

## Looking for a Relationship with the Sea: Urban-Scape and Cosmopolitan Memories in Contemporary Odessa

**Emilio Cocco**

*University of Teramo, Department of Communication Science  
ecocco@unite.it*

The sea is not quite on the radar of social science. However, things change when the sea and the land touch each other and the sea resonates in living social relations. In some cases, the encounters with the sea take place in the form of embodied imagination processes that bring about productive dissonances. My research aims to unveil the frictions between dissonant embodied imaginations of local citizens and tourists in an exceptional 'landscape of dreams': the post-cosmopolitan port-city of Odessa. In 2008–2010 I carried out field-work with interviews and surveys aimed at comparing the ways maritime imperial legacies were exploited in Trieste and Odessa. After almost a decade, I was back 'in the pearl of the Black Sea' with the intention of carrying out a more in-depth investigation of the relationship between tourism and the exploitation of cosmopolitan memories in this post-socialist port city of Ukraine. My data are a combination of secondary statistics, ethnographic work, and first-hand qualitative accounts, both audio-visual and interviews, collected from April 2017 to June 2018, here including a two-week period spent in Odessa. After a preliminary elaboration of data, I am persuaded that the tourist relations in contemporary Odessa are oriented by the double endeavour of both hosts and guests looking for a special relationship with the sea. The sea and the waterside work both as privileged view-points for urban spectators (both tourists and residents) and a necessary *medium* to establish a relationship with the city and its multicultural past.

*Keywords:* Odessa, cosmopolitanism, sea, tourism, urban-scape  
<https://doi.org/10.26493/2335-4194.11.111-116>

### **Theoretical Background**

Does it make sense to speak of 'resonance of the sea' in terms of cultural tourism? And how to study it?

The oceans cover almost two thirds of our planet's surface and remain among the less measured, less organised, and less socialised spaces on earth (Latour, 2005). However, while natural science has been exploring both the abyss and the surface of the sea for a long time, nowadays archaeology, geography, history, and cultural studies have started a sort of 'blue turn' (Mentz, 2009). Social science, however, is still lagging

(Cocco, 2014; Hannigan, 2017) and continues to experience a terrestrial bias and a land-locked dominating theoretical paradigm (Peters, 2010; Ballinger, 2013). As a result, sociologists and anthropologists can rarely explain and understand the ocean space but, even more importantly, cannot share a theoretical frame that includes the sea in the understanding of society.

The sea remains for many a heterotopia *par excellence* (Foucault, 1984), the place of pure wilderness (Corbin, 1994; Davis, 1997) and the space of extra-sociality by default (Helmreich, 2011, pp. 135–136).

However, the sea is also a rich repository of legends, stories, symbols, and images that shape the mental images of the majority of people on earth, although most of them do not ever have a direct experience of the sea in their lives, other than beach vacations and short trips on ferries.

However, things can change in those places where the sea and the land come together, that is to say at the interface of land and sea. There, the sea possibly becomes part of society and more legible social relations with the sea take place. As Philip Steinberg reminds us, the sea is not 'just' a social construction but also a material, physical and emotional relationship. If it is true that human encounters with the sea are, by necessity, spaced and partial, it must also be said that different types of relationship with the sea can be established. From the shore of the sea, like a swimmer; from the deck of a boat, like a sailor, passenger, or scientist; from the surface, like an aquatic athlete or a surfer; even from the depths, like a scuba or deep-sea diver. All these relationships create different 'seascapes' that originate both in mental representations and in physical incarnations, as the senses, movements and emotions are part of the interaction with the material environment and, to a certain extent, they shape it. In other words, the meetings with the sea are 'living relationships' (Picken, 2015) replete with feelings and sensations, which, in the end, affect both the social representations of the sea and the moral values associated with them (from the respect of the environment to professional ethics). However, all human relationships with the sea capture only a fraction of its complex materiality and, therefore, the partial nature of our encounters with the ocean necessarily creates something that we could call 'ontological gaps', because 'the unrepresentable becomes the unrecognized and the unrecognized becomes the unthinkable' (Steinberg, 2013, pp. 156–157).

Accordingly, to better grasp the nature of social relations with the sea, we refer to the notion of an 'embodied imagination' as a new form of social imagination that involves bodily mediated relations with the environment. In recent years, this originally psychoanalytical (Bosnak, 2007) notion has been revived by a number of research works for different purposes.

In some cases, it functions as a methodological tool to recover phenomenological and existential perspectives, with the intent of analysing the contrast between tourism imaginaries and realities (Andrews, 2017, pp. 32–33). Differently, the embodied tourist imagination might explain the tourist enactment in cultural heritage performances and shed light on the co-construction of the story-scape in historical commemoration (Chronis, 2005). An especially interesting development comes from the anthropologist Lavolette, who explores the connections between adventurous pleasure, moral responsibility, and environmental awareness from the point of view of the anthropology of emotions and social phenomenology (Lavolette, 2011). Principally, Lavolette focuses on the knowledge produced through action and bodily understanding in those types of leisure and recreational activities in which danger and an adventurous spirit play an important role. Specifically, he suggests an alternative to a basic cognitive or physiological reading of the work of imagination by stressing the socially productive outcome of mobility and risk taking. In other words, he combines the activity and the imaginary to describe body's interactions with the landscape it moves through and its adaptation to contingencies (Lavolette, 2011, pp. 2–9). Thus, senses, movements, emotions are phenomenologically bound to the social construction of cultural contents, environmental feelings or territorial identities. Lavolette investigates the cases of British Cornwall and New Zealand, where identity making is linked to hazardous leisure activities such as extreme surfing and cliff jumping. However, the same assumptions may work in other areas and for different types of maritime-based leisure activities such as the embodiment of an Adriatic seascape by the boating people yachting across the sea (Cocco, 2018). The combined results of both a survey carried out with pleasure boaters and an ethnographic investigation of selected Adriatic marinas show that the yachters' performance often replicates a model of maritime circulation and trans-Adriatic connectivity that used to be a historically established paradigm of regional mobility. However, the fieldwork also shows how such a re-enactment of the Adriatic seascape is not following contemporary pre-established and

‘made on land’ cultural-political patterns. Nor does it represent the conscious re-evocation of a European trans-border maritime region, perhaps along the desires of both nostalgic intellectuals or politically inspired spatial planners.

### Methodology

Following the above, my research question is to understand to what extent the inconsistencies and the frictions between the embodied imagination of the sea and the land-based social construction of maritime space can spark some productive dissonance that deserves to be researched. Particularly, frictions and dissonances between maritime brands/images created ‘on land’, either for political gains or tourist consumption (or, often, for both), and the everyday life encounters with the sea have inspired a research action that aims to compare tourism policies and city branding strategies in frontier maritime cities. Namely, those former multi-ethnic, imperial hubs once imbued with the cosmopolitan ethos and trade-oriented mentality are now struggling to find a place both in the globalised geoeconomy and in the culturally homogenising narratives of the nation-states. In 2008–2010, I carried out fieldwork with interviews and survey aimed at comparing the ways maritime imperial legacies were exploited in Trieste and Odessa. After almost a decade, I was back ‘in the pearl of the Black Sea’ with the intention to carry out a deeper investigation of the relationship between tourism and the exploitation of cosmopolitan memories in this post-socialist port-city of Ukraine.

Meanwhile, many things have changed in Odessa and in Ukraine: in 2014, the Ukrainian crisis crept into the city, and violent riots broke out between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian groups. As a consequence, 40 people died, and buildings were burned, among which was a government one (De Frank, 2014). However, most of all, memories of violence and massacres along ethnic-political lines re-emerged from the city’s complex history, setting ghosts of the pogrom and urban guerrilla free to stand along and coexist with Odessa’s mythology of tolerance and transnationalism (Sicher, 2015, p. 234). Barricades, shooting and window-breaking looked like a dangerous remem-

brance of the gloomy autumn days of 1905. Moreover, to many observers, the burst of violence in this Russian-speaking maritime city that politically distanced itself from any separatism meant the end of the story. As a matter of fact, the eruption of violence far from the Russian borders, in a site linked to Imperial Russia but comfortably outside present-day Russia, could have set the stage for an irreversible spreading of civil war that would eventually break the entire country apart. However, things proved to be different, and Odessa resisted the poisonous consequences of ethnic violence that can painfully destroy multi-cultural settings, as happened in Sarajevo.

In contrast, in Odessa, the story has been, at least up to now, different, thanks perhaps to a long record of Odessites of getting their history wrong, which is not a bad thing all the time (King, 2014). Alternatively, perhaps because the history of Odessa never changes (Starobin, 2014), making this country within a country an irredeemable land where Jewish-blended humour and *joi-de-vivre* would always be a potent antibody against such political threats. Somehow like in post-Yugoslav Istria, the local identity seems to represent a successful mimetic alternative to a compulsory national self-determination process, which conflates culture and politics in one exclusive existential option (Cocco, 2010). Accordingly, ‘odessity’ (Schlör, 2011) is a state of mind: a choice that does not force you to choose; it is an experience of the sense of place (Richardson, 2008, p. 20) and a claim to belong to an *ante-litteram* modernity, expressed by the alliance between enlightened absolutism and diasporic communities of traders and artists, well before the time of nations and nationalisms. In other words, a landscape of dreams, still engraved in the city’s neoclassical and art nouveau buildings, as opposed to the inescapable harshness of both contemporary politics and ethnic fault-lines.

This is why the memories related to maritime imageries and the multicultural imperial narratives are often re-evoked with nostalgia and staged in different ways (especially in the historical centre) since the 1990s: but always in compliance with the present-day political guidelines (i.e., nation-state-framed historical accounts). Thus, the working hypothesis of this

work is that the relationship between hosts and guests in Odessa is often fraught with ambivalences and frictions, with particular reference to the sea as a source of narratives, symbols, and customs staged for tourist consumption.

In particular, while tourists struggle to fit together cosmopolitan memories and national narratives, the local population does not necessarily share the official cosmopolitan identity the way it is staged: on the contrary, the encounter with the tourist 'other' are tarnished by discrimination and suspicion, especially when the other is 'non-European', and the encounter has sexual implications between male foreigners and local women. The goal of exploring the dynamics of tourist encounters in Odessa is coincident with the many attempts of both hosts and guests to look for a relationship with the sea. This is true firstly for the people of Odessa that try to embrace tourism development through images based on their cosmopolitan maritime heritage, which should relocate themselves in the post-communist world and strengthen their sense of identity.

Secondly, the relation with the sea is searched by visitors that are heading to the city both for memory tours and for the attractiveness of its women, which stands out in the picture of a lively port-city with alleged promiscuous habits. As a matter of fact, the sea as a symbol of both cosmopolitanism and moral relaxation is part of multiple, intersecting narratives that aim at different goals: from the ethnic-national representation of a maritime and Mediterranean nation as opposed to the (backward) continental neighbours to the local, urban identity supported by the persistence of imperial legacies as opposed to the nation-state homogenising cultural trends. So, if Ukrainian nation-building can take advantage of a maritime, cosmopolitan reading of Odessa's past (*vis-à-vis* Russia), then, from the urban perspective, an identity specific to Odessa (*Odessity*, as many inhabitants call it) is often embraced as an alternative to the Ukrainian one. Also, many traditional ethnonational groups living in Odessa, such as Greeks or Jews but also Italians or Germans, can revive their specific identities in the contemporary urban-scape by exploiting the cosmopolitan narrative of a once thriving maritime port

city made of traders and artists. Truly, the same cosmopolitan multinational memories that are staged as the city's cultural heritage throughout the urban-scape is exploited and appropriated by different actors with somewhat conflicting purposes. Accordingly, my research work aims to discuss the above-mentioned issue by focusing on the analysis of tourism policies that exploit the material and symbolic importance of the maritime legacies of the city and play upon mythologies dating back to the time when the city was a cosmopolitan maritime outpost of the Russian empires. Now, it is true that in the age of the empire, the multi-ethnic population of Odessa, with special regards to the diaspora as an agent of civic progress, impersonated the gist of the multicultural imperial idea through its cosmopolitan flavour, economic prosperity and religious tolerance. However, the contemporary situation is far different, and local decision-makers try to turn these cosmopolitan imageries into factors of tourism development but often do not frame their actions within the changed economic and geopolitical contexts. Eventually, tourists are often puzzled by the experience of Odessa because they could be misled by a somewhat mythical interpretation of the social relationships at the time of the empires and tend to misunderstand the present reality of ethnic and national relations in the city. The encounter with the hosts reveals a different reality, made of ethnic discrimination, mistrust, and widespread disconnection between the present political and socio-economic conditions on one side, and the celebrated cosmopolitan urban heritage on the other.

### Research Goals

Therefore, I shall discuss the abovementioned frictions and ambivalences that haunt the tourist relations in Odessa through the results of an ongoing investigation that is reaching its final stage. My data are a combination of secondary statistics, ethnographic work and first-hand qualitative accounts, both audio-visual and interviews, collected from April 2017 to June 2018, here included a two-weeks period spent in Odessa. After a preliminary elaboration of data, I am persuaded that the tourist relations in contemporary Odessa are oriented by the double endeavour of both hosts and

guests looking for a relationship with the sea. The latter is staged as a natural and historical frontier of the city especially in sites such as beaches, piers and harbours. Thus, the sea and its cosmopolitan memories ought to be explored and rediscovered – perhaps with nostalgia – by locals and visitors in order to reconnect one's (tourist) experience with the multicultural urban heritage which is materialized in the cityscape: monuments, parks, buildings, squares, etc. However, how does this expectation resonate with the everyday practices and encounters of the Odessa people with the visitors/tourists in a sea-shaped context? What are the frictions and ambivalences, and how are they managed? We know that landscapes, and monuments within them, are actively produced and planned by artists and political authorities to provide citizens and visitors places for both interaction and reflection, often following a moral agenda (Hametz, 2014, p. 138). Thus, the effect of the city on people's minds, both on the mental cliché and cognitive perception, depends on the way the staged cosmopolitan past is affecting the mental images experienced by visitors and citizens: for instance, through the architectural outlook of the historical city core that is meaningfully located by the sea (15–16) and through the monuments dedicated to city founders, local artists and imperial authorities, which are the elements of the spatial identity of the city. The aesthetically valuable images of the port-city as seen from the sea, among which are the Primorsky Boulevard and the Potemkin stairways, suggests that the sea and the waterside work as privileged viewpoints for urban spectators (both tourists and residents) to establish a relationship with the city and its multicultural past. Just like in post-imperial Trieste (Ballinger, 2003; Treleani, 2009; Schlipphacke, 2014), nostalgia for the golden time of the empire is often recurring against the uncertainty of the present. Odessa, once the mythical Southern Palmyra of Russia, turns to its all-European elite cultural heritage of opera, ballet, coffee houses and cosmopolitan, artistic vocations to stage its transnational cultural and economic identity both for tourist and domestic consumption. However, this is when dissonances emerge and reveal more contemporary fears and contradictions.

## References

- Andrews, H. (2017). Becoming through tourism: Imagination in practice. *Suomen Antropologi*, 42(1), 31–44.
- Ballinger, P. (2003). Imperial nostalgia: Mythologizing Habsburg Trieste. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8(1), 84–101.
- Ballinger, P. (2013, 27 September). *Adrift on the sea of theory? Anchoring sociology in the lived seascape*. Keynote speech at the International Symposium of Maritime Sociology, Zadar, Croatia.
- Bosnak, R. (2007). *Embodiment: Creative imagination in medicine, art and travel*. London, England: Routledge.
- Chronis, A. (2005). Co-constructing heritage at the Gettysburg storyscape. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 32, 386–406.
- Cocco, E. (2010). Borderland mimicry: Imperial legacies, national stands and regional identity in Croatian Istria after the nineties. *Narodna umjetnost*, 47(1), 7–28.
- Cocco, E. (2014). Theoretical implications of maritime sociology. *Annals of Marine Sociology*, 22, 5–18.
- Cocco, E. (2018). Sailing the Adriatic: Social mobilities and the social construction of the Adriatic seascape. *Turistica*, 27(1/2), 61–86.
- Corbin, A. (1994). *The lure of the sea: The discovery of the seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Davis, S. (1997). *Spectacular nature: Corporate culture and the sea world experience*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- De Frank, P. (2014, 5 May). Ukraine conflict creeps into crucial city of Odessa. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/ukraine-conflict-creeps-crucial-city-odessa-n97391>
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16, 22–27.
- Hametz, M. (2014). Presnitz in the piazza: Habsburg nostalgia in Trieste. *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 2(47), 131–154.
- Hannigan, J. (2017). Towards a sociology of the ocean. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 54(1), 8–27.
- Helmreich, S. (2011). Nature/culture/seawater. *American Anthropologist*, 113(1), 132–144.
- King, C. (2014, 8 May). Forgetting Odessa. Retrieved from <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2014/05/ukraines-crisis-reaches-odessa-how-the-port-citys-understanding-of-its-own-history-helps-and-hurts.html>
- Lavolette, P. (2011). *Extreme landscapes of leisure: Not a hazardous sport*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Mentz, S. (2009). Towards a blue cultural studies: The sea, maritime culture, and Early Modern English literature. *Literature Compass*, 6(5), 997–1013.
- Peters, K. (2010). Future promises for contemporary social and cultural geographies of the sea. *Geography Compass*, 4(9), 1260–1272.
- Picken, F. (2015, 2–5 February). *Accounting the blue planet in tourism: Undersea and the opportunity for inclusive approaches to knowledge production*. Paper presented at the 25th Annual CAUTHE Conference, Gold Coast, Australia.
- Richardson, T. (2008). *Kaleidoscopic Odessa: History and place in contemporary Ukraine*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Schlipphacke, H. (2014). The temporalities of Habsburg nostalgia. *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 47(2), 1–16.
- Schlör, J. (2011). Odessity: In search of transnational Odessa (or 'Odessa the best city in the world: All about Odessa and a great many jokes'). *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*. Retrieved from [www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=220](http://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=220)
- Sicher, E. (2015). Odessa time, Odessa space: Rethinking cultural space in a cosmopolitan city. *Jewish Culture and History*, 16(3), 221–241.
- Starobin, P. (2014, 18 March). The history of Odessa does not change. *City-Journal*. Retrieved from [https://www.city-journal.org/html/"-history-odessa-does-not-change"-11342.html](https://www.city-journal.org/html/)
- Steinberg, P. E. (2013). Of other seas: Metaphors and materialities in maritime regions. *Atlantic Studies*, 10(2), 156–169.
- Treleani, M. (2009). Il ruolo simbolico di Piazza Unità d'Italia a Trieste: Prospettiva semiotica e storica. *E/C Rivista dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Semiotici*. Retrieved from [http://www.ec-aiss.it/index\\_d.php?recordID=436](http://www.ec-aiss.it/index_d.php?recordID=436)



This paper is published under the terms of the Attribution- NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) License.