Journal Pre-proof
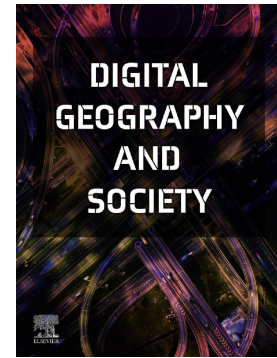
Landscape constructions on Instagram. A postmodern reinvention of romanticism

Niklas Toresson

Please cite this article as: N. Toresson, Landscape constructions on Instagram. A postmodern reinvention of romanticism, (2024), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diggeo.2025.100133

This is a PDF file of an article that has undergone enhancements after acceptance, such as the addition of a cover page and metadata, and formatting for readability, but it is not yet the definitive version of record. This version will undergo additional copyediting, typesetting and review before it is published in its final form, but we are providing this version to give early visibility of the article. Please note that, during the production process, errors may be discovered which could affect the content, and all legal disclaimers that apply to the journal pertain.

Landscape constructions on Instagram. A postmodern reinvention of romanticism

Niklas Toresson*

Institute of Geography, University of Augsburg, Alter Postweg 118, 86159 Augsburg, Germany, Niklas.toresson@uni-a.de, +49 1573 6271203

Notes on contributors

Niklas Toresson studies applied human geography M.Sc. at the University of Trier. His academic program focuses on topics related to sustainability and socio-ecological transformation as well as on tourism matters. In 2021, he completed his B.Sc. in geography at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz where he specialized in cultural geography. Furthermore, he is especially interested in urban studies, neo-colonial processes, and social media-induced tourism, which was the topic of his Bachelor's thesis.

Landscape pictures on Instagram. A postmodern reinvention of Romanticism

An increasing number of people select their travel destination according to its 'Instagrammability'. As a result, certain places emerge as 'Instagram hotspots', where tourists replicate the same photos, leading to a plethora of nearly identical images on Instagram. Despite Instagram's profound influence on travel behaviour and landscape representations, existing research has largely focused on single case studies, with limited attention to the dominant aesthetic strategies shaping landscape representations on the platform. This article addresses this gap by examining how landscapes are constructed on Instagram and how these stereotypical portrayals reflect broader societal and ecological narratives. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative iconographic-iconological techniques and quantitative content analysis, the study analyzes 625 landscape photographs posted by 25 German-speaking Instagram influencers, supplemented by 18 structured interviews with tourists influenced by Instagram imagery. The findings reveal that landscape pictures on Instagram echo Romantic era paintings, using similar motifs and aesthetic strategies. Instagrammers, like 19th-century Romantic painters, emphasize themes of solitude, mystification, sublimity, and nostalgia, contrasting sharply with contemporary issues like ecological crises. By staging and aesthetically transforming nature, Instagrammers medially reverse the destruction of nature and create idealized landscapes that evoke a bygone, pre-industrial era and an intact human-nature relationship. Accordingly, landscape images on Instagram can be interpreted as a new idealized, romantic reality or as a postmodern reinvention of Romanticism. Instagrammers seek out photo locations based on their ability to synthesize as many physical elements as possible into an 'instagrammable' scenery, creating a stereotypical romantic landscape image.

Keywords: Instagram; Tourism, Romanticism; Romantic Gaze; Instagrammability; Landscape; Photography

Introduction:

The landscapes constructed on Instagram have a major influence on people's travel behavior (e.g. Assaad, 2024; Anuar et al, 2021; Fitri et al, 2023; Gretzel, 2019; Kilipri et al, 2023; Korff & Winsky, 2023; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Smith, 2018).

Guided by 'beautiful photos' on Instagram, an increasing number of people are choosing the same places to capture the same 'perfect motif' against similar 'appealing backdrop'. These structurally identical images are then shared on Instagram, perpetuating a cycle of imitation and contributing to the emergence of so-called 'Instagram Hotspots'. However, the beauty and solitude of these places often only exist in the stylized representations on Instagram; many of these places are, in fact, overcrowded (Baur & von Kürten, 2023; Reuter, 2019; Wistveen, 2023).

According to Schofield (2017), already 40% of 18 - 35-year-olds choose their travel destination based on their 'Instagrammability' – i.e. the potential for taking visually appealing photos to maximize possible positive feedback on Instagram - they 'travel for likes' (translated from German, Merkle, 2021, p. 16):

> Users seek out locations that, once photographed and posted to their accounts, will accrue the most 'likes'. Hence the expression of 'only traveling for [one's] Instagram' [...] results out of a desire to capture a popular shot and secure one's social-media popularity (Smith, 2018, p. 183).

Images with many likes serve as prototypes. They are imitated and thus reproduced again and again on Instagram (Arts et al., 2021; Smith, 2018). This leads to recurring motifs and repetitive stagings, which results in a homogenized and stereotypical aesthetic and uniformity in landscape and travel photography (Arts et al., 2021; Reuter, 2019). In line with Urry and Larsen's hermeneutic circle (2011), Korff and Winsky (2023) as well as Arts et al. (2021) emphasize how Instagram users deliberately participate in standardizing the visual representation of landscape photos on Instagram:

> Our participants were aware that certain activities, landscapes, or places, portrayed in a particular way, would be more 'instagrammable' than others,

and thus contributed to the standardization of the collective imaginary (Arts et al. 2021, p. 1255).

However, while the relationship between social media and tourism has been widely explored, the specific aesthetics of landscape photos on Instagram remain largely unexplored in tourism geography. Kirillova and Wassler (2019, p. 153) note that 'tourism research has been largely unconcerned with the aesthetic dimension'. The study of landscape constructions on Instagram has so far been limited to single case studies (e.g. Smith, 2018; Widholm, 2024). This article seeks to address this gap by investigating the construction of landscapes on Instagram more broadly, examining a wide range of landscape images across various accounts and destinations to uncover common structures, aesthetic strategies, and visual motifs that characterize the portrayal of landscapes on Instagram. By combining visual analysis with structured interviews of individuals influenced by such imagery, this study will not only highlight the underlying aesthetic strategies and visual motifs but also shed light on the crafting processes behind these images and how they can be interpreted within the framework of contemporary social and ecological changes. In doing so, the study will examine what makes certain landscapes or places particularly 'instagrammable'.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How are landscapes constructed on Instagram? What aesthetic strategies and visual motifs dominate the portrayal of landscapes on Instagram?

2. How do Instagram's landscape aesthetics reflect broader societal and ecological changes?

3. What role does the socio-cultural meaning of a place play in these constructions? What implications do these aesthetic constructions have for the role of place in digitally mediated tourism?

The social construction of landscape serves as the theoretical framework for this study, offering a lens through which to analyze the structural content and significance of landscape images on Instagram.

To guide the reader, the remainder of this article is structured as follows: The next section provides an overview of visual culture and the rise of platform-specific aesthetics on Instagram. This is followed by the theoretical perspective, which provides the framework to analyze the structural content and significance of landscape images on Instagram, such as the social construction of landscape and Urry's tourist gaze. The subsequent methods and materials section describes. This is followed by the methodology section and the analysis section, presenting the the empirical findings, which are then discussed in relation to the research questions. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings and their theoretical and practical implications.

Literature review

This section reviews relevant literature to situate the study within broader debates on visual culture, social media platforms, and Instagram's aesthetics and their impact on places and tourism.

Scholars have long emphasized that we live in an increasingly visual culture. As Mirzoeff (2011) argues, visual culture is not merely about images but about the power relations and meaning-making processes tied to how images are produced, circulated, and consumed. Within this visual culture, social media platforms play a key role by shaping what kinds of images gain visibility and traction. Among these platforms, Instagram stands out as a highly visual, algorithm-driven environment that both standardizes and amplifies certain aesthetic strategies, transforming everyday practices – including how we engage with landscapes and travel (Gunkel, 2018; Arts et al., 2021).

Gunkel (2018) describes how the platform encourages 'iconic communication', where visually striking and emotionally resonant images are more likely to be shared and seen. This leads to the standardization of visual strategies that conform to the so-called 'Instagram look' (ibid.). Arts et al. (2021) and Korff & Winsky (2023) describe how users intentionally mimic high-performing content, contributing to a homogenized aesthetic that emphasizes natural beauty, solitude, and visual coherence. These patterns help form a digital 'collective imaginary' (Arts et al., 2021) around landscape and travel photography. Users on Instagram are thus not only documenting places but actively shaping how these places are imagined and understood. Landscapes become staged backdrops for a curated digital identity – what Urry and Larsen (2011) describe as part of the 'tourist gaze', now digitally mediated and performatively enacted.

Importantly, Instagram is not a neutral platform but actively shapes user behavior through algorithmic feedback loops. Posts that align with aesthetic conventions are more likely to be promoted by Instagram's algorithm, thus reinforcing these visual patterns (Gunkel, 2018; Hauser et al., 2022). This phenomenon is closely related to what Couldry and Hepp (2016) describe as 'deep mediatization', where media not only transmit content but increasingly organize social life itself. Instagram's influence extends beyond aesthetics to the curation of identity, where users craft an aspirational self through carefully selected landscapes – a concept referred to as the 'spatial self' (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2014).

Although several studies have explored individual aspects such as color, lighting, angles, focus, and composition, comprehensive investigations of the aesthetics and visual motifs of landscape pictures on Instagram remain rare. Smith (2018) identifies three visual motifs in tourist images on Instagram: the 'tropical exotic', the 'promontory gaze', and 'fantasized assimilation'. These motifs echo colonial

iconographies, presenting landscapes as spaces available for possession and consumption while tourists staging themselves as 'other' realms. The motif 'promontory witness' romanticizes landscape and resembles the famous painting 'The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog' by Casper David Friedrich. This motif has become 'a way of representing travel on social media platforms like Instagram' (Smith, 2019, p. 605). Hauser et al. (2022) found that users rate nature-dominant images as more aesthetically pleasing than those featuring urban infrastructure. Korff and Winsky (2023) analyze images of the German Upper Black Forest on Instagram, noting similarities in composition, scenic choreography, and meaning with paintings of the Upper Black Forest from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The landscape is depicted as pristine wilderness, with modern infrastructure like car roads deliberately excluded. Similarly, Weyl (2019) observes that destination management organizations in Italy often reproduce motifs reminiscent of Romantic paintings, while Widholm (2024) finds that Instagram images of the Stockholm archipelago romanticize island life, frequently integrating nostalgic elements such as old boats and excluding human presence.

Despite this growing body of work, most existing research focuses on individual destinations or case studies. While some of them have noted parallels between Instagram imagery and visual traditions such as Romanticism, the extent to which these patterns are consciously referenced or emerge through platform-specific dynamics remains underexplored. There is no empirical work that systematically categorizes the dominant aesthetic strategies used across a broader sample of landscape imagery. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing a body of 625 landscape pictures from Instagram from different accounts, combining content analysis of Instagram imagery with interview data to contribute to ongoing debates in digital geographies, tourism studies, and media aesthetics.

Theoretical Perspective: The social construction of landscape and the romantic gaze

This section outlines the theoretical framework that informs this study and provides the basis for interpreting the empirical material and contextualizing the visual strategies identified on Instagram. By combining the theory of the social construction of landscape, Urry's concept of the tourist gaze, and Romanticism, this framework guides the interpretation of the visual motifs and practices identified in the empirical material.

Social Construction of Landscape

The idea that landscapes are socially constructed emphasizes that they are not neutral, but shaped by cultural, historical, and social meanings. This concept underlines how visual representations – like Instagram images – actively produce specific ways of perceiving and constructing places.

From a social constructivist perspective, landscape is not merely an object of the physical-material world, but is understood as a social construct, shaped by attributions of meaning. Landscape is based on normative and valuation processes (Kühne et al., 2013) and is ultimately a way of looking at the world: 'Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world' (Cosgrove, 1998, p. 13).

The aesthetics of landscape are always 'embedded within social developments and represent an expression of currently valid, common evaluations' (translated from German, Kühne et al., 2013, p. 38). A central focus involves understanding which landscapes are considered beautiful and why certain landscapes are preferred over others (Aschenbrand 2017, p. 41).

Tourist Gaze

In tourism, both well-known landscape images and less familiar landscapes are strategically used for marketing purposes, depending on target audiences and branding strategies, to attract visitors and arouse emotions and expectations: 'However, landscape is not only an abstraction, but also an emotional projection, especially in tourism' (translated from German, Aschenbrand, 2017, p. 33). When selecting travel destinations, ideas of sublime and lovely landscapes play a critical role. Sublimity is usually expressed through heights and mountains, emphasizing the smallness and insignificance of humans in the face of nature's grandeur. In contrast, the ideal of a lovely landscape corresponds to a peaceful and tranquil cultural scene, often featuring elements such as castles on hills (Aschenbrand, 2017, p. 64ff).

Upon arrival, tourists seek validation for these preconceived landscape stereotypes. Urry and Larsen (2011) describe this process of appropriating a landscape, influenced by socially learned ideas and expectations, as the 'tourist gaze'. Following this idea, this study considers which landscape stereotypes are conceived as instagrammable and thus circulate among and are reproduced by Instagram users. The concept of the tourist gaze will be revisited in the analysis to interpret how Instagrammers replicate and stage specific aesthetics. Urry and Larsen (2011) further distinguish the tourist gaze between two primary types: the 'romantic gaze' and the 'collective gaze'. The romantic gaze emphasizes solitude as well as sublime settings and refers to the Romantic era.

Romanticism

Romanticism itself emerged as a reaction against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, seeking to restore a lost sense of original meaning in the world (Ciseri, 2004). To achieve this, the Romantics turned to the inner sphere:

> The world must be romanticized. That's how you find the original meaning again. Romanticizing is nothing but a qualitative potentiation. [...] By giving the common a high meaning, the ordinary a mysterious prestige, the known the dignity of the unknown, the finite an infinite appearance, I romanticize it. (translated from German, Novalis, as cited in Koerner, 1998, p.30)

Romanticism imbued elements and objects with an aura, integrating them into landscapes to romanticize them and deepen their meaning (Scholl, 2005). Accordingly, Romantic painters created symbolic landscapes that 'liberate the viewer from everyday life, inspire him in turn with ideas and allow him to feel and experience his meaning of life' (translated from German, Jost, 2005, p. 302). These idealized landscapes feature elements such as mountains, gorges, rivers, and seas to represent untamed nature, often combined with symbolic features like fir trees, oaks, ships, ruins, cemeteries, and churches. One particularly significant visual metaphor of Romanticism is fog, lending the landscape a mysterious and mystical atmosphere. Similarly, transitional states such as sunrises, sunsets, and moments of becoming and passing away were depicted to evoke a heightened Romantic sensibility (Düchting, 2010).

The so-called 'Rückenfigur' by C.D. Friedrich – a solitary figure placed in the foreground of a wild, uncivilized landscape – became the most important motif of Romanticism. This figure symbolizes humanity's alienation from nature while simultaneously serving as an entry point for the viewer to engage with the landscape. By limiting the figure's activity to simply observing the scene, it serves as an imaginary entry point for the viewer to engage with the landscape and allows both the artist and the viewer (Grave, 2020) to project their thoughts and feelings onto the landscape (Scholl, 2005).

Furthermore, sublime mountain landscapes, mysticism, sentimental longing, and nostalgia became basic motifs of Romantic landscape painting (Koerner, 1998). In addition, Romantic painters tried to portray an intact human-nature relationship by

integrating cultural artefacts in their landscapes. For tourists seeking the romantic gaze, this translates into a search for solitude in seemingly secluded, natural, and untouched landscapes, mirroring the ideals of Romanticism.

The Romantic movement of the 19th century has had a lasting influence on visual culture, and its aesthetic principles have been continuously reinterpreted across different artistic and media forms. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Romantic ideals persisted in landscape painting and photography, particularly in pictorialist photography, which emphasized atmospheric effects, soft focus, and emotional depth (Rosenblum, 1997). As visual media evolved, Romantic motifs were absorbed into photography, cinema, and early tourism marketing and postcards, portraying landscapes as sublime and untouched (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Andrews, 2005). Even in advertising and popular media, landscapes continued to be framed through a Romanticized lens, reinforcing ideals of solitude, nostalgia, and mystical nature (e.g. Lutz & Collins, 1993). These visual traditions shaped contemporary digital culture, where social media platforms like Instagram have inherited and repurposed Romantic aesthetic strategies (Gunkel, 2018; Arts et al., 2021).

Methods and materials

This section describes the methodological approach, including the selection of Instagram accounts and the coding procedures for both image and interview data. In general, the research employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative image type analysis with qualitative methods to contextualize the visual data obtained.

First, in autumn 2019, a total of 18 structured qualitative interviews were conducted with Instagrammer visiting well-known Instagram hotspots featuring distinct landscape motifs (Hallstatt in Austria, Lake Braies, Lake Carezza, and St. Magdalena in South

Tyrol in Italy). All interviewees reported having chosen these destinations based on landscape pictures they had seen on Instagram, with the intention of taking similarly aesthetic photographs to post on their own Instagram account, i.e. they were not only influenced by popular landscape pictures on Instagram, but also actively sought to reproduce and contribute to them. The participants were either German-speaking or English-speaking and ranged in age from 21 to 37. The interviews were conducted on-site at locations and each interview lasted between 11 and 35 minutes. The questions focused on participants' motivations for visiting these locations, their photographic practices and processes of constructing their photos, their use of Instagram in travel planning, and their expectations about the destination. The aim was to explore how Instagram influences the selection of photo and travel destinations, as well as to understand the underlying motivations and visual strategies involved in the construction processes and photographic choices. The interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and inductive coding.

Building on these insights, a systematic analysis and interpretation of landscape pictures on Instagram was carried out. A total of 625 landscape images were evaluated, collected from 25 prominent German Instagram accounts with more than 100,000 followers specialized into landscape and tourism photography (data collection cut-off date: 15/09/2020; the 25 most recent photos per account were analyzed). The images were publicly available on Instagram at the time of data collection and no private data accessed. The 25 accounts of the sample were randomly selected from all German-speaking Instagram accounts with (1) more than 100,000 followers, (2) a thematic focus on landscape photography, and (3) regular posting activity. No special software was used, accounts were manually selected. Although their accounts are not representative for the entire platform, they are influencers (Serazio & Duffy, 2018) and thus opinion

leaders, particularly in landscape and travel photography:

> In the travel genre, (...) a clearly defined hierarchy of competent speakers - that is, most-followed users - exerts a hegemonic influence upon millions of other users, who deliberately or not look to these influencers as a model for generating attention. (Smith, 2018, p. 9)

Influencers play a significant role in shaping how landscapes are depicted on Instagram, leading to a high degree of visual similarity across the platform. Consequently, analyzing other accounts would likely yield no fundamentally different findings.

The observation that recurring image types emerge serves as the foundation for the quantitative image type analysis, which follows the approach outlined by Grittmann and Ammann (2009). This method combines the qualitative iconographic-iconological approach developed by Panofsky (1979) with quantitative content analysis. The central interface of the two methods are the so-called image types, in which 'the central meaning of the individual image motif is abstracted and [...] reduced to the essential message' (translated from German, Grittmann & Ammann, 2009, p. 151). Here, the focus is on identifying generalizable commonalities rather than individual characteristics (Grittmann & Ammann 2009).

Using Panofsky's (1979) three-stage procedure, comprising pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation, it was possible to classify different image types of landscape images on Instagram. This typology enabled a systematic categorization of the entire image dataset and served as the basis for the subsequent quantitative content analysis, allowing for identifying underlying structures, as well as examining the construction and selection processes of these image types. Specifically, the analysis focused on the composition of landscape images, their visual

presentation, specific pictorial elements, and overarching thematic references. By combining the two methods, the image content was standardized into thematic units, enabling an interpretation of their significance and symbolism (Grittmann & Ammann 2009).

The interview data and the image analysis serve complementary roles in this study. While the image analysis focuses on the aesthetic strategies used by popular Instagram influencers when photographing landscapes, the interviews, in turn, provide insight into how these kinds of images influence Instagrammers' travel decisions, expectations, and their own photographic practices. Although the interviewees did not create the analyzed images, they engage with and respond to similar types of content – often drawing inspiration from the exact styles and motifs observed in influencer posts, as will also be seen in the analysis. The interviews also shed light on the reasoning behind users' desire to replicate and post similar photos themselves: why certain locations are perceived as "Instagrammable," how decisions about framing and angles are made, and why so many visually identical images are produced and shared from the same places. By combining image analysis with interview data, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Instagram landscapes are both aesthetically concstructed and visually reproduced.

Analysis: The construction of romantic landscapes on Instagram

This section presents the main empirical findings, focusing on recurring visual patterns, aesthetic strategies, and the ways in which users construct and replicate Romantic landscape motifs on Instagram.

Based on the sample of 625 landscape pictures from Instagram, a total of 13 different image types (see Table 1) and five central aesthetic strategies determine all

sceneries. Each image was assigned to only one image type according to the central motif (e.g. a mountain lake), even if framing elements (e.g. mountain backdrop) also fit other image types (e.g. sublime mountain scenery). Only 19 of the 625 photos, i.e. 3.0%, could not be assigned to any image type. These results correspond to previous studies that a limited set of image types is predominant on Instagram (e.g. Arts et al., 2021).

Types of landscape images on Instagram

I call the most dominant image types 'Solitary Nostalgia' and 'Personified Solitude'. Together they account for 51.4% (321 out of 526) of all landscape pictures analyzed. 'Solitary nostalgia' is characterized by depictions of old, traditional buildings set within secluded landscape. Common motifs include small, isolated and often weathered wooden or stone huts in exposed locations, typically surrounded by rugged mountain scenery. Other recurring traditional elements include historic castles, palaces or churches (20.2%), isolated villages (9.8%), chapels framed by mountain ranges (9.3%), lighthouses (4.4%), and wooden churches (3.8%) [Table 1 near here].

Table 1. Image types of landscape images on Instagram (N = 625) (Source: author)

Solitary Nostalgia (@evolumina, 2020)	Personified Solitude (@lennart, 2020)	Sublime Mountains (@hannesstier, 2020)	Majestic Mountain Lake (@manuel dietrich photography, 2020)	Rough Seascape (@andre.diaz, 2020)
N = 183	N = 138	N = 54	N = 53	N = 36
29.3 %	22.1 %	8.6 %	8.5 %	5.8 %

Quiet Forest (@danielernst, 2020)	Abandoned Paths (@manueldietrichphotography, 2020)	Life in Nature (@frauki, 2020)	Deserted River Meander (@andre.diaz, 2020)	Secluded Waterfall (@patheight, 2020)
N = 29	N = 25	N = 24	N = 18	N = 17
4.6 %	4.0 %	3.8 %	2.9 %	2.7 %

Wild Animals (marcel.siebert, 2020)	Traditional Village (@giuliogroebert, 2020)	Wild Stream (@jannikobenhoff, 2020)		
N = 12	N = 9	N = 7		
1.9%	1.4%	1.1%		

The image type 'Personified Solitude' features a single person in a seemingly isolated landscape. Neither a footpath nor a trail leads to the person's location, emphasizing their separation from civilization. The person is usually depicted standing or sitting exposed on a stone, rock, or at the edge of a cliff, adopting an observing posture dominating the remote and untouched landscape (71%). Always photographed from behind, the person appears fully immersed in the landscape, seemingly unaware of the camera.

53 out of 625 (8.6%) of all sceneries examined on Instagram can be assigned to the image type 'Sublime Mountains', characterized by high, rugged, and craggy mountain ranges.

The depiction of a 'Majestic Mountain Lake' is the fourth most popular motif of landscape images on Instagram, appearing in 8.5% of the images. Nearly half of these images feature a calm lake reflecting the surrounding mountain range, creating a scene

of magnificence and sublimity. In contrast, 'Rough Seascapes' account for a total of 5.8% of all landscape pictures, showcasing remote coastlines with black beaches or rugged cliffs. The sea in these images often has a powerful swell, symbolizing a wild, untamed natural force, underlined in 13.9% of the images with the motif of a lone ship on a high, stormy sea.

The image type 'Quiet Forest' represents 4.6% of the sample and typically features tall, columnar trees often cloaked in fog. This contributes to the imagination of a mysterious landscape that cannot be grasped in its entirety, evoking peace and tranquillity.

Depicting pathways leading into otherwise deserted landscapes, 4% of the sample fall under the category of 'Abandoned Paths'. Another 3.8% of the images depict 'Life in Nature'. A campervan or tent is photographed in a seemingly remote landscape, in which a campfire suggests cooking practices. A small subset of these images (6 out of 24) shows the view from a camper, tent, or old house, with window, door, or tent openings framing the picture.

The type of 'Deserted River Meanders' accounts for 2.9% of the sample. These images, captured from a bird's eye view, guide the viewer's gaze across an expansive and seemingly untouched landscape.

Another recurring motif on Instagram is the 'Secluded Waterfall', present in 2.7% of all images. The rushing water conveys a sense of wilderness and drama.

In addition, the image types 'Wild Animals' (N = 12, 1.9 %), 'Traditional Village' (N = 9, 1.4 %), and 'Wild Stream' (N = 7, 1.1 %) were identified and taken into account in the analysis of aesthetics. Only 20 images could not be assigned to any image type, i.e. they did not resemble any of the other images in the sample in terms of motif.
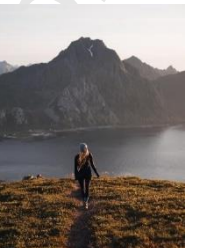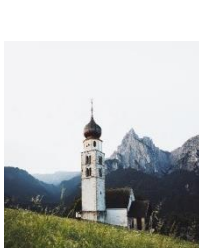
Aesthetics of landscape images on Instagram

The following five aesthetic strategies (see Table 2) are used landscape images on Instagram: (1) mystification of the landscape through dusky light and foggy weather conditions, (2) emphasis on the autonomy and sublimity of the landscape, (3) idealization of human-nature interaction, (4) embedding nostalgic artifacts, and (5) optimization through image montage (see Table 2). These strategies are often combined, so that the aesthetics of a landscape picture on Instagram is composed of several strategies [Table 2 near here].

The sample is dominated by the (1) mystification (see Table 3) of the landscape by taking landscape photos in dusky light and foggy weather conditions. In over half of the photos, the sky is either cloudy (26.9%) or the landscape is shrouded in fog (28.9%). Deep, dark clouds covering the landscape (8.2%) convey a threatening and dramatic atmosphere, while wafts of fog (17.0%) lend the landscape a mystical, mysterious, and even haunting character. These weather phenomena are deliberately sought out by Instagrammers to create a certain mood: 'I was actually rather hoping that it would be foggy this morning, [...] then it's a bit moody' (Interview, 27.08.2019, Lago di Braies).

Table 2. Aesthetic strategies for landscape images on Instagram (N = 625) (Source: author)

(1) Mystification through dusky light and foggy weather conditions	(2) Emphasis on the autonomy and sublimity of the landscape	(3) Idealization of human-nature interaction	(4) Embedding nostalgic artifacts

(@danielweissenhorn, 2020)	(@hannesbecker, 2020)	(@marcel.siebert, 2020)	(@tom.juenemann, 2020)
(@theolator, 2020)	(@hannesstier, 2020)	(@daniel.ernst, 2020)	(@andre.diaz, 2020)
(@fabiozingg, 2020)	(path.height, 2020)	(@frauki, 2020)	(@evolumina, 2020)

(5) Optimization through image montage

Another characteristic for the sample is the avoidance of clear blue sky. While 192, i.e. 30.7%, of the images were taken in sunny weather, only 32 images feature a visibly blue sky. In the majority, the sky is either overexposed (appearing bright to white), or the photos were taken during sunrise or sunset so that the sky appears in a golden-yellow to red light. These shots, taken during the 'golden hour', are prized for 'the best light' (Interview, 29.08.2019, Lago di Carezza). In combination with fog, these shots create an atmosphere of an enchanted landscape, as the soft morning or evening light enhances the landscape's mystery [Table 3 near here].

Table 3. Light and weather conditions in landscape images on Instagram (N = 625) (Source: author)

	Quantity	In percent

Fog	**181**	**28.9**
low clouds/wafts of fog	106	17.0
dense fog	46	7.4
Fog and sun	29	4.6
Cloudy	**168**	**26.9**
High clouds	117	18.7
dark clouds	51	8.2
Sunrise	**108**	**17.3**
blue sky	13	2.1
Sunny	**84**	**13.4**
overexposed	65	10.4
blue sky	19	3.0
Night	**18**	**2.9**
No statement possible	**66**	**10.6**

(2) Emphasizing the autonomy and sublimity of the landscape is another common aesthetic strategy used by Instagrammers. More than half of the photos (50.6%) depict a landscape without any visible infrastructure (see Table 5), and around two-thirds do not show any people. These photos are dominated by a portrayal of the landscape as seemingly civilization-free and untouched. If people are included in the photos, they are usually small and solitary (only 1.8% of all photos include more than one person), emphasizing their insignificance and exposure against the vast and powerful surroundings. The frequent combination with dark, low-hanging clouds (strategy 1) further reinforces the idea of the landscape as autonomous and governed by the laws of nature.

Simultaneously, the sublimity of the landscape is exposed as the vastness of the landscape is highlighted by the small size of the person: 'I usually try to put a subject on the picture. [...] You have this small person and this huge background' (Interview, 27.08.2019, Lago di Braies). This characterizes the image type 'Personified Solitude', though the motif of sublimity is present across all identified image types: High, rugged mountain peaks are featured in the image types 'Solitary Nostalgia' and 'Sublime

Mountains', whereas river meanders and traffic routes all lead to secluded and rugged mountains and lakes. The image type 'Majestic Mountain Lakes' showcase serene lakes surrounded by vast mountain range, with reflections on the water enhancing their grandeur (see Table 4). In addition to the rugged landscape and the seemingly untouched nature, the image types of 'Rough Seascape', 'Wild Streams' and 'Secluded Waterfalls' highlight the power of water, symbolizing sublimity. For the image type of wild animals, the large-scale depiction of predators emphasizes wilderness and sublimity [Table 4 near here].

Table 4. Reflection on lake surfaces in sceneries on Instagram (N = 99) (Source: author)

	Quantity	In percent
Lakes with reflection	83	83.8
Lakes without reflection	16	16.2

Another strategy of landscape pictures on Instagram is the (3) depiction of idealized human-nature interactions. People are hiking in seemingly untouched landscapes (20.5%), rowing or swimming in clear lakes (7.3%), camping alone in nature (4.8%), or sitting around a campfire at night (2.0%) (see Table 5). Outdoor activities are thus emphasized and a harmonious coexistence with nature is imagined. Roads and hiking trails appear as though shaped by the landscape, further reinforcing the notion of nature's dominance over human interventions. The most common human activity depicted in landscape images on Instagram, however, is observing the surrounding landscape. People usually stand with their back (59.5%) or side (22.9%) to the camera while looking at the landscape (83.4%) and only exceptionally into the camera (1.0%). The portrayal of people on Instagram, which dominates at 56.6%, thus corresponds to the famous 'Rückenfigur' by C.D. Friedrich and aligns with the concept of 'Romantic Gazing' according to Urry and Larsen (2011). The pose of the 'Rückenfigur' gazing at

the scenery is used on purpose: 'I don't wanna be on the picture smiling. It's more like a familiar picture and not an Instagram picture' (Interview, 29.08.2019, Lago di Carezza).

Also, by depicting people as small and as a harmonious component of the landscape, one could interpret that the human-nature relationship is idealized in the images. However, such representations may also reflect forms of visual appropriation or dominance over the landscape, echoing scholars such as those by Smith (2018) [Table 5 near here].

Table 5. Number of people in the photos (N=625) and characteristics of the people depicted (N=205) (Source: author)

		Quantity	**In percent**
People in the photo	0	420	67.2
	1	194	31.0
	2	8	1.3
	> 2	3	0.5
Figure representation	Full figure	203	99.0
	Half figure	2	1.0
Viewing direction	View into camera	2	1.0
	Looking past the camera	19	9.3
	View of the landscape	171	83.4
	No statement possible	13	6.3
Camera perspective	Frontal view	30	14.6
	Side view	47	22.9
	Back view	122	59.5
	Bird's eye view	2	1.0
	No statement possible	4	2.0
Activity of the person	Romantic Gazing	116	56.6
	A person is moving/walking	42	20.5
	A person rowing in a boat	9	4.4
	A person swims in a mountain lake	6	2.9
	A person walking on a wooden walkway	4	2.0
	Person(s) sitting around a campfire	4	2.0
	Other	24	11.7

Furthermore, the (4) embedding of nostalgic artifacts is an aesthetic strategy frequently used by Instagrammers (see Table 6). If buildings are included (66.5 %), over half of them (56.4 %) are abandoned-looking, traditional wooden or stone huts. The huts are usually located in the middle of nature with no visible connection to infrastructure (94.7%), enhancing the aura of solitude. Similarly, castles, churches, and palaces are photographed in seemingly untouched surroundings.

Traffic routes further reflect nostalgia: unpaved roads, gravel tracks, and hiking trails (54.8%) are more commonly depicted than asphalted roads (33.9%), all leading into a remote landscape. 53 images of the sample depict means of transportation. Among them, non-motorized means of transportation, such as rowing boats, sailing boats, canoes, or gliders, dominate (62.3%). Looking at the materiality of all civilization objects, wood (47.8%) and stone elements (33.8%) also prevail, with wooden huts, rowing boats, jetties, and windmills contributing to a sense of cultural history and nostalgia. In contrast, 'modern' materials such as concrete, metal, sheet metal, or plastic are only occasionally apparent (17.8%) [Table 6 near here].

The integration of old, traditional elements into seemingly untouched landscapes is thus a basic topos of Instagram's landscape pictures. This strategy reflects a deliberate aesthetic that evokes cultural nostalgia and aligns with the imagination of a pre-industrial past and an older 'Zeitgeist', as statements from interviewees underline. Wooden elements, in particular, are closely tied to this nostalgic vision: 'Everywhere else there would only be plastic pedal boats and here are cool old wooden boats. I think it's this retro, wooden feeling that is so special' (translated from German, Interview, 26.08.2019, Lago di Braies). Similarly, another interviewee highlights the charm of these simple wooden boats: '[They] still look a bit nostalgic, made of wood and are actually simple boats and not somehow plastic [...]' (translated from German, Interview,

27.08.2019, Lago di Braies). For the same reasons, primarily non-motorized means of transport are integrated which require physical effort – 'you have to row' (translated from German, Interview, 27.08.2019, Lago di Braies) – and evoke a sense of connection to nature. Such elements contribute to the construction of a scenery that corresponds to the imagination of a pre-industrial landscape and an idealized human-nature relationship, as encapsulated in the words of another interviewee: 'Look, for me, it's very untouched, it kind of remains the way I feel it has always been' (Interview, 24.08.2019, Hallstatt).

Table 6. Infrastructure, infrastructure elements, connection, motorization, and materiality in landscape images on Instagram (Source: author)

			Quantity	In percent
Infrastructure (N=625)		available	309	49.4
		not available	316	50.6
Infrastructure elements (N=355)		*in some photos >1*	**355**	100
	thereof buildings		236	66.5
	thereof	traditional huts	133	56.4
		Monuments	61	25.8
		Wooden walkways	15	6.4
		Modern houses	11	4.7
		Lighthouse	8	3.4
		Stone bridge	7	3.0
		Wooden windmill	1	0.4
	thereof (traffic) routes		62	17.5
	thereof	Asphalted road	21	33.9
		Hiking trail	18	29.0
		(Forest) path	16	25.8
		Rail	7	11.3
	thereof boats		30	8.5
	thereof	Rowing boat	18	60.0
		Sailing ship	5	16.7
		Canoe	4	13.3

	Cutter	2	6.7
	SUP	1	3.3
Thereof vehicles		17	4.8
thereof	Campervan	13	76.5
	Car	3	17.6
	Motorcycle	1	5.9
thereof others		10	2.8
Road access to traditional huts (N=133)		**133**	100
	available	7	5.3
	not available	126	94.7
Motorization of means of transport (N=53)		**53**	100
	motorized	20	37.8
	unmotorized	33	62.3
Materiality of all infrastructure elements (excluding traffic routes) (N=293)		**293**	100
thereof	Wood	140	47.8
	Stone	99	33.8
	Metal, sheet metal	28	9.6
	Concrete	13	4.4
	Plastic	11	3.8
	Other	2	0.7

Another aesthetic strategy is (5) optimization through image montage, where distracting or undesirable elements are deliberately excluded or edited out and, at the same time, suitable objects added. Modern buildings, industrial structures, and other postmodern objects are rarely shown. Photos are framed to exclude other people and emphasize solitude, so that a person depicted appears solitary in the vast natural surroundings: 'You have to take the shot so people imagine that it's calm and that's nobody here' (Interview, 27.08.2019, Lago di Braies). This montage process is particularly evident at Lago di Carezza (see Table 7).

Despite the lake's small size, proximity to highways, and surrounding deforestation, Instagram images frame the scene to make the lake appear vast and untouched. Many Instagrammers even climb over fences (despite prohibition signs) to

take shots from the shore of the lake, allowing to create a sublime aura thanks to the

reflection of the mountains [Table 7 near here].

Table 7. Montage process at Lago di Carezza (Source: author)

The typical Instagram motif of Lago di Carezza (@magictiron, 2019)	A less aesthetic snapshot of Lago di Carezza (Thibaut Octave, n.d., https://www.thibautoctave.com/lago-di-carezza-dolomites-italy)

Post-production editing further enhances this process of optimization.

Distracting elements like trash, other people, or modern buildings are easily removed

and color adjustments are made using digital photo editing software altering the photo's

mood and aesthetic. Thus, the scenery is deliberately composed of selected objects and

aligned with Instagram's stereotypical landscape style through image montage

processes (Interview, 27.08.2019, Lago di Braies).

The construction of an ideal world using romantic iconography

Instagrammers take up both the typical pictorial motifs and aesthetic strategies of

landscape paintings from the Romantic era [Table 8 near here]. Certain aspirations,

convictions, and strategies of the Romantics can be transferred to today, as the following

discussion will show.

Table 8. Comparison of Romantic landscape paintings with landscape depictions on Instagram (Source: author)

The Watzmann by C.D. Friedrich (Source: Hofmann, 2006)

Sublime landscape on Instagram (Source: @rosenfeld.mandy, 2020)

Morning Fog in the Mountains by Caspar David Friedrich (Source: von Lüttichau, 2006)

Misty mountain landscape on Instagram (Source: @jannikobenhoff, 2020)
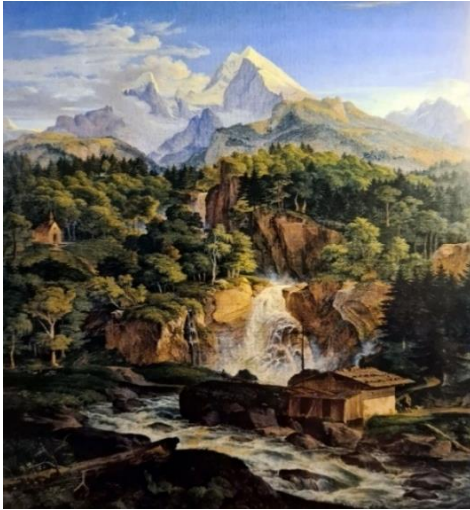
The Watzmann by A.L. Richter (Source: Düchting, 2010)

Sublime and beautiful things on Instagram (Source: @formgestalter, 2020)

Eltz Castle by Heinrich Adolf Valentin Hoffmann (Source: Artnet, n.d.)

Eltz Castle on Instagram (Source: @evolumina, 2020)

The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog by C.D. Friedrich (Source: Düchting, 2006)

The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog on Instagram (Source: @kuhrmarvin, 2020)

Romantic landscape paintings and Instagram imagery share striking similarities in the way they depict nature (see Table 8). Sublimity, as a central motif, is a key element in both mediums. Seemingly untouched mountains and rugged seascapes are reproduced: Romantic paintings such as Caspar David Friedrich's *'The Watzmann'* or *'Morning Fog in the Mountains'* emphasize awe-inspiring and seemingly untouched natural landscapes. This aesthetic is mirrored on Instagram, where users like @rosenfeld.mandy and @jannikobenhoff post images of rugged mountain peaks and fog-shrouded valleys that closely resemble Friedrich's work. These compositions highlight the vastness of nature and the insignificance of humanity in its presence, reinforcing the sublime quality of these scenes. As in Romanticism, the sublime on Instagram is often intertwined with beauty, symbolizing a harmonious relationship between humankind and nature. This is evident in the image type of 'Solitary Nostalgia', where elements of the cultural landscape as a human habitat are integrated into sublime landscapes. Such motifs echo works like Adrian Ludwig Richter's depiction of *Der Watzmann* in 1824, where cultural artifacts such as huts are harmoniously placed within the grandeur of the natural setting. Similarly, castles, churches, and palaces – popular subjects in Romantic paintings – are recurring motifs on Instagram. In some cases, Romantic landscape paintings are reproduced almost exactly, such as the fog-shrouded Eltz Castle posted by @evolumina, which was painted from a similar perspective by H.A.V. Hoffmann in 1885. Both Romantic art and Instagram photos rely heavily on mystification, with atmospheric elements like fog, twilight, and low-hanging dark clouds creating an enchanted, otherworldly ambiance. The 'Rückenfigur' as the epitome of Romanticism today (Grave, 2020) remains one of the most dominant motifs on Instagram.

Like representatives of Romanticism, Instagrammers also deliberately include traditional and old-fashioned objects such as remote huts or wooden boats to lend the landscape a pre-industrial and nostalgic character. Similarly, objects, materials, and people that might disrupt this construction are either excluded during composition or removed in post-processing. This approach transforms the images into montages, where individual elements are carefully structured and combined to create a unified scene imbued with symbolic meaning, romanticizing the landscape.

To summarize, the analyzed Instagrammers construct a scenery based on sublimity, mystification, and nostalgia, echoing the basic ideas of Romanticism. By carefully structuring, combining, and concealing spatial elements, they create an idealized, aesthetically transformed version of nature that resonates with the longing for an idealized, harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world – the stereotypical image of a romantic landscape is reproduced. These repeated aesthetic strategies demonstrate that landscapes on Instagram are not simply recorded but actively constructed through selective framing – illustrating how the meaning of a place emerges through collective visual practice rather than inherent qualities.

The irrelevance of place

In this context, the significance of the depicted locations themselves becomes largely irrelevant. What matters most is whether the location can be used to construct a romantic landscape that corresponds to the Instagram look. For almost all interviewees, the primary motivation for visiting these locations is their visual appeal on social media rather than any inherent cultural or historical significance. They indicated that they discovered these places through Instagram, and their decision to visit was largely driven by the aesthetics of the photos they had seen online: 'We came here because we saw the photo, otherwise I would never have known that it existed I think' (Interview,

29.08.2019, Lago di Carezza). The declared aim of another interviewee's one-week road trip through South Tyrol was to 'hit the hotspots' (translated from German, Interview, 27.08.2019, Lago di Braies) and take as many photos as possible for Instagram.

The process of selecting these destinations is also influenced by the desire to replicate the popular Instagram images that have already been shared from these locations. For example, one interviewee at Lake Carezza explained that 'this is one of the favorite Instagram spots so that's why we're here. (...) I always choose destination because of the Instagram how it looks on the pictures' (Interview, 29.08.2019, Lago di Carezza). Upon arriving at the lake, the interviewee immediately consulted Instagram to review the most popular photos taken at that spot. He then searched for the right angle to capture his photo, ensuring it aligned with the idealized images he had seen online. Despite being disappointed by the reality of the lake, which did not meet his expectations due to missing trees, the interviewee felt satisfied because the photo they took matched the Instagram version: 'I expected this lake something different. There are lots of trees missing around and I didn't expect that but the picture I took look the same as on Insta' (Interview, 29.08.2019, Lago di Carezza).

Cultural and historical significance, on the other hand, does not play a role in the selection of these locations. None of the interviewees had previously acquired background knowledge about the locations or the region visited. In fact, only one person was informed about the historic salt mines in Hallstatt. The significance of the locations is therefore reduced to their aesthetics. The places serve solely as a backdrop for the perfect Instagram photo: 'I think we would be more interested in history and everything if there were no pictures and everything because I feel like we see great spots, we take pictures and then we leave. I kind of see that vibe' (Interview, 24.08.2019, Hallstatt). Another interviewee echoed this sentiment, stating that 'it could be wherever, it doesn't

matter. It's just the scenery and not the name Hallstatt' (Interview, 25.08.2019, Hallstatt).

These findings highlight that the socio-cultural meaning of the photographed locations plays only a minor role, if any. Instead, a location's worth is determined by its aesthetic potential and alignment with dominant Instagram motifs. Influencers and tourists alike replicate famous landscape aesthetics on Instagram, reinforcing a visually standardized way of seeing and sharing landscapes. This supports Urry's argument that the tourist gaze is socially organized but highlights that this organization is now also platform-driven and amplified by algorithms. The interviews further reveal that tourists actively seek out and recreate images they see online, embodying a digitally mediated tourist gaze.

This dynamic reflects a broader transformation where locations become interchangeable visual commodities. 'Instagrammability' takes precedence over embedded cultural significance, contributing to the aestheticization and contextual flattening of place in platform-mediated travel practices. While the landscapes themselves remain visually important, their depth of meaning often reced into the background – reduced to their aesthetic qualities as backdrops for the perfect Instagram photo.

Discussion: Invention of a new reality through aesthetically transformed nature

On Instagram, a romantic and nostalgic image of the landscape is constructed. Nostalgia, in this context, expresses the longing for a past that is believed to be lost and is seen as a 'reaction to the irreversibility of time and to a present that is perceived as inadequate' (translated from German, Steiner, 2019, p. 32f). Industrialization and modernization, a constantly changing and complex globalized world as well as the

alienation of man and nature are key triggers of nostalgia (Schrey, 2017). Concurrently, longing for the authentic, for a life in harmony with nature, and for the 'good old days' are basic motifs of nostalgia: 'The prevailing motif of nostalgia is the erasure of the gap between nature and culture' (Stewart, 2007, p. 23). Accordingly, nostalgia can be interpreted as a yearning for an intact nature, as an attempt to re-enchant the rational world, and as an escape from postmodern realities (Schrey, 2017).

Landscape images on Instagram reflect this nostalgia in the face of contemporary challenges (e.g. climate change, environmental pollution, social fragmentation, self-alienation and heteronomy in the capitalist world). They stand in clear contrast to the postmodern world characterized by 'multiple crises' and 'the crises of societal relations to nature' (Hummel et al., 2017). Instead, they reflect the nostalgic longing for a bygone era and an intact, idealized human-nature-relationship. Instagrammers' aesthetic strategies oppose the economically-driven destruction of the environment, the ever-increasing consumption of landscape, and the dominance of humans over nature. Rather than depicting nature as a space that is controlled or altered by humans, landscapes on Instagram are often shown as 'natural' and untouched, with humans depicted as humble and harmonious inhabitants.

This is particularly evident in emphasising the autonomy and sublimity of the landscape, where humans are portrayed as small and insignificant in the face of nature's vastness (strategy 2). Infrastructure and people serve as silent observers who blend harmoniously into the landscape. Mystification (strategy 1) further enhances this effect, often using dark storm clouds or fog to make nature seem overpowering and mysterious, emphasizing the vulnerability of human beings. At the same time, the landscape appears enchanted by the fog and twilight, counteracting the technologized nature of the modern world.

The longing for a life in harmony with nature is also expressed in the idealization of human-nature interaction (strategy 3). People hike in pristine nature, observe it from an exposed position, or swim in clear mountain lakes. The image type of 'Life in Nature', portraying people camping in secluded spots, imagines a life in nature rather than simply life with nature. This romanticized vision is further embodied in landscape pictures framed by windows, where the viewer adopts the perspective of someone living in this idealized world (see Figure 1). [Figure 1 near here]

Figure 1. Framed view out of a window (Source: @evolumina, 2020)

Additionally, nostalgic artifacts (strategy 4) such as old huts without infrastructural connections, castles, rowing boats, or other wooden elements are included in the landscape images to imagine the 'good old days'. These elements help to contrast the complexities of the postmodern era. Absolute solitude, tranquillity, and simplicity are staged while a self-determined life far away from the globalized and capitalist lifeworld is imagined: 'I wish that this was like 300 years ago' (Interview, 27.08.2019, Lago di Braies).

The constructed nostalgic landscapes on Instagram project yearnings for a past 'Zeitgeist" and an intact human-nature relationship, one that eliminates the destructive impact of human activity on the environment. To craft this idealized world,

Instagrammers often use image optimization techniques (strategy 5), removing unwanted elements and adding idealized features to their photos, further romanticizing the landscape. This montage process transforms the landscape, hiding signs of human dominance over nature and environmental degradation and presenting an image of nature that aligns with the nostalgic longing for a past and an idealized human-nature-relationship.

Instagram landscapes, therefore, can be understood as the creation of a new reality through the aesthetic transformation of nature. These images contrast the crises of the modern world, offering an escape into an idealized romantic past where nature and humanity coexist in a state of perfect balance. This longing is personified in the famous 'Rückenfigur', allowing the viewer to immerse himself in both the person depicted in the image and the photographer's role and becoming part of this idealized world. According to Schwartz and Halegoua's 'Spatial Self' (2014), photographers create here a romantic and yearning identity for themselves, which is not only shaped by the 'Rückenfigur', but generally by all romanticized landscape images posted on Instagram. In posting romanticized landscape pictures, they adopt a romanticized identity that mirrors the nostalgic longing for the past.

The underlying motivations behind today's aesthetic strategies are strikingly similar to those of the landscape painters of the Romantic era. Romantic painters, responding to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the alienation brought about by industrialization and early capitalism, depicted untouched nature in their works, imbuing it with a sense of mystery (Scholl, 2005). Similarly, Instagrammers take up romantic motifs and strategies in response to the modern-day alienation from nature. Thus, the landscapes constructed on Instagram can be interpreted as a postmodern reinvention of Romanticism, both in terms of their aesthetics and their 'Zeitgeist'. In

this sense, the results show that Instagram not only organizes how landscapes are photographed and shared but also reinforces the romantic gaze as a desirable aesthetic.

Here, it is important to note that data collection occurred right in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, global tourism behaviors have shifted, with restrictions on international travel increasing interest in local and nature-based destinations. Many travelers during the pandemic sought isolated, outdoor environments (Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2022), which aligns with the Romantic aesthetics observed in Instagram's landscape imagery. This trend may have reinforced the visual strategies identified in this study since the pandemic, such as mystification, solitude, and the idealization of untouched landscapes. While this study captures pre-pandemic data, these broader societal shifts suggest that the romanticized landscape aesthetics documented here may have become even more relevant in the post-pandemic period.

The irrelevance of the place itself shown above can be linked to Aschenbrand's (2017) finding that stereotypical meanings are superimposed on places. Consequently, 'the objects of tourism appear to be interchangeable when stereotypical landscape categories play the decisive role in the travel decision. The decisive criterion is then whether specific objects are perceived according to a demanded stereotypical category' (translated from German, Aschenbrand, 2017, p. 70). In the landscapes reproduced on Instagram, the specific location or its historical context is secondary; what matters is whether the physical attributes of the landscape can be arranged in a way that fits the idealized image of a romantic landscape – the place is visually very important but contextually flattened and socio-culturally irrelevant. What montage was for Romantic painters, the search for the perfect location to shoot an instagrammable photo it is for Instagrammers. Almost any location can become an Instagram hotspot if a romantic scenery can be crafted there by idealizing human-nature interaction and hiding the

destruction of nature. This pattern illustrates how Instagram users actively reproduce and reinforce a standardized tourist gaze, perpetuating romantic motifs as dominant Instagram gaze.

As already shown above, the aesthetic strategies observed in Instagram's landscape images are not unique to social media but are rooted in a long visual tradition that extends from 19th-century Romanticism through landscape photography, cinema, and tourism marketing. The enduring appeal of Romantic landscape aesthetics in digital media suggests that these visual motifs continue to resonate with contemporary audiences, adapting to technological and social changes while retaining their core thematic elements.

Conclusion: Landscape images on Instagram as a postmodern reinvention of Romanticism

The Romantic era was characterized by the longing for a holistic human-nature relationship, a desire to re-enchant the world, and a quest to rediscover a sense of meaning that seemed lost. These longings were projected onto symbolically heightened, romanticized landscapes depicting mystical and atmospheric sceneries. This study demonstrates that landscape images on Instagram echo this Romantic tradition, presenting a postmodern reinvention of Romanticism by transforming landscapes into romantic sceneries of longing and nostalgia that evoke an imagined, idealized human-nature-relationship. By imitating and actively reproducing famous landscape pictures, Instagram users adapt a standardized Instagram gaze, based on Romantic ideals.

Drawing on an analysis of 625 Instagram landscape pictures and qualitative interviews, this study addressed the following three guiding research questions:

1. How are landscapes constructed on Instagram? What aesthetic strategies and visual motifs dominate the portrayal of landscapes on Instagram?

2. How do Instagram's landscape aesthetics reflect broader societal and ecological changes?

3. What role does the socio-cultural meaning of a place play in these constructions? What implications do these aesthetic constructions have for the role of place in digitally mediated tourism?

First, the analysis identified 13 central image types and five dominant aesthetic strategies, all deeply rooted in Romantic iconography. Much like 19th-century Romantic painters, Instagrammers nowadays emphasize themes of solitude, mystification, sublimity, and nostalgia. Through selective staging and framing of real locations, they construct idealized romantic sceneries (RQ1).

Second, the study shows that these images reflect a nostalgic longing for a 'bygone' natural world and an escape from contemporary ecological crises, while paradoxically relying on digital platforms to share and replicate these images. In this sense, Instagram's romantic sceneries stand in tension with modernity, reimagining landscapes as seemingly untouched and medially reversing the reality of environmental degradation. This digital revival of Romanticism is not simply about an escape from reality but rather leads to the invention of a new reality through aesthetically transformed nature. Iconic motifs like the Rückenfigur allow photographers and viewers alike to become part of these sceneries, constructing a romanticized 'Spatial Self' (RQ 1 & RQ 2).

Third, this study showed that the socio-cultural meaning of the place represented in the Instagram image is largely irrelevant. Instead, places are valued for their visual characteristics and ability to resemble romantic landscape tropes. Locations are selected and staged for their 'Instagrammability': physical elements are deliberately combined or hidden to create idealized Romantic sceneries. Thus, it can be assumed that almost any

location can develop into an Instagram hotspot – provided it contains the necessary features to construct these 'instagrammable', romanticized sceneries. In this context, place becomes interchangeable—a backdrop for enacting visual identity rather than a site of embedded meaning (RQ3).

Empirical contributions and theoretical implications

This study contributes empirically to the growing body of research on digital geographies and visual culture by systematically analyzing the aesthetic construction of landscapes on Instagram across a large dataset. By combining image analysis with interviews, it offers insight into both the visual strategies used by content creators and the underlying ideas and construction processes of Instagrammers who seek to replicate these images.

The findings advance our understanding of how Romantic visual strategies are not only revived, but recontextualized within contemporary social media landscapes. Rather than assuming a direct historical continuity, this research interprets Instagram imagery as a postmodern reinvention of Romanticism and underscores the enduring significance of nostalgia, mystification, and the sublime in shaping cultural perceptions of nature.

Additionally, the findings highlight the construction of a mediated new reality through Instagram's visual aesthetics. While Romantic landscape paintings served as an artistic critique of industrialization, Instagram images can be interpreted similarly as symbolic responses to current ecological crises, digital alienation, and a technologized world. This reinforces theories of media and representation by illustrating how social media enables users to idealize and reframe reality.

Finally, the paper contributes to the emerging body of research on social media tourism by showing how destinations are selected and redefined not for their cultural or

historical significance but for their visual resonance within platform aesthetics, i.e. for their suitability to construct romanticized, 'instagrammable' landscapes. Furthermore, it illustrates how the 'Instagrammability' of landscapes reshapes the meaning of place, aestheticizes natural space, and contributes to a flattening of cultural and historical context. This insight advances theoretical discussions on the commodification and interchangeability of places in the visual era, especially in tourism.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses exclusively on Instagram and its visual culture, which may not capture the full spectrum of Romanticized representations across other digital platforms (e.g., TikTok or YouTube). Future research could investigate whether similar aesthetic strategies are prevalent across other social media channels as well.

Second, the study primarily relies on visual analysis and a limited set of interviews. While this approach offers valuable insights into aesthetic strategies and user behavior, it does not allow for definitive quantitative conclusions regarding the prevalence of Romanticized landscape representations relative to other aesthetic categories on Instagram. Additionally, the sample focuses on German-speaking Instagram users, which may influence the findings due to cultural differences in the perception of Romanticism. While Romantic aesthetics are prominent in European and especially German art history, the extent to which these visual motifs resonate with broader global audiences remains an open question. Given the global distribution and usage of Instagram, it is likely that landscape images may be depicted and constructed differently in other cultural or regional contexts. Future studies could examine whether similar aesthetic preferences emerge in Instagram content from other linguistic or cultural groups to assess the broader applicability of these findings. Further

investigations could also explore other emerging Instagram hotspots (e.g. in urban settings, such as Rue Cremieux in Paris), and the aesthetic strategies employed in their construction. Furthermore, interpretations of visual motifs are also inherently open to multiple readings. While the images analyzed are read as suggesting a harmonious human-nature relationship, alternative interpretations—such as those that highlight appropriation or visual dominance—are equally plausible and merit further investigation. This reflects the interpretative complexity of Instagram imagery and the need for cautious generalization.

Third, the study did not include interviews with influencers themselves, who play a key role as trendsetter and opinion leaders on social media. Engaging directly with influencers could provide valuable insights into their motivations, creative processes, and underlying ideas behind their Romanticized depictions of landscapes on Instagram. This perspective would add another layer of understanding to the visual constructs explored in this study.

Finally, another important avenue could be to examine whether idealized Instagram landscapes raise awareness of ecological crises or, conversely, obscure environmental degradation. A deeper understanding of audience interpretations and reactions could illuminate Instagram's dual role in shaping discourses around nature and environmental issues.

By addressing these areas, scholars can further explore how digital media aesthetics shape contemporary relationships between humans, nature, and place, offering new insights into the cultural and societal consequences of social media landscapes. Given Instagram's enduring popularity and its continued growth, the platform's influence on tourism practices and destination marketing will remain a critical area of study.

Declaration of interest statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public,

commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References:

Andrews, M. (2005). *Landscape and Western Art*. Oxford University Press.

Anuar, F. I., Zaid, A. A. A., Zabidi, I. Z., & S.N.J. Kamal (2021). Young Tourists' Trust in Instagram Travel Influencers and their Intention to Visit Travel Destinations. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 11*(16), 304–317. http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i16/11236

Artnet (n.d.). *Heinrich Adolf Valentin Hoffmann.* Retrieved from https://www.artnet.de/k%C3%BCnstler/heinrich-adolf-valentin-hoffmann/. Accessed Februars 5, 2024.

Arts, I., Fischer, A., Duckett, D. & van der Wal, R. (2021). The Instagrammable outdoors – Investigating the sharing of nature experiences through visual social media. *People and Nature 2021*(3), 1244-1256. https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10239

Aschenbrand, E. (2017). *Die Landschaft des Tourismus. Wie Landschaft von Reiseveranstaltern inszeniert und von Touristen konsumiert wird* [The Landscape of Tourism. How Landscape is Staged by Tour Operators and Consumed by Tourists]. Springer Link.

Assaad, J. & A. Köchling (2024). Instagram as an influencing factor on the image of the destination Cappadocia – Implications for destination decisions of Generation Z. *Zeitschrift für Tourismuswissenschaft 16*(3), 204-227. http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/tw-2024-0013

Baur, N. & Von Kürte, J. (2023). Konstruktion von Landschaft auf Instagram am Beispiel Venedigs [The construction of landscape on Instagram using the example of Venice]. In O. Kühne, T. Sedelmeier, C. Jenal, T. Freytag (Eds.), *Landschaft und Tourismus* (pp. 769 – 788). Springer VS.

Ciseri, I. (2004). *Die Kunst der Romantik* [The art of romanticism]. Belser.

Cosgrove, D. (1998). *Social formation and symbolic landscape*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Couldy, N., Hepp, A. (2016). *The Mediated Construction of Reality: Society, Culture, Mediatization.* Polity.

Düchting, H. (2010). *Die Kunst der Romantik* [The art of romanticism]. Belser.

Fitri, F., Februadi, A., Elisabeth, V. & A. Yuardani (2023). The Influence of Instagram Social Media Marketing as a Promotional Means to Increase Intentions to Visit Tourist Destinations. *Journal of Marketing Innovation 1*(2023), 171-188.

Grave, J. (2020). Beobachtete Einsamkeit. Zum Verhältnis von Rückenfigur und Betrachter bei Caspar David Friedrich [Observed Solitude. On the Relationship between the Rückenfigur and the Viewer in Caspar David Friedrich's Works]. In A. Arnold, W. Pape, N. Wichard (Eds.), *Einsamkeit und Pilgerschaft. Figurationen und Inszenierungen in der Romantik* (183-196). De Gruyter.

Gretzel, U. (2019). The role of social media in creating and addressing overtourism. In R. Dodds & R. Butler (Eds.), *Overtourism. Issues, realitites and solution* (pp. 62-75). De Gruyter.

Grittmann, E. & Ammann, I. (2009). Die Methode der quantitativen Bildtypenanalyse. Zur Routinisierung der Bildberichterstattung am Beispiel von 9/11 in der journalistischen Erinnerungskultur [The method of quantitative image type analysis. On the routinization of image reporting using the example of 9/11 in the journalistic culture of remembrance]. In: T. Petersen & C. Schwender (Eds.), *Visuelle Stereotype* [Visual stereotypes] *(pp.141-158).* Halem.

Gunkel, K. (2018). *Der Instagram Effekt. Wie ikonische Kommunikation in den Social Media unsere visuelle Kommunikation prägt* [The Instagram Effect. How iconic communication in social media shapes our visual communication]. Bielefeld.

Hauser, D., Leopold, A., Egger, R., Ganewita, H. & Herrgessell, L. (2022). Aesthetic perception analysis of destination pictures using #beautifuldestinations on Instagram. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management 24*(2022), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2022.100702

Hofmann, W. (2006). Die Romantik – eine Erfindung? [Romanticism - an invention?]. In Museum Folkwang Essen & Hamburger Kunsthalle (Eds.), *Caspar David Friedrich. Die Erfindung der Romantik* (pp. 20-31). Hirmer.

Hummel, D., Jahn, T., Keil, F. Liehr, S. & Stieß, I. (2017). Social Ecology as Critical, Transdisciplinary Science – Conceptualizing, Analyzing and Shaping Societal Relations to Nature. *Sustainability 2017 9*(7), 1050. https://doi.org/10.3390/su9071050

Instagram (n.d.). *Instagram*. https://www.instagram.com.

Jost, E. (2005). *Landschaftsblick und Landschaftsbild: Wahrnehmung und Ästhetik im Reisebericht 1780-1820* [Landscape vision and landscape image: perception and aesthetics in travelogue 1780-1820]. Rombach.

Kilipiri, E., Papaioannou, E. & I. Kotzaivazoglou (2023). Social Media and Influencer Marketing for Promoting Sustainable Tourism Destinations: The Instagram Case. *Sustainability 2023*(15), 6374. https://doi.org/ 10.3390/su15086374

Kirillova, K., & Wassler, P. (2019). *Travel beautifully: The role of aesthetics in experience design. Vol 16. Atmospheric Turn in Culture and Tourism* (M. Volgger & S. Volo). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Koerner, J.L.K. (1998). *Caspar David Friedrich. Landschaft und Subjekt.* [Casper David Friedrich. Landscape and Subject]. Brill.

Korff, C. & Winsky, N. (2023). Touristische Schwarzwaldlandschaften einst und jetzt: Konstruktionen und Reproduktionen von bildlichen Landschaftsrepräsentationen [Tourist Black Forest Landscapes Once and Now: Constructions and Reproductions of Pictorial Representations of the Landscape]. In O. Kühne, T. Sedelmeier, C. Jenal, T. Freytag (Eds.), Landschaft und Tourismus. RaumFragen: Stadt – Region – Landschaft (pp. 641-670). Springer VS.

Kühne, O., Weber, F. & Weber, F. (2013). Wiesen, Berge, blauer Himmel. Aktuelle Landschafskonstruktionen am Beispiel des Tourismusmarketings des Salzburger Landes aus diskurstheoretischer Perspektive [Meadows, mountains, blue sky. Current constructions of landscape using the example of tourism marketing in the Salzburg region from a discourse-theoretical perspective]. *Geographische Zeitschrift 101*(1), 36 – 54.

Lutz, C., & Collins, J. (1993). *Reading National Geographic*. University of Chicago Press.

Merkle, J. (2021). Reisen für 'Likes' [Travel for Likes]. *Geographische Rundschau 73*(1/2), 16-19.

Mirzoeff, N. (2011). *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality.* Duke University Press.

Munar, A.M. & Jacobsen, J. (2014). Motivations for sharing tourism experiences through social media. *Tourism Management 2014*(43), 46-54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.01.012

Panofsky, E. (1979). Ikonographie und Ikonologie [Iconography and iconology]. In E. Kaemmerling (Ed.), *Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem. Ikonographie und Ikonologie. Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme* (pp. 207-225). DuMont.

Pröbstl-Haider, U., Gugerell, K., & Maruthaveeran, S. (2022). Covid-19 and outdoor recreation - Lessons learned? Introduction to the special issue on "Outdoor recreation and Covid-19: Its effects on people, parks and landscapes". *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism 2023*(41), 100583.

Reuter, M. (2019). Die Banalität des Besonderen [The banality of the extraordinary]. In J. Krone (Ed.), *Medienwandel kompakt 2017-2019* (pp. 119-124). Springer VS.

Rosenblum, N. (1997). *A World History of Photography*. Abbeville Press.

Schofield. (2017). *Holiday destination chosen based on how 'Instagrammable' the holiday pics will be.* https://www.schofields.ltd.uk/blog/5123/two-fifths-of-millennials-choose-their-holiday-destination-based-on-how-instagrammable-the-holiday-pics-will-be/. Accessed February 5, 2024.

Scholl, C. (2005). *Romantische Malerei als neue Sinnbildkunst* [Romantic painting as a new allegorical art]. Deutscher Kunstverlag.

Schrey, D. (2017). *Analoge Nostalgie in der digitalen Medienkultur* [Analog Nostalgia in Digital Media Culture]. Kulturverlag Kadmos.

Schwartz, R. & Halegoua, G. (2014). The spatial self: Location-based identity performance on social media. *New Media & Society 17*(10), 1643-1660. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814531364

Serazio, M. & Duffy, B.E. (2018). Social media marketing. In J. Burgess, T. Poell, A. Marwick (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Social Media* (pp. 481-496). SAGE.

Smith, S. (2018). Instagram abroad: performance, consumption and colonial narrative in tourism. *Postcolonial Studies 21*(2), 172-191. https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2018.1461173

Smith, S. (2019). Landscapes for 'likes": capitalizing on travel with Instagram. *Social Semiotics 31*(4), 604-624. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2019.1664579

Steiner, J. (2019). *Nostalgie im Upside Down. Das progressive Potenzial von Nostalgie in der Retro-Serie Stranger Things* [Nostalgia in the Upside Down. The Progressive Potential of Nostalgia in the Retro Series Stranger Things]. Büchner-Verlag.

Stewart, S. (2007). *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.* Duke University Press.

Toresson, N. (2021). *Landschaftsbilder auf Instagram. Eine postmoderne Neuerfindung der Romantik.* Unpublished bachelor thesis at the Institute of Geography at JGU Mainz.

Urry, J. & Larsen, J. (2011). The tourist gaze 3.0. SAGE.

Weyl, V. (2019). Destinationsmarketing 2.0: Die strategische Nutzung von Instagram durch italienische Destinationsmanagementorganisationen. Eine quantitative Bildtypenanalyse [Destination marketing 2.0: The strategic use of Instagram by Italian destination management organizations. A quantitative image type analysis]. In W. Gamerith & J. Scheffer (Eds.): *Passauer Schriften zur Geographie 30. Studien zur geographischen Tourismus- und Regionalforschung* (pp. 37-60). Universität Passau.

Widholm C. (2024). Stockholm Archipelago on Instagram— Landscape Imaginaries of Two Hashtags. *Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History 11*(1), 1–12. https://doi. org/10.16993/rl.123

Wistveen, L. (2023). The Influence of Social Media in Overcrowded Destinations and the Re-Emergence of Slow Travel in Gen Z. Expectations versus Reality. In X.Y. Mei (Eds.), *Tourism and the Experience Economy in the Digital Era. Behaviours and Platforms* (pp. 157-171). Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003335924-15

Declaration of interest statement

Highlights

- Landscape pictures on Instagram echo Romantic era motifs and aesthetic strategies
- Instagram landscapes reverse nature's destruction by staging and transforming nature
- Evoking a pre-industrial landscape, Instagram pictures reshape human-nature relations
- Locations enabling stereotypical romantic images are instagrammable for travel