” usually associated with pilgrimage or spiritual travel.⁴ Further, Gillis claims that nowadays, islands often capitalize on their apparent remoteness in time and space to become popular destinations— islands slake the modern thirst for that authenticity which seems in short supply on the mainland.⁵ Iceland is slightly set apart from the majority of islands in the world as it is inhabited, yet bordering the Arctic and thus remote in the sense of its Nordicity. Thus its island allure, composed of an amalgamation of its physical, cultural, and climatic features, is compounded through less tangible characteristics of “island-ness,” such as a sense of distance, isolation, separateness, tradition, “otherness,” and the North.⁶ This amalgamation creating its allure has been well documented by scholars⁷ as being a combination of uninhabited wilderness, volcanic activity, frontier land at the edge of the world, and a genuine physical challenge to those wanting to

³ Gunn 1988.

⁴ Gillis 2007: 278.

⁵ Gillis 2007: 280.

⁶ Jóhannesson, Huijbens, & Sharpley 2010.

⁷ Ísleifsson 1996; Oslund 2000; Pálsson & Dürrenberger 1992.

travel in it. Through the centuries Iceland has thus been a well-known destination, at least in the Western world.

Before setting out, some basic premises need to be outlined. Firstly, a destination is no simple matter. Jarkko Saarinen states:

Destination is by nature a problematic concept. It refers to a varying range of spatial scales (i.e. levels of representation) in tourism: continents, states, provinces, municipalities and other administrative units, tourist resorts or even single tourist products. Spatial scales and definitions of destinations based on administrative or other such units are sometimes useful and practical, but theoretically they tend to approach tourism as a spatial and geographical phenomenon from a technical and static viewpoint.⁸

Emerging from this is a type of relational ontology where a destination is never static and scales can never be fixed, as that would fail to bring to life all the ongoing events and spatial trajectories which co-form it.⁹ These trajectories are manifold and entail human as well as non-human actors in a particular destination. Tourism, understood from this perspective, revolves around practices, orderings, and the ways tourism is done. Tourism is thus an active ongoing endeavour, never to be arrested and fixed into explanatory categories.¹⁰ This ontology will be further explored below whilst critiquing image building. But in this context a particular trajectory is made from the perspective of those visiting destinations. They seek experiences, and managing those is impossible, although B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore attempt to produce guidelines to that effect.¹¹ These experiences are lived ones and do not merely revolve around visual perception. Adding the visitors' perspective thus adds a commercial trajectory to destination formation, which Maria F. Cracolici and Peter Nijkamp explain:

⁸ Saarinen 2004: 164.

⁹ Massey 2005: 110.

¹⁰ Cloke & Perkins 1998; Crouch 2002; Edensor 1998; Franklin & Crang 2001.

¹¹ See Pine II & Gilmore 1999.

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A tourist destination (e.g. city, region or site) is at present often no longer seen as a set of distinct natural, cultural, artistic or environmental resources, but as an overall appealing product available in a certain area: a complex and integrated portfolio of services offered by a destination that supplies a holiday experience which meets the needs of the tourist. A tourist destination thus produces a compound package of tourist services based on its indigenous supply potential.¹²

If we understand destinations through a relational ontology as composed of trajectories that have, as Brian Massumi would say, “an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary,” then a country, with its inhabiting nation, can be seen as a constellation of such destinations, to use tourism vocabulary.¹³ Nation building as outlined by Benedict Anderson is very much a calculated effort to align this constellation into a coherent state, but branding is as well. However, branding is business and thus wholly different from the process Anderson describes.¹⁴

The second premise is that of understanding branding and its relation to images. In tourism a destination’s image is well known to be fundamental to destination choice.¹⁵ That is, the images, perceptions, feelings, and beliefs that tourists hold of particular places are significant influences on the destinations they choose to visit; moreover, those images may be verified, enhanced, or modified (positively or negatively) by the experience of the destination, thus impacting on future travel decisions.¹⁶ In this context and drawing on Graham Hankinson, an image can be defined as that which people perceive whilst a brand is that which is being communicated by someone.¹⁷ Jean-Noël Kapferer outlines a relationship between brands and images in three parts.¹⁸ First, there is the sender, who conveys brand identity along with other sources of inspiration as a

¹² Cracolici & Nijkamp 2008: 336.

¹³ Massumi 2002: 4.

¹⁴ Anderson 2006.

¹⁵ Baloglu & McCleary 1999; Jenkins 1999.

¹⁶ Chon 1992.

¹⁷ Hankinson 2004: 111.

¹⁸ Kapferer 2004.

signal. These signals are messages transmitted to a third party, the receiver, who develops the brand image. An image is always in the eye of the beholder, but branding or brand management aims to encompass both ends, the eye of the beholder and the producer of the image. Between both ends there needs to be congruence. Image thus appears as a promotional asset in brand management, be it for good or bad, and branding is about the management of images amongst other things, just as branding is created through image.

Thus a destination and any constellation thereof (i.e., nations and regions) is not so much about nation building and their deployment in diplomatic advocacy, but it has become a component in branding exercises of various kinds. Image and reputation have become essential equities of states,¹⁹ and these are subject to brand management practices to an increasing extent.²⁰ It almost goes without saying that it takes considerable investment in neo-liberal ideology to believe that culture, spaces, and places can be subjected to brand management practices.²¹ It simply begs for a critical analysis, but first the official efforts at creating and maintaining Iceland's image will be outlined.

Branding Iceland

The recent image building exercise of the Icelandic authorities will be analyzed below. This concerted multi-stakeholder effort of induced image building started in the late 1990s and is aimed at marketing Iceland and products produced there. Midway through, the Icelandic authorities called upon the popularly labelled proponent of nation-branding, Simon Anholt, as they became conscious of the need to “repackage” Iceland's image and seek the source of its brand.²² The image building exercise has been greatly influenced by Anholt's input, and Iceland's latest effort in marketing and image promotion bears his mark.

¹⁹ van Ham 2005: 17; see also Anholt 2006.

²⁰ Anholt 2007.

²¹ Harvey 2005.

²² Anholt is currently the chief editor of the journal *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, and has published extensively on the subject. See for example Anholt 2002, 2007.

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Most tourists travel to major destinations and a country like Iceland can hardly be considered amongst those, with only 500,000 visitors yearly compared to the millions that visit neighbouring countries or places like Paris, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen. Iceland can at best be a niche player competing on the margins. Thus, when it comes to an induced image, the country relies on effective, targeted strategies that have the potential to squeeze the maximum value from the small budget available.²³ The government of Iceland has wholeheartedly accepted this, at least for tourism, and a report outlining the policy and vision for Icelandic tourism until 2030 states the necessity of a concerted effort to harmonize the image of Iceland domestically and internationally, or “to attach the image better to the country’s competitive advantage.”²⁴



Figure 1. Iceland Naturally—registered trademark and the logo of Íslandsbanki.

Iceland Naturally (IN) can be considered the start of this concerted effort in building and protecting Iceland’s image as a tourist destination, although the image was not only developed for tourism. Initiated in 1997 and 1998, by the then head of the Icelandic Tourist Board and the commercial attaché of the Foreign Secretariat in New York, the project was formally launched in the U.S. in 1999 and in 2006 in Europe, based on the U.S. experience. It was not only Iceland’s tourism industry that was involved in this exercise, but artists and advertisement agencies contributed as well, for example, through making the logo in Figure 1 above. Other logos were also produced, sharing the layout of Figure 1, such as that of Íslandsbanki, set next to it on the right.

The initial focus of the IN campaign was upon product awareness. Preceding its launch a market survey was carried out on the U.S.

²³ Morgan 2005.

²⁴ “Að tengja ímyndina betur samkeppnisforskoti landsins.” *Íslensk ferðaþjónusta—framtíðarsýn* [Icelandic Tourism—Vision for the Future] 2003 (my translation).

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market by Fleishman Hillard, showing that only 11% of respondents were aware of Icelandic products in the U.S. market. Later, the Michael Cohen group conducted a similar product awareness survey in Europe in 2005 preceding IN's launch there, but this was also with a focus on the island as a tourism destination. There the results were that around two-thirds of respondents in Britain, France, and Germany found Iceland to be an appealing destination. The themes that emerged from the survey were different according to the nationality of the respondent. Whilst the British associated Iceland with ice and snow, with mineral spas, fish, and volcanoes lagging as far seconds, the Germans placed primacy on the mineral spas, although they ranked on a par with ice and snow, and with natural beauty and rugged exotic landscapes coming second. The French followed the British with prominent notions of ice and snow, with fish, exotic rugged landscapes, and mineral spas coming far behind. These findings have guided the marketing efforts of IN. Generally the Iceland Naturally project can be viewed as a first step in Iceland's image campaign.²⁵ The main themes of Iceland Naturally are the natural, with reference to purity, sustainability, nature, and the unspoiled. The companies who partner with the public authorities in this project are seven food producers and selected tourism operators in the country.

The Iceland Travel Industry Association (SAF) is also involved in the management of IN. In 2003 SAF called its members to a strategic planning meeting to review the association's five-year history and create a vision for the next five years. The vision created entailed seven strategic goals, one of which revolved around the image of Iceland. The bases stated for the image are:

- Purity
- Health
- Safety
- The country's beauty

For the SAF the marketing of Iceland and its beauty revolves around notions of untouched nature, to be promoted through the marketing slogan "Iceland Naturally." Environmental consciousness

²⁵ Pálsdóttir 2005.

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also features in their vision for the image, as well as the idea of purity.²⁶ So in many ways the industry association's vision echoes that of the IN marketing strategy. Purity seems to be the focus in Iceland's marketing, responding to the Michael Cohen group survey where the respondents did not have a strong awareness of Iceland in terms of purity.

Following the strategy of IN and the vision of SAF, the Iceland Chamber of Commerce (ICC) recruited Simon Anholt as an advisor for the long-term strategic build-up of the image of Iceland in response to the adverse publicity in early 2006 regarding Icelandic banks and the resumption of whaling.²⁷ Through focus group interviews in Iceland and abroad, several work sessions, and most importantly the surveying of Iceland's position through Anholt's quarterly Nation Brand survey, Iceland emerged as a relatively unknown entity mostly associated with the Nordic countries in general. Anholt concluded that Iceland's image today is more of a country brand than a nation brand, referring to the physical entity that is Iceland and its nature rather than the people living in the country. Thus, he praised the rise in Icelandic tourism as it has done a good job of communicating the natural attributes of the island around the world, but the character of Iceland's population remains largely unknown except to its nearest neighbours.²⁸

The ICC next recommended that a special task force should be set up in order to establish the image of Iceland. Their role was to inventory the current perception of the population, outline a policy, and suggest ways of implementation. The Office of the Prime Minister responded and set up this task force in 2007, which delivered

²⁶ *Stefnumótun SAF 2004–2012* [SAF Policy 2004–2012], 2007.

²⁷ As an interesting comparison, Denmark has gone through much the same. First image awareness became prominent with the Muhammad cartoon controversy; see Therkelsen & Halkier 2008. Then in 2007 the government allocated 400 million DKK to branding Denmark; see for example *Markedsføring af Danmark* [Global Marketing of Denmark], <<http://www.brandingdanmark.dk>>.

²⁸ *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008.

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its report in February 2008 entitled *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* (The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy).²⁹

The task force’s method entailed an attempt at an inventory of the cultural resources of Iceland, along with an inventory of the population’s “mindscape.” In practical terms it can be compared to Wally Olins’s seven-step essentials in nation-branding.³⁰ These steps are outlined in Table 1:

Table 1. The seven-step essentials in nation-branding.

Olins’s steps	The taskforce’s method and results
Set up working groups	The task force set up several smaller focus groups by invitation around the country.
Perception of the nation	Large open focus group meetings were held in Reykjavík and in the countryside.
Evaluate strengths and weaknesses	The focus was mainly on outlining the strengths.
Central idea created	The image core was set up as a matrix of nature, people, the economy and culture, intersecting with power, freedom and peace.
Visualisation	The core was visualised through the “ice crystal” and a volcano and it was suggested that a brand image should be created.
Co-ordination of the message	The current state of affairs was detailed and what emerged was a tangled web of relations entitled “the spider” by the taskforce. They recommend how to clarify this.
Liaison system launched	Recommendations are put forth as to who is to work with whom.

Source: Olins 1999 (left column)

With the steps in the right-hand column a core was made, around which a sense of purpose in the country was to be built. In the core, tourism, population, export, policy, cultural relations, and investment promotion agendas could be aligned into a long-term development

²⁹ *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008.

³⁰ Olins 1999.

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agenda for the entire nation.³¹ As stated in the foreword to the taskforce's report,

this has to do with the whole nation, as the build-up of a powerful and positive international reputation is necessary to further secure Iceland's position in the international community.³²

With this aim the task force set about researching in order to generate the core image of Iceland. Spearheaded by the rector of Reykjavík University, a semi-private business school, huge focus groups of around 100 participants around the country were set up in collaboration with Capacent-Gallup, and from them the task force distilled the five points below as a summary of what Icelanders thought of themselves. These ideas served as a first step in outlining the truth of the "Iceland brand," guiding branding practices.

Origin: The first Icelanders were people who came here in search of freedom and better quality of life. The nation mostly suffered from hardships through history, but once becoming independent it vaulted from being a developing country to becoming one of the richest nations in the world in less than a century. The greatest cultural heritage of Icelanders, the Icelandic language, lives in the nation's daily communications and literature.

Society: Iceland is a free democratic society, human rights are well respected, and welfare dominates. The society is egalitarian characterized by strong social bonds. It is a safe and peaceful society.

Personal characteristics: Icelanders are hard working, brave, and resourceful. They are uninhibited children of nature and have a strong will for independence.

³¹ Wason 2005: 28.

³² "sem varðar þjóðina alla þar sem uppbygging kraftmikils og jákvæðs alþjóðlegs orðspors er nauðsynlegt til þess að festa Ísland enn frekar í sessi á alþjóðagrundvelli. *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008: 3 (my translation).

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Achievements: The struggle for independence by a small nation and achievement to escape poverty and become one of the world's richest nations is ranked in the minds of many as the nation's key achievement.

Attributes/Assets: Unique nature, its resources and purity, safe and peaceful democratic society, founded on freedom and respect for human rights. A powerful economy and the aptitude of the nation's people are the driving force.³³

Here the mixing of people, society, and nation is no coincidence as the above is presented in a selectively diachronic fashion. Based on the key attributes of Iceland defined above, the taskforce proposed that there should be three founding tenets to Iceland's branding:

Power: Efficiency, optimism, and audacity characterize the unique creative powers of the nation. The Icelandic landscape is extremely powerful and its purity is one of the most important factors in Iceland's image.

Freedom: The origin of settlement in Iceland is rooted in the search for freedom. The struggle for independence captured a small nation's desire for freedom, which despite its size and poverty managed to gain independence. Iceland is amongst the freest societies in the world and democracy is its founding principle.

Peace: Icelanders enjoy one of the safest societies in the world, a strong welfare society populated with those wanting to live at peace with their environment, Nature, and other nations and who advocate peace strongly in the international arena.³⁴

Following this, the taskforce claims that the untamed forces of Nature are parallel to the often unruly and unpredictable behaviour of Icelanders. The report draws a stark homogenous picture of a nation invested with a "natural strength" that forms the "foundation of its

³³ *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008: 25 (my translation).

³⁴ *Ímynd Íslands. Styrkur, staða og stefna* [The Image of Iceland. Strength, Position, and Policy] 2008: 25 (my translation).

dynamic business activities.”³⁵ The people, the place, and its romance all feature here, generously laced with power in all its form but in a very superficial fashion, as much more in-depth research than simple focus groups is required to get a sense of places and its people. All the tenets of former image building exercises and ideas from the Iceland Naturally concept through the industry association and the Icelandic Chamber of Commerce are present, especially nature. But here there is an explicit attempt to tie the people to the landscape in order to turn the country brand into a nation brand, as deemed necessary by Simon Anholt. The key conclusion of the taskforce is the necessity of a joint platform to communicate the key attributes and thus commit and align the stakeholders to the branding vision. The government report, compiled to serve business interests, even suggests that Icelandic artists should be put to use creating positive stories about Icelandic companies’ achievements.³⁶ The brand is to be an all-encompassing framework and shows an amazing lack of awareness of the complexities of places and its peoples and draws heavily on the branding literature. It is abundantly clear under which theme “truths” are to be introduced in branding, or as Andy Pike shows, how “space and place are written through branded objects and the social practices of branding,” simplistically and framed with the teleological lens of branding’s ultimate marketing aim.³⁷

As is clear from the above, the work of the taskforce is the culmination of Iceland’s image building exercise and clearly echoes that of nation-branding, albeit the taskforce claims it is about image building and protecting. What is also clear is the way in which the aim is to further commit people and places to the image of Iceland for profitability.³⁸ Now the taskforce’s proposals have been adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a “communicative defence strategy,” taking marketing into the realm of public diplomacy. Branding is indeed business, but there are inherent tensions within the destinations it aims to promote.³⁹ What is perceived by a person

³⁵ Ólafsdóttir 2008.

³⁶ Ólafsdóttir 2008.

³⁷ Pike 2009: 620.

³⁸ Pike 2009.

³⁹ Even going so far as having handbooks produced for the purposes of branding nations, cities, and destinations published in the academic press; see Moilanen & Rainisto 2008.

visiting a place is open to different interpretations, not only since we are all different and with different backgrounds, but also depending on the different ways each stakeholder packages the image and encounters *in situ*. In this way Philip Kotler's euphemism that "places are more difficult to brand than products"⁴⁰ holds, as the qualities of places, for example, experiences of authenticity, cannot be determined, and how a place is apprehended in its entirety is hard to make clear sense of.⁴¹ All places are an outcome of history and heritage, culture, a specific political system, distinctive core values and beliefs, constitutions, institutions, and national behaviour—or as Brian Massumi would say, an infinity of trajectories ripe with non-present potential, as will be further explained below.⁴²

Critique and Ways Forward

Space *can* talk back⁴³.

Ash Amin

By way of introduction to this critique I pose the question: Can a nation be branded? Do nations function as competitive entities on a world market? Here the distinction between a brand and branding becomes significant. Iceland has an identity in the minds of the international community, albeit rather vague and primarily tied to its landscape and Nordicness, as Simon Anholt showed. This identity can supposedly be augmented through branding, but the question is whether Iceland can be branded. This is a pertinent question, since the efforts of the taskforce can only be seen as an attempt at branding. Douglas B. Holt states, "Consumer culture is the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume and sets the ground rules for marketers' branding activities."⁴⁴ In the same way, Andy Pike states that branding "represents the valorization of the cultural forms and meanings of

⁴⁰ Kotler 2005: 12.

⁴¹ Ryan 2002; Seddighi & Theocharous 2002.

⁴² Massumi 2002.

⁴³ Amin 2004: 39, emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ Holt, 2002: 80.

goods and services.”⁴⁵ Consumer culture is to guide branding and branding valorises consumption—the agenda is clear as has been outlined above. According to the branding literature nations are competing, with much of what a nation and society is about being turned into *equities*, and the taskforce’s aim is to define basic national characteristics in order for them to become equities in a branding strategy.⁴⁶ This equitization of Iceland’s people and culture is taken through a three-tiered critique below.

Packaging People

As a first level critique, the taskforce has in certain ways fallen prey to what Holt terms the modern branding paradigm, where the brand is to function as a cultural blueprint for the masses to adopt.⁴⁷ The critique of this type of place branding evident in the literature is neatly summed up by Joao R. Freire:

Often, people do not accept that branding or any other marketing concept should be applied to places because they immediately establish a negative link between these marketing aspects and the commercialisation of national and local culture [...] branding is a perverse tool used by greedy companies, with the objective of manipulating consumers’ minds and increasing profits [...] corrupt a place’s authenticity [...] abuse of the natives.⁴⁸

In very much the same way, Sun-Young Park and James F. Petrick say that

the measures to evaluate effectiveness of destination branding are not different from those for image. Thus, the term, DB [destination branding] *might be* “old wine in a new bottle.” That is, it may be re-adorned jargon to emphasize the need for

⁴⁵ Pike 2009: 630–631.

⁴⁶ Anholt 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007; Anholt & Hildreth 2004; Bengtsson & Fuat-Firat 2006; Clifton 2005; Freire 2005, 2006; Garbacz Rawson 2007; Gudjonsson 2005; van Ham 2005; Hankinson 2004; Nebenzahl 2005; Wason 2005; Wetzel 2006.

⁴⁷ Holt 2002.

⁴⁸ Freire 2005: 350.

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unequivocal “focus” in marketing a destination to appeal to tourists.⁴⁹

Graham Hankinson’s concern is that “conflicts can arise between the destination’s economic aspirations and the socio-cultural needs of residents, leading to commodification at the expense of culture.”⁵⁰ The four points below are matters of dispute between branding exercises and those involved.

- The way guests and tourists experience a destination they visit cannot be controlled by those marketing the destination.
- The product presented and marketed is not necessarily the one that will be actually used.
- Many actors are involved in the promotion and use of the product.
- Capital is not forthcoming for joint marketing exercises such as branding of a nation or a destination.

Clearly an awareness of conflicting views and multi-stakeholder interests can be gleaned in the branding literature. Simon Anholt speaks of an advanced notion of branding, creating a more complex picture drawing on vested interests, socio-cultural dynamics, and place specificity.⁵¹

The taskforce in some ways also took this more nuanced approach aiming to understand the image Icelanders have of themselves in order to promulgate a true image that is then to underpin the nation’s brand. In that sense the taskforce sought to create a brand that Holt explains to be “invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value.”⁵² Through their focus-group methods they sought to place the brand in real life, looking for what Holt would call “evidence that the brand has earned its keep

⁴⁹ Park & Petrick 2006: 264, I emphasize.

⁵⁰ Hankinson 2004: 117.

⁵¹ Anholt 2007.

⁵² Holt 2002: 83.

either at some remove from marketing's propaganda engines or in historic eras that precedes the race to create brand identities."⁵³

The nation brand is construed as a valuable resource for identity construction, for example, for those in tourism or those in export businesses. Hlynur Gudjonsson proposes that the people of any place are the keys to successful branding, or, as he states: the people "properly utilised [are] the most powerful communication tool in the nation branding toolbox."⁵⁴ In a more nuanced, less utilitarian, account, Juergen Gnoth states: "The economic motivation needs to be expanded to embrace ecological accounting based on a critical socio-historical background."⁵⁵ Here branding is about coordination, rather than directives and control, similar to the way in which Clare A. Gunn explains the workings of a tourism destination:

Tourism, in contrast to a manufacturing plant, cannot be managed by a single director. It can be guided, stimulated, and led, but not managed, by a central authority. Especially important at the destination scale is leadership, not dictation.⁵⁶

What appears is that the balance struck in the taskforce's work is one skewed towards dictation rather than guidance.

To sum up the first level of critique: Firstly, conflicting and contested interests complicate the unravelling of an image core of a nation. Uncovering a "true" brand is thus nothing more than an exercise in branding and can never patch up the commercial motivations. Secondly, the methods employed in order to unravel the core for the benefit of a brand treated the nation and Iceland as a tangible product. It is obviously not so. The taskforce thus emerges as a dictating branding instrument with clear commercial motivations. Here notions of authenticity, commodification, and "disneyfication" come to the fore.⁵⁷

⁵³ Holt 2002: 84.

⁵⁴ Gudjonsson 2005: 288.

⁵⁵ Gnoth 2005: 25.

⁵⁶ Gunn 1994: 438.

⁵⁷ The term "disneyfication" was coined by Zukin (1996) but was popularized in Ritzer's work (especially Ritzer 1995) referring to how societies become uniform

Authentic Iceland

With the notions of contestation a second-level critique emerges. Bella Dicks points out when referring to authenticity, “authenticity is not an objective quality but a subjective judgement, always open to dispute and dissent through conflicting interests.”⁵⁸ Thus what is real is a matter of conflicting voices. First to contest the representation presented by the taskforce was the Association of Icelandic Historians, who wrote an open letter to the prime minister dated 12 June 2008. They take special issue with the notion of origin as presented above and say in the letter:

The Association of Icelandic Historians finds it prudent to point out that these few sentences among other things entail a view on history not in line with historical research from the past 30–35 years. These reflect a view on history forged during the struggle for independence with a political purpose in mind. This view has been objected to by several historians with compelling arguments. Myths such the original settler’s desire for freedom and a new golden age in the wake of independence were amongst those created to justify the claim for independence. In addition modern concepts and norms such as “better quality of life” and “developing country” are used with reference to a past when they maybe had no value.⁵⁹

through globalized consumption practices. Here it means that little by little, tourism would turn out to be very similar everywhere, that experiences tourists went to get would be predictable and calculated as in Walt Disney’s theme park. There would be a guaranteed satisfaction in a perfect *Disneyland* image, but at the same time using the Disney techniques in branding, marketing, pricing, safety, and staff.

⁵⁸ Dicks 2003: 58.

⁵⁹ “Sagnfræðingafélagi Íslands finnst rétt að benda á að þessar fáu setningar fela m.a. í sér söguskodun sem er á skjön við sagnfræðirannsóknir síðustu 30-35 ára. Hún sver sig fremur í ætt við þá söguskodun sem mótuð var í sjálfstæðisbaráttunni í pólitískum tilgangi. Þeirri söguskodun hafa fjölmargir sagnfræðingar andmælt síðustu áratugi og komið fram með sannfærandi rök sínu máli til stuðnings. Greina má goðsagnir á borð við frelsisþrá landsnámsmanna og nýja gullöld í kjölfar sjálfstæðis sem voru meðal þeirra sem skapaðar voru til að réttlæta sjálfstæðiskröfuna. Einnig má sjá að nútímahugtök og –viðmið eins og „betri lífsskilyrði“ og „þróunarland“ eru notuð yfir fortíð þar sem óvíst er að þau hafi haft nokkuð gildi.” Ellenberger 2008 (my translation).

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In a radio interview on RÚV on 28 June 2008, Professor of History Guðmundur Hálfðánarson of the University of Iceland sums up: “This picture is built like all such images...this is not something that simply exists.”

Quoting the professor further, indeed the truth content of images, if they at all can represent what they are supposed to, is highly suspect. In addition, squeezing a whole nation into a uniform whole under a “core brand” simply entails violence to all those who cannot assimilate. Hálfðánarson also picks up on the attempted commercial camouflaging, noting that developing a core brand for advertising purposes has a pre-given result: it must at all costs be positive.⁶⁰ The critique summed here through Professor Hálfðánarson is one half of a two-pronged critique, the other half revolving around landscape imagery and how nature and the environment are put to work. Power and purity are suffusing landscape myths, transposed onto the inhabitants. The nature portrayed or the representative landscapes of Iceland set forth by the taskforce entails an active forgetting of hardships and suffering.

In sum, the deconstructions of historical and landscape myths provide a stepping-stone in the second-level critique of branding. The neo-environmental determinism, renewing notions of how different species of man are directly shaped physically and culturally by their environment,⁶¹ manifest in the taskforce’s simplistic categorical associations, is taken to task by the historians.⁶² But places and spaces, which compose landscapes, nature, and the environment, are complex. What Pike calls the brand’s inevitable “geographical entanglement” forms the basis for a third-level critique, which is the main focus of this article.⁶³

⁶⁰ My notes from the radio interview: “Þessi mynd er tilbúin líkt og aðrar ímyndir...þetta er ekki eitthvað sem einfaldlega er til” (my translation).

⁶¹ See Sluyter 2003.

⁶² This has been done before; see for example a sum of literature presented by Sigurðsson 1996: 20. Also the environmental determinism notion can be traced to antiquity in Western literature; see Glacken 1967: 81.

⁶³ Pike 2009.

Species of Spaces and Other Places⁶⁴

Spaces and places are key to the core brand of nations. Understanding space is thus instrumental to understanding the inherent complexities of the core brand. Theories of spaces and places are becoming more intricate and nuanced. Spaces have become understood relationally in terms of multiplicity and flows. Spatial theory builds on a progressive sense of place, a sense that recognizes places as unbounded, open, and mobile, as movements of various intensities where space and time are unhinged. All these movements come together to form a place, such as the city Elizabeth Grosz outlines:

By “city,” I understand a complex and interactive network that links together, often in an unintegrated and ad hoc way, a number of disparate social activities, processes, relations, with a number of architectural, geographical, civic and public relations.⁶⁵

This progressive sense of place has been promoted in the work of Doreen Massey, who places it in juxtaposition with

thinking of the local as uniquely embedded [that] can encourage a certain closure of identity, an understanding of identity as pre-formed before engagement with the world beyond.⁶⁶

She argues that places are historically contingent. By being historically contingent a place is born out of a certain material and temporal context from which future spaces emerge. This is to say, how the dense networks of interaction for which a place provides make spatial configurations that are generative of future spaces.⁶⁷

Franco Bianchini and Lia Ghilardi argue in the branding literature for an inventory of the cultural resources of a place, along with an inventory of the “mindscape,” in the manner of the Icelandic

⁶⁴ See Perec 1999.

⁶⁵ Grosz 1995: 105.

⁶⁶ Massey 1999, 2005, 2007: 154.

⁶⁷ Massey 2005; see also May & Thrift 2001; Murdoch 1997; Pred 1983; Thrift 1996.

taskforce.⁶⁸ But this exercise is never complete, as Georges Perec reminds us: “I know that if I classify, if I make inventories, somewhere there are going to be events that will step in and throw the order out.”⁶⁹ As we continually mould our identities, there always follows another act from the preceding one, there is always an and. As Marcus A. Doel states, “the taking place of space is always already,”⁷⁰ which paraphrases Michel de Certeau, who says that “the fact remains that we are *foreigners* on the inside—but *there is no outside*.”⁷¹ There is never a goal to be reached, yet we are always reaching.

The above understanding of spaces and places is that one can never stand outside the unfolding of space; one can never black-box it and set it up as a representation; space is always at one with its own unfolding. In capturing this one-dimensional foldedness of space (that at the same time implies its multidimensionality), the illustration of the Möbius strip is often used when discussing what Michel Serres would term “the chain of genesis.”⁷² Premised upon this spatial understanding a new view emerges of the co-ordination of stakeholders’ interests and the efforts of those involved in branding a nation. Bruce Bough would see this coordination as “a chance concatenation of forces, of converging and diverging series of fluxes, differentials of intensity and rates of change, which together produce something new and unforeseeable.”⁷³

It must be unforeseeable, since Brian Massumi claims everything always exceeds and is thus kept in motion:

If there were no escape, no excess or remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death. Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Bianchini & Ghilardi 2007.

⁶⁹ Perec 1999: 132.

⁷⁰ Doel 1999: 144.

⁷¹ de Certeau 1984: 13–14.

⁷² Serres 1995: 71; see also Conley 2002; Deleuze 1991, 1992, 1998, 2001; Deleuze & Guattari 1983, 1987; Doel 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001.

⁷³ Bough 1993: 23.

⁷⁴ Massumi 2002: 35.

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With the world constantly escaping through its own excess, as Massumi argues, a politics emerges. Ben Highmore explains this politics as not being “about having certain ends in mind, but about generating beginnings.”⁷⁵ This is a politics, as Jacques Derrida argues:

To assert that a decision is ultimately undecidable does not mean that there can be no such thing as truth, right or good. It means rather, that if we purport to know in advance the specific contents of such notions, then the event of the decision is divested of its political content, it is simply “deduced from an existing body of knowledge [...] [as] by a calculating machine.”⁷⁶

It is in the coordination and networking that these politics unfold, that we make assessments, analyze, and decide based on our aspirations, hopes, dreams, faith, longings in every moment, every encounter. This is a sensibility of attending to and through the relations that are constituted through coordination,⁷⁷ or what Sarah Whatmore sees as

ethical praxis [that] likewise emerges in the performance of multiple lived worlds, weaving threads of meaning and matter through the assemblage of mutually constituting subjects and patterns of association that compromise the distinction between the “human” and the “non-human.”⁷⁸

Doel wants thus to “*make* way for that which is coming [...] *step aside* as things come to pass. (In the United Kingdom, it is customary to keep to the left whilst so doing).”⁷⁹ In this way, basing politics on ethics sensible to the emergent relationality of the coordination of interests in practice invokes “vitalist” notions, in the sense of being a-signifying and non-textual, sympathetic to the stance argued by Derrida in the quote above. Thus, Whatmore tells us that agency is not reduced “to the impartial and universal enactment of instrumental

⁷⁵ Highmore 2002: 173.

⁷⁶ Derrida 1999.

⁷⁷ McCormack 2004.

⁷⁸ Whatmore 2002: 159.

⁷⁹ Doel 2004: 456, emphasis in original.

reason, or “enlightened self-interest,” but is difference-in-relation constituted in the context of the practical and lived.⁸⁰ With the grander questions of society in mind, Derrida asks:

Is it possible to think and to implement democracy, that which would keep the old name “democracy”, while uprooting from it all those figures from friendship (philosophical and religious) which prescribe fraternity: the family and the androcentric ethic group? Is it possible, in assuming a certain faithful memory of democratic reason and reason *tout court* [...] not to found, where it is no longer a matter of *founding*, but to open to a future, or rather to the “come”, of a certain democracy.⁸¹

Massey explains that what Derrida draws forth is that “space is the dimension of contemporaneous existence [...] that demands an attitude of ‘respect.’”⁸² The politics inherent in branding management and the coordination of stakeholders’ interests in producing the nation brand is one-sided, narrow, and instrumental. It does not allow for excess or continuation and rehearses simplistic myths in order to sustain them sufficiently for them to be part of the nation’s core brand.

With space talking back, as stated in the opening quote to this section, what I argue is that being part and parcel to the excess of communication and encounters, a vitalist future-oriented spatial politics makes brand management exercises untenable in terms of destinations. Moreover, this particular critique has recently been extended to product branding.⁸³

Conclusions

A vitalist future-oriented spatial politics means that what matters is what we do and have done through time. Marketing a nation to a

⁸⁰ Whatmore 2002: 149, 153.

⁸¹ Derrida 1997: 306.

⁸² Massey 2007: 23.

⁸³ Pike 2009.

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tailored brand, no matter how thoroughly researched amongst the population, cannot alter international perceptions. What counts is what we do: a genuine reputation is earned, not fabricated. In summary, the first level of the three-tiered critique demonstrated that the taskforce, as the latest manifestation of Iceland's image building campaign, was a branding instrument with clear commercial motivations, notwithstanding their various claims to the contrary. Secondly, the taskforce did not account for the inherent conflicts in the campaign regarding Iceland's identity and image. With simplistic categorical assumptions history was stereotyped, historically specific political agendas and socio-cultural realities were glossed over and, in the process, the campaign veered uncomfortably close to neo-environmental determinism. From a critique directed at the simplistic categorical assumptions, the third tier of critique involving space and its specificities was made.

To end then with the opening quote: "We also have to take care that Iceland does not become a brand; Iceland is naturally like...life." The vitalism bubbling from the spatial critique above formulations should give abundant material for more nuanced brand management practices, or a wholesale departure from them. I support the latter and follow Massey where she argues, "What is needed is a politics that is prepared not just to defend but also to *challenge* the nature of the local place."⁸⁴ According to her, "it is moreover about the process of *construction*, not the prior assumption, of a grounded solidarity."⁸⁵

Therefore each and everyone's joint and unremitting responsibility for things as they come to pass cannot be negated. Through ongoing debates and mediations, open discussions, and open plans regarding the future, Iceland can best be prepared for its forthcoming challenges in a globalized world. Through a relational-spatial understanding of branding, the ceaseless dialogue between the nation and the rest in a globalized world becomes understood in terms of performance and practice, that is, the ways in which we act and do things, conditioned by our history, will constitute the "core brand" or image of the nation—which then obviously becomes a contradiction in terms. Thus an image or brand being promoted by anyone can at

⁸⁴ Massey 2007: 171, emphasis in original.

⁸⁵ Massey 2007: 192, emphasis in original.

best give insights into the tensions between spatio-temporally specific socio-cultural realities and those leading the branding initiative. The question that now remains is whether publicly recruited brand managers in post-crash Iceland will learn.⁸⁶

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⁸⁶ Hersveinn 2009.

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