

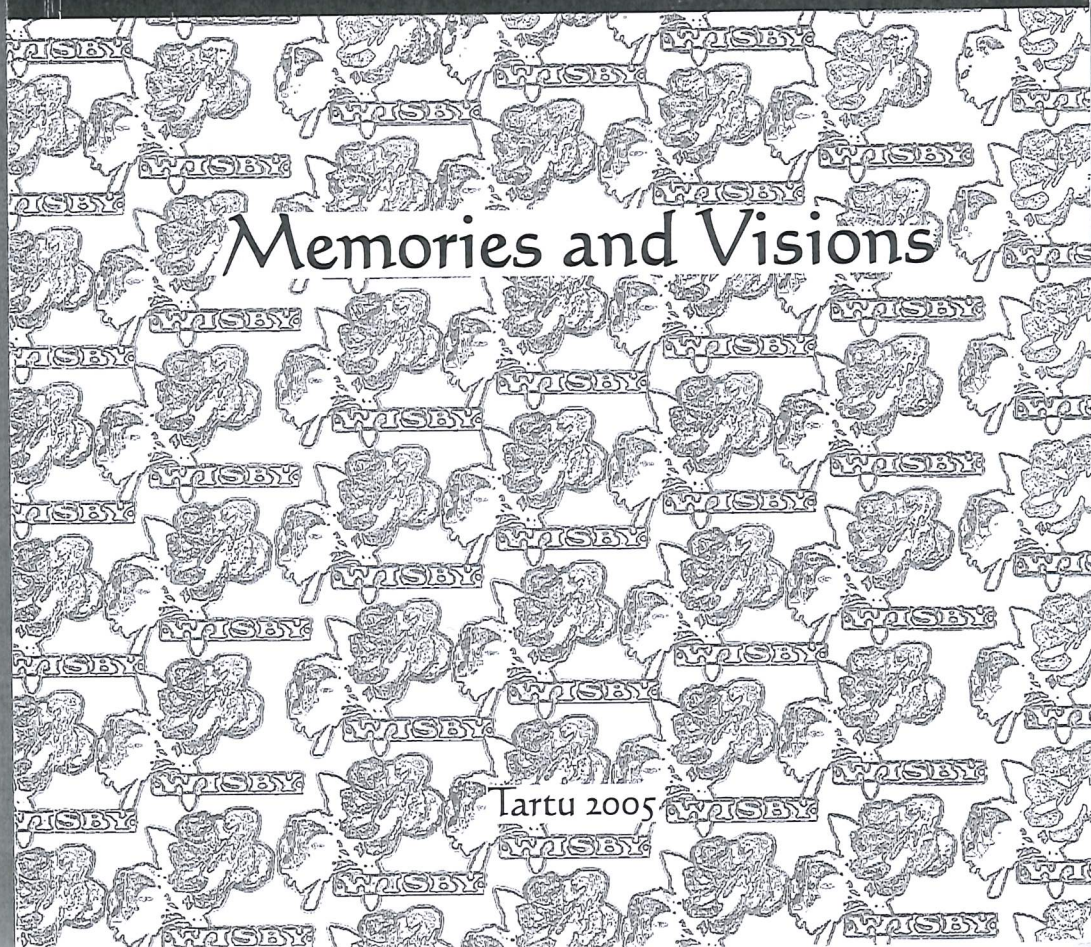
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Disregarding Popular Memories – Promoting Profitable Visions – Talking about Pictures of Visby

Carina Johansson

What roles can visual images play? Using Visby as a case study, I intend to examine how people deal with visual representations and relate them to their own lives. In this article, I examine how three persons discuss photographs in a widely distributed tourist guide for Visby. The photos are visual representations of a place regarded as a commodity that tradesmen and other actors try to sell. The study focuses on *how* these persons talk, and *what* they talk about, analysed in the light of *different ways of viewing*. I orientate myself within two fields of research. I want to combine 'visual culture' with a folkloristic approach. The British cultural geographer, Gillian Rose, states that vision is what the human eye is "capable of seeing", whereas visually "refers to the way in which vision is constructed in various ways": 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein'.¹ In other words, visibility means something culturally constructed. Some writers on visual culture deal with how images appear, how they are regarded and how they are intimately bound up with social power relations (Rose 2001: 6f, 9, 11). I want to contextualize the Visby Guide photographs, and use interviews to learn something about the relationships between people, images

¹ Gillian Rose refers to H. Foster, 1988: ix, *Vision and Visuality*.

and the place. What do common motifs in current tourist guides tell us? What do they do to us and to places such as Visby?

Agency of Display

Image production is a kind of 'agency of display' and an effective means to publicize a place. Here, I briefly highlight three different ways to present places like Visby. The term 'display' is used because it has to do with the viewing general public (Becker 2001: 181). This town, the urban face of Gotland in the Baltic Sea region, has long been a popular tourist resort. Tourist information, in the form of travel brochures, maps and postcards, has been produced for over a century. Since 1995, Visby has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site as one of the Hanseatic cities. The city wall and medieval street plan have survived, and also buildings and church ruins, from that period. One vision for actors in Visby was to make Visby better known as a unique place, which would attract more tourists. One approach was to focus on buildings having a distinctive character and talk about them on websites and in brochures. Tourist site or not, every city needs an image illustrating local and regional development. Prospective new inhabitants and employers, as well as tourists, are greeted with words of welcome in advertisements, together with topographical motifs in a favourable light. They meet the highlights, in most cases representations of only selected glimpses of the locality, serving a metonymic purpose. These then symbolize the whole locality as brands or trademarks. They are also meaningful parts of discourses.

Marketing, intended to attract new inhabitants, has become a new genre. The same kinds of brochures and folders everywhere present similar photos and texts with common keywords. Tourist guides aspire to be sources of inspiration, whereas the visual materials differ in some respects – often people are portrayed as young families in restful surroundings rather than on crowded beaches, or in shopping precincts, pubs and restaurants. Whereas

the visual material can differ according to the locality, the text materials are almost interchangeable. Every image producer uses the same concept. They tell us about peaceful places, but with numerous stimulating attractions just around the corner. There are always seemingly desirable cultural, aesthetic surroundings, good communications, idyllic spots, an environment having good schools suitable for all children – a good place to raise a family.

Social changes, such as regionalisation within the EU, are also affecting the *agency of display*. Every region needs to tell the rest of Europe who they are, thus a third type of image production is created. Regions must distance themselves from one another by visible attributes and a keyword is distinctiveness. These three types of publicity focus on different aspects. The tourist guides focus on leisure, the second type on people's everyday life, while the regional marketing genre lies somewhere in between or encompasses both. All three present Visby as an *arena* for consumption of a special kind of everyday life and spare time. Many participants with varying aims are involved such as local government agencies, County administrative boards are also involved, as are a variety of private entrepreneurs. In her book *Destination Culture*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett identifies museums, historical re-creations and ancient monuments as important settings for displaying places and producing destinations through the agency of cultural heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). This is obviously what has taken place in Visby.

Most arenas for consumption are visual and visual representations give rise to change. They speak about uniqueness and hauntingly beautiful subjects in contrast to the texts, which are almost identically worded. In one respect, the visual images are also similar – they are very aesthetic and present just a few subjects, but their purpose is to accentuate distinctiveness. Carefully selected though these pictures are, they form brands and discourses and exclude the greater part of the place. And of course such exclusion has implications.

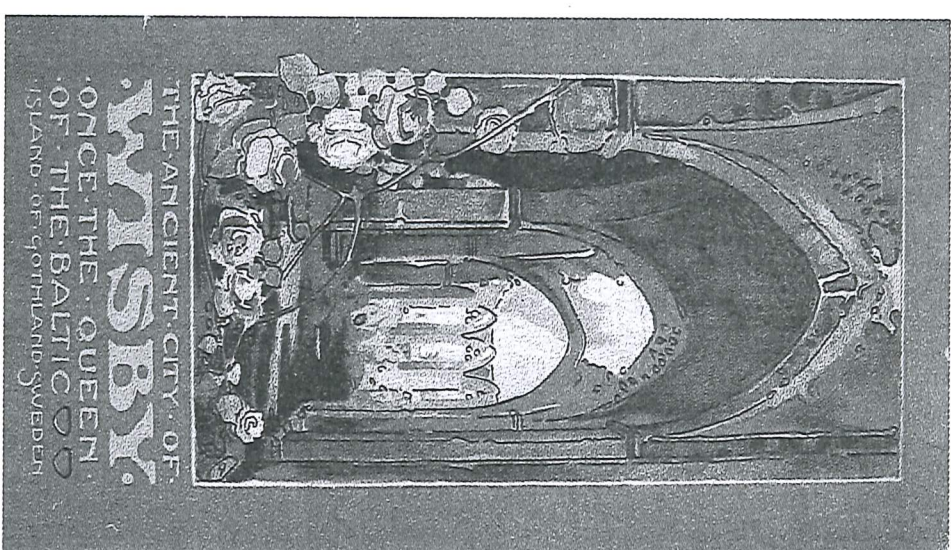
More about Visby

Visby, capital of Gotland, has 24.000 inhabitants. About 3.000 live in the old part of the town, enclosed by the 13th century city wall. With the three army regiments in mind one can talk about Visby as a garrison town. Defence policy for the Baltic Sea region has changed, the last regiment is now disbanding and recruits are no longer called up to Gotland for military service.

One week every summer, the Swedish political party leaders meet in Almedalen, a park in Visby, to make keynote speeches in preparation for the next parliamentary session. This “politicians’ week” was initiated by the late Olof Palme almost 40 years ago. The event has grown in significance and media coverage has increased. But it is as a tourist resort that most people know Visby, or as a well-preserved medieval city that once was the hub of the Hanseatic League, during the 12th to the 14th century. During the Medieval Week, an annual event marked by plays, tournaments, music, open-air markets and parades with the participants wearing historical costumes, the town takes on the look of 1361. Both the event and Visby inner city, listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, throw more light on the Hanseatic period. Apart from the culture heritage production, Visby with its surrounding coastline is a renowned seaside resort. The tourist season is very short and the town is regarded as a typical summer city.

A very common description of the place is found in this introduction to Bengt G. Söderberg’s book:

“There is a lingering poetical or romantic idea of Visby – the town of the roses and ruins, walnut trees, mulberry trees and the town of little blossoming idylls. The romantic atmosphere comes from a past greatness, a scattered wealth. And the exaggerated romance of Visby has its origin in the Middle Ages” (Söderberg 1970: 5).



Visby brochure from 1912. Gotlandica collection, Almedalen Library, Visby.

This idea derives from the romanticization of the ruins more than a century ago. Roses and exotic trees complement these remains perfectly and make the romantic aura even more potent. An

interesting effect of the prevalent emphasis on cultural heritage is that the buildings and street layout talk to us in a very loud voice. They are symbols of the golden age when Visby played an important role in the Hanseatic League. Visby is often portrayed as a magnificent place, the ideal place for everyone and the final paradise. The city wall, the ruins, old warehouses and tiny cottages are central parts in this discourse. Numerous paintings, photos and other images make Visby visible. Complementing the narratives, these images engender different gazes, perspectives and mindscapes, thus they focus on specific objects.

The Tourist Guide

Gotlandsguiden was chosen for this study as it is so widely spread. It is a commercial tourist publication of about 200 pages, produced in three editions of 265.000 copies every year. The Guide is distributed at the ports and airlines and to households on Gotland. It is available at about 100 different places around the island and even at the travel agency, Gotland City, in Stockholm (<http://www.gotlandsguiden.se/>). As a commercial product, it advertises tourist activities, attractions, shops, restaurants and accommodation. It also contains informative articles about the environment. As a mass medium, the Guide is a channel "for communication across space and time" (Formäs 2003: 123).

What kind of viewing attractions do the photos in the Guide invite one to visit? Visual images are always embedded in particular cultural practices. Visby (and Gotland) attracts different kinds of tourist's different kinds of gazes, to use John Urry's words. Urry investigates the "collective gaze" as well as "the romantic". Exemplifying the former he writes about British seaside resorts teeming with people. On the beaches, at the restaurants and so on, you have a lot of people around you and you all have the same experiences. Everybody knows that and that's the point. The meaning of the romantic gaze, however, is experienced without a

lot of other people around. You feel you are not sharing all your experiences with others even if you actually do so (Urry 1990). Tourism and cultural heritage in Visby create both.

Here I also use *mindscapes* – images associated with material objects. Orvar Löfgren considers that people are travelling in the same mindscape when they visit the same places, thus confirming the tourist guides picture, bringing home the same souvenirs and filling their private albums with similar photos (Löfgren 1999: 73). The guide exemplifies different tourist mindscapes. One can identify at least four. One of them is Visby, the theme, with its medieval past as the current subject. Ordinary people seldom appear in these representations. Visby, as a party town, is another mindscape with related pictures showing people sitting at open-air restaurants or beer gardens in delightful evening light. Visby – as a shopping place is a third. Here the modern areas are represented, unlike the theme city mindscape. The fourth mindscape is Visby the seaside resort, with its beaches, guest harbour and seashore paths. One non-existent mindscape for visitors is probably Visby in wintertime, which raises the very common question: what do Gotlanders do in winter?

Some of the photos in the Guide are common to different genres and different media, such as postcards, art, history books, websites and information from the local authority.

An investigation made by Destination Gotland, the ferry traffic company, reported that 60% of persons questioned said they had obtained information about their destination from *Gotlandsguiden* (<http://www.gotlandsguiden.se/statistics.html>).

The Informants

Visual images, intending to say something about townscape imagery, are seen by particular observers. I chose three persons for my study. Gösta is a retired psychiatrist, born in Visby but left the island to further his education on the Swedish mainland. He

returned in 1969. One of his interests is photography and he publishes some of his own work on the Internet. He showed me lots of photos during the interview and gave me a CD-ROM with pictures from his childhood.

Åsa, a specialist in children's diseases, lives on the mainland with her family. She lived in Visby for two years, some time ago, because of her own and her husband's employment. She has visited Visby and Gotland as a tourist on very many occasions and returns to Gotland on holiday several times a year to see her own and her family's favourite spots again and to visit friends. She is interested in local handicraft artefacts.

Frida is now a teacher, but worked at a firm called 'Film in Gotland', which presents Visby and Gotland as a good place for filmmaking. In her current occupation she works with children at Visby hospital. She has trained as a tourist guide. She moved to Gotland fifteen years ago from the Swedish mainland.

The Interviews

"The seeing of an image thus always takes place in a particular specific location with its own particular practices" (Rose 2001: 15). In what specific location does the seeing of these Visby images take place? I chose *Gotlandsguiden* for my informants in this study. The Guide is produced for tourists and only one of the informants can be categorised as a Visby tourist today. This is Åsa, who reads the Guide regularly. She often used it when seeking out the most interesting craftsmen. Gösta glances occasionally through this and similar guides. Frida says she looks through the Guide when she comes across a copy, especially when travelling by ferry to the Swedish mainland. The informants are all familiar with tourist guides generally, as most people are nowadays. My intention was to confront the three persons with visual images in this specific genre – photos produced by the tourist services, as a starting point for discussions about Visby pictures in general. The photos are

representations of a place they all know very well. All three know Visby from everyday life, even if two of them came to Visby for the first time as tourists. Åsa emphasises that she nowadays visits Visby in her leisure time, but she doesn't class herself as a tourist.

I asked the informants to look at the Visby pictures in the Guide and comment on them. I did not say anything about the texts as it was up to them if they wanted to comment on the written material. I informed them I was also interested in their own mental images of Visby, using the photos in the Guide as a starting point.

Three Different Strategies

When analysing the interviews I saw the Guide photos as representations for different mindscapes, focusing on different aspects. These official photos show something about official history and the agency of display. The interviews deal with popular experiences and personal memories shaping personal mindscapes vis-à-vis official representations. I immediately identified three different strategies for using the photos in the Visby Guide – minutely comparing the pictures with private mental images, putting the brochure away or analysing the photos as a mass medium.

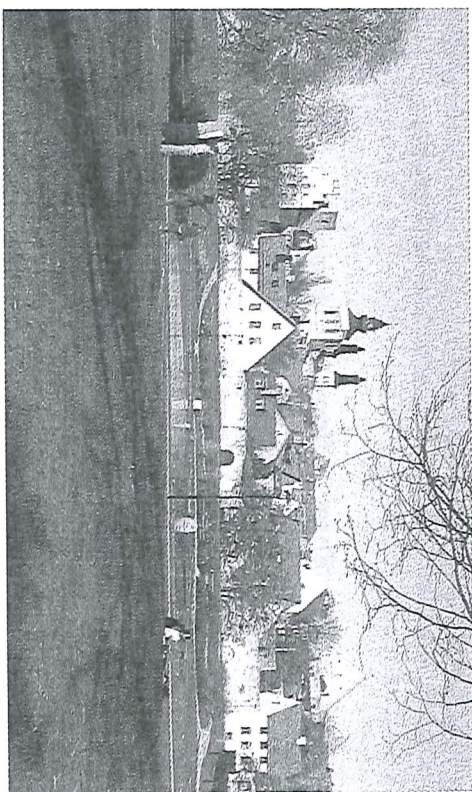
One of the first things Frida said when she looked through the Guide was:

Yes, there is something, you always start in Almedalen don't you think? Everything starts in Almedalen, always. I took a study course in guiding tourists too. /---/ We also learned to start in Almedalen.²

Now she points out that one of the first Visby images in *Gotlandsguiden* is a view of Almedalen. This is a park nowadays, but it was right here that the harbour was first established by the Vikings. It's a chronological starting point when telling the Visby story. The

² All translations by present author.

picture also shows the skyline of the old part of the city, a very frequent view in different sources – a key image connected with keywords. The latter are, for example: old harbour, skyline, and Olaf Palme, serving as mini discourses. When checking some similar material it was obvious that Almedalen was quite often the starting point in Visby narratives.



Typical Visby motif, Almedalen and skyline of the old town.

Photo: Carina Johansson 2005.

Frida knows how to analyse photos and that's the way she tackles them:

These pictures are obviously intended for tourists. They (the publishers) have evidently wanted to avoid conveying the Medieval Week image. They are showing Visby as it is when the tourists are using the town.

She discusses different kinds of pictures telling different stories:

They are different, convey a slightly more romantic [image] where wearing shorts and parabola aerials are not acceptable. That you take photos in a more aesthetic way, but they really have wanted to show people constantly on the move.

Frida knows that kind of romantic image from similar guidebooks and brochures. The pictures are more aesthetic, as she says, with tranquil scenes without people or with people wearing archaic costumes, mostly taken during the Medieval Week. The aim of these pictures is to portray the olden days without misleading or obtrusive modern artefacts.

They're quite honest here and they openly show this as a tourist resort. Perhaps they have relented... or else role players are not the intended viewers, i.e. the medieval enthusiasts. They are people not ashamed of wearing shorts and with cameras around their necks who are going to see these photos. I think this is obvious, when I look at them.

In saying so, she doesn't categorise herself as a receiver – she is an analyser.

Frida alludes to visual images not present in this brochure and rarely seen in Visby advertising. Remains from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries are absent, for instance. Focusing on the medieval era draws attention to remains from that era. One's eyes search for such artefacts, she comments. She notices the photos in the Visby Guide showing not only the northern part of the city wall, the main square or some of the streets. They also show the city wall, streets and square filled with ordinary holidaymakers.

She notes that the shopping centre on the east side of the inner city is called Östertorg (East Square): *I don't think Visby inhabitants would say that. We would never say – 'See you at Östertorg'.* She laughs: *They have presented it as a place where you can pass your time, as in any town.* She explains her own attitude to the

shopping centre: *You avoid being there. You are there only when passing through.* Frida would not go there, as if it were an attractive place to spend one's time, as the text in the brochure suggests. It has to do with values, centre – periphery relations and power. To name something powerful and to refuse to use the name Östertorg is also to exercise authority. Frida knows from everyday life in Visby that this place is called *Öster*, not *Östertorg*. Some may say *Östercentrum* (the East Centre) sometimes, but *Östertorg* is almost never used. This exemplifies a very common dichotomy verbalized on Gotland, Gotlanders versus tourists. Many narratives abound on this topic. Mention of the parabola aerials is also a way for Frida to tell me she knows what it is like to live in Visby. People use those satellite dishes and there is a covert “agreement” concealing them in the inner city to give the impression of an old town in hazy bygone days. She also compares the Guide with brochures from leading holiday firms for travel abroad. She reflects on different advertising genres. Finally she says, before putting the Guide away: *Yes, that was the amusing thing about this!*

During the interview Gösta felt uncomfortable with the Visby Guide and the visual images it conveyed. He wanted to tell a different Visby story and the photos in the Guide gave him little inspiration. Looking at the Almedalen photo he said:

Well, the pictures arouse associations but I really don't know how to use them. When it's about Almedalen, for instance, my mother wanted me to take an active part in politics.

He mentioned a particular topic – a dance-pavilion she didn't want to be built in the park. Then he puts the Guide away and while doing so he talks about a timbered house he had often seen portrayed on postcards and in brochures, the Burnmeister house. As an avid photographer he is aware of the most common Visby motifs. For instance, he collects ‘digital postcards’ and talks about images that are incessantly reproduced. When I looked for the Burnmeister house in the Guide afterwards, it wasn't there.

Once the Guide is out of sight, Gösta immediately started talking about Visby during his childhood and returning home after studies in Uppsala. He talked about milk bars, grocers' shops and craftsmen. He also talked about class and how it felt to grow up in a small town with different classes living side by side in the same area. He described, in detail, life in Visby during the Second World War and talked about his family, family home and occupation.

Most shops were situated in the inner city and then the craftsmen, saddlers, [...] barbers (hairdressers). Next to the saddler's there was a stuffed horse with a saddle on it, furniture makers and woodcarvers, handicraftsmen, milliners, dressmakers' and tailor's shops... There were so many trades and occupations. Sometimes when visiting Mediterranean countries, I have had nostalgic sentiments when suddenly seeing small workshops, still flourishing, in town centres and sometimes I wish Visby could show that same picture [...] reminiscent of the 1930s, an authentic environment with old cars and horse-drawn vehicles, market trade and assistants behind the counters in the shops and lots of suchlike things. Of course there are still a few rural shops that are now museums and something in the county museum too, but this just arouses genuine feelings of nostalgia for us born in the thirties.

Gösta gives an alternative view of Visby and it's obviously a matter of feelings. This one reminds him of his childhood and makes him feel nostalgic. During the interview he told me about both happy and poignant memories from this period but it is the bright side he wants to be reminded of by Visby representations. Referring to the Mediterranean countries, he is aware of what kinds of feelings arise when confronted with the things he describes. He thinks this is something that concerns himself and people of his age when visiting Visby. He wants to revive the 1930s. Only the medieval time is on display in Visby.

When Gösta talks about sad memories he recalls the Second World War and the fear it engendered:

Especially when Norway was occupied and then there was barbed wire fencing all over Gotland. You couldn't imagine Gotland without barbed wire, lots of it, criss-crossed and even here down on the seashore, and then all the forts and bunkers and cannons and all the soldiers you saw in town. And then all the cold winters with difficult icy conditions.

What Gösta talks about is a Gotland (Sweden) prepared for war. This stands in sharp contrast to the common tourist mindscapes and the agency of display in general. Stories like this can be found in archival records in Visby. I interpret them as something hidden away and not of topical interest to be put on display. War is an element in contemporary mindscapes only regarding Waldemar Atterdag and his Danish army of 1361 and sometimes the civil war of 1288. In tourist information, such narratives fit together with pictures of the city wall.

Åsa talks about her Visby pictures like this:

There are very few pictures in those tourist brochures that are mine, except for the Almedalen picture, perhaps in another light, but this is very much Visby for me. This is the gateway to Visby with the tower of St. Mary's Church and the building with the stepped gable. You can see a large part of Visby from Almedalen, the silhouettes and the city wall of course and the Sunbird.³ We have been there a lot when we lived in Visby and when Anna was born we walked through Almedalen many a time. [...] It's a lot of things at the same time.

³ The Sunbird (Solfågeln) is a work of art by the artist Tyra Lundgren.

Åsa starts to talk about a similar picture, as did Frida and Gösta. Lot of memories come to mind when she looks at it. The skyline is the first thing one sees when arriving Visby by boat, she says and there is a playground where her children have often played. The picture doesn't show the playground, but when you know the place you know it's there. Åsa tells me about buildings she can see in the photo and about the connections her family has with some of them, especially St. Mary's Church with its steeples reaching to the sky. Particularly Anna, the oldest daughter is very fond of the church and the family says "hello" to it every time they come back to Visby and "goodbye" when they leave. It's a sort of family ritual. When Åsa looks at the picture a little bit more she recalls what she said earlier – it has the wrong colours. It isn't exactly her picture, the way she remembers the place. *That's not natural light!* The colours are far too garish in the Guide, she says, and explains which tints she is used to seeing, summer and winter. She refers to photos in her family album and mentions pictures in some books corresponding to her own. She is very fond of these books, showing Visby mostly during autumn, winter and spring seasons. When I remind her of what she first said that just a few pictures in the Guide were the same as hers, she responds:

No, I think it's because these guides are commercial and we used them for this purpose especially when we started to travel to Gotland, to get suggestions (where to go and what to buy). [...] I was entranced with the light and the island. I was really captivated, really. And the handicrafts, ceramics, wool...

Åsa still wants to take a piece of the place with her back home, but less intensely. The cupboards at home are nowadays full of handicraft products. But there is another reason too – she doesn't think handicrafts are as genuine as previously. She talks about merchants sending for cool things from Stockholm to sell on the island. It's too much making money out of it and the feeling is gone.

When Åsa is telling me about her and her family's Visby pictures it's obvious she doesn't want to share these mental Visby pictures with lots of other people. It appears to be the tourists she has in mind. *We don't want to take part in mass tourism*, she says and explains how her family used to escape when there were too many tourists in Visby. When looking at a picture showing a shopping street in Visby crowded with people she says: *This is not our Visby at all*. Her point of view is similar to the romantic gaze John Urry analyses. When she says, *the ruins are not ours* and *not the roses either* it's obvious she is aware of what elements are usually included as parts of Visby tourism mindscapes. She draws attention to the city wall, to St. Mary's Church and the sea as hers and her family's Visby. Åsa is very fond of the old inner city and she says it's almost like falling in love. She talks about vivid pictures that will probably remain in her mind for the rest of her life.

Memory is not only constructions of what the eyes record. It has also something to do with hearing and the sense of smell. During the interview Åsa turns to her husband, sitting in the same room and says:

And we lived at Stetnergården then and I remember. There's also a picture of that district in the book. When you opened the door and went out on to the steps you could hear the sea, but you couldn't see it. That's such a picture too, even if it is sound... I remember it vividly.

Her husband confirms what she is saying.

Reflections

What roles can these visual images from the Visby Tourist Guide play? This small study can at least point out a few, according to cultural practice and meaning. All three informants made different

choices as to how to use the photos in the Guide as a starting point for the interviews. These three different strategies tell us something about the formation of identities, memories and visions in a late-modern, post-industrial world.

Even if the strategies of Åsa, Gösta and Frida differ, one similarity is very obvious. All three see themselves from outside the tourist sphere. The *Gotlandsguiden* pictures are not for them. Perhaps they were for some of them, during some period of their lives, but not now. They have their own Visby pictures of everyday life and they don't correspond very well to the tourist pictures. It seems to be an active choice – not being included. That's interesting because pictures in tourist guides, brochures and on postcards are carefully selected and of course bound to highlight the really best and most highly acclaimed. Tourists take photos of the same subjects they have seen in tourist guides, to confirm they actually have been there. How does it feel to live at a tourist resort? Although Gösta takes photographs very similar to some of the images in the Guide, he doesn't seem to take an interest in them. Is there an implicit understanding to reject the tourist images in my material – dissociation from them? Is there a popular discourse expressing something about 'anti-tourism'? Is there a risk to Visby inhabitants (or former inhabitants) of accepting the tourist images? Would it endanger one's symbolic capital, to use a term from Bourdieu (1989)? This is connected with social power relations, norms and ethics, values and taste. It may also be connected with class. The pictures seem to be filled with energy, both negative and positive, to be treated with deference.

Referring to Dean MacCannell in her thesis on the Medieval Week in Visby, Lotten Gustafsson suggests that the modern tourist is ashamed of merely looking at things superficially. Tourists are searching for authenticity but they rarely find what they seek as spectators (Gustafsson 2002: 147f). Do the pictures in the tourist guides represent something not genuine, something too superficial?

My informants point out, when they take a stance outside the tourist mindscapes represented in the Visby Guide, that they have a visual knowledge of the place, not to be confused with the tourist

gaze. The pictures they present as their own can sometimes be the same as in the Guide, but they can be positively or negatively charged, depending on the origin. This is a matter of inclusion, exclusion, personal choices, and popular discourses, anti-tourism, effects of truth, alternative pictures, memories and visions. It's also a matter of identity and, referring to Gillian Rose, it is obvious "we never look just at one thing, we are always looking at the relations between things and ourselves" (Rose 2001: 12).⁴

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