

Introduction

PENGUINS IN THE PARIS UNDERGROUND



Paris, France, March 2006. An early morning in an underground station. Odours of soap, perfume, cleaning products and old sweat were hanging in the air. The platform was filled with commuters in dark overcoats and greyish winter outfits. I had sat down in a plastic chair fixed to the wall and stared at a billboard on the opposite side, above the rails. A man was playing golf on top of a shoreline flooded in warm sunlight. There was a text that explained, in French, that ‘there is an island where the sun remains faithful in every season’. It was an advertisement by the Cyprus Tourist Board. The train arrived and I rushed into the cabin. It accelerated abruptly. People were not talking, not even whispering. Some were reading magazines. I held on to a metal pole. The train’s brakes made a squealing noise. A bodiless sound came out of somebody’s earphones. My eyes were searching for familiar forms. They were caught by a small poster hanging from the cabin’s ceiling. Three penguins were walking towards the lower edge of an ice-berg. The ice-berg was floating in turquoise waters under a bright blue sky, near a palm-tree fringed white sandy beach. The text was an invitation to ‘Change the air!’ (*Changez d’air!*). The penguins were about to leave their icy ‘ship’ to board a tropical island. It was a photo-montage advertising the World Tourism Salon that was to take place in Paris later that month. I reached the station where I had to change trains and got off. Caught up in the flow of people, I passed through different brightly lit tunnels and eventually arrived at another platform. I was almost alone. There was another billboard behind the blue plastic seats of the platform. It showed an aerial shot of a chain of arid mountain tops emerging from valleys filled with dark blue water. They looked like islands in a large sea. The image was superimposed with the words ‘Snapshots of serenity’ (*Instantané de sérénité*), printed in capital letters in the centre, and ‘Croatia. The Mediterranean rediscovered’ (*Croatie. La Méditerranée retrouvée*) in the lower right corner. It was an advertisement from the Croatian Tourist Board. I was standing there, freezing, thinking about why I have to be here when there are places out there of eternal sunshine, of serenity, with white sandy beaches fringed by turquoise water

and a bright blue sky. While I did not think of myself in terms of a penguin, I must have looked very much like one.

This random sample of tourism advertisements in the Paris underground brings to the surface one of the most striking, yet, paradoxically, academically most obsessively ignored facets of modern culture: the idea that tourism can give access to a fantastic, somehow symbolically elevated realm out there. Many of the works developed in the relatively young field of tourism anthropology show that the aesthetics of such a realm also comes up in various other tourism advertisements and therefore seems to stem from a more generic underlying paradigm. Most texts used to advertise or otherwise visualise tourist destinations are, indeed, quite explicit about the idea that tourism is able to ‘transform’ tourists, to have an impact on their body, to allow them to reconnect to ‘what really is important in their life’, to rediscover ‘nature’ and search – and hopefully find – ‘their soul’. If the people who create such texts mobilise a similar set of images that, in their understanding of the public to be addressed, best invoke the essence of tourism, then these may indicate the existence of what Roland Barthes (1957) called a ‘significant consciousness’¹ among the audience addressed, e.g. mainly Western populations that represent by far the largest proportion of global island tourists. It may indicate that these images are able to appeal to an effectively shared ‘collective’ imaginary about, and desire for, places out there that are capable of changing the nature of life, of transforming the body, of rejuvenating the person, of ‘recharging the batteries’. It may indicate that they are able to evoke what essentially is a form of ‘magic’.

Approach

Here is a major paradox whose internal contradictions and – external – consequences I would like to explore in this book. While claiming a progress- and transparency-seeking rational as one of the guiding principles of modern life, Western society seems to institute firmly, at the same time, the idea of places-out-there imbued with quasi-magical qualities. In this sense, ‘magic’, which in Western society has long been considered to be the ‘superstition’ or the potentially dangerous supernatural power of others,² effectively seems to expose itself as a constitutive element of modernist thinking and the forms of social life it has shaped. Accessing such ‘magic’ by means of touristic travel seems crucial to maintain and renew that which legitimates the moral and political order of modern life. And this comes not only as an intellectual escapist fantasy by socially alienated literature students, but as one of the politically and socially most powerful institutions cultivated as part of modern culture and social life: tourism. How is such ‘magic’ being conceived, produced, maintained, renewed, exchanged, and made accessible, through tourism? What *is* ‘magic’ and how does it relate to the other grand paradigms of Western modernity, e.g. that of ‘beauty’, ‘truth’, ‘good-

ness', 'liberty'? What roles and qualities does the projection of 'magic' confer to touristic 'destinations' and the people inhabiting them? How can it inform our understanding of the contemporary world and the forms of order through which it maintains itself? How does that work, when people and places become 'elevated' as tourist attractions, when what often has been considered as ugly or worthless in the past is aesthetically transfigured and elevated as a 'magical' realm and object of collective desire and aspiration?

In order to approach these broad questions in more depth, I focus my attention here on the particular case of one 'destination', the tropical island of La Réunion in the Western Indian Ocean. I arrived on this island in 1995, at first motivated by a paradigm of exoticism, adventure and discovery. Initially pursuing undergraduate studies in economics at the University of La Réunion in Saint-Denis, I later discovered anthropology and, subsequently, followed a postgraduate and then doctoral programme in this discipline. Eventually, I stayed on the island until 2002 and have, since then, regularly returned to see friends and update my data. As a result of the length of this stay, and my ongoing social immersion in various social milieus on the island, I achieved a deep degree of cultural intimacy, both privately and as part of organised ethnographic fieldwork. I was living in conditions similar to those of many people in La Réunion, fighting the same struggles, enjoying the same events, discussing the same politics, sitting in the same backyards, eating the same food, making the same jokes, enacting to a large degree the same social performances. At the same time, I remained an outsider, a *zoreil*, and I was reminded almost daily that this constitutes a particular, largely ambivalent role within local society. My family name, which by historical coincidence is very common among some of the rural populations in the interior of the island, often helped to overcome antagonisms; indeed many people approached me, not without humour, in terms of a distant cousin. Also, being German – and not French – helped me to escape the all-too-simple analogies made, within much of the local common sense, between the origins of people and what they are made to represent. In this sense, I was not, or was considered to a lesser degree, an 'arrogant' *métropolitain* (French mainlander) who was admired, on the one hand, as a model of reference and modernity, while on the other hand being rejected as an agent of the 'neo-colonial order'. Being there, living there, I was, of course, not a neutral observer but affected the social environments in which I lived and which I observed. I always believed that this form of agency worked to my advantage, as being part of the research setting allowed me, among others, to observe means and strategies directed towards myself as a particular type of stranger. At the same time, my permanence as a subjective and socially implicated observer generated a form of solid and relatively objective research frame; as a person talented with sensibility and a sense of aesthetic judgement, I became a kind of apparatus to observe, frame and judge reality.

Theoretical Aspirations

In this book, I wish to explore two main ideas. The first relates to the relationship between ‘magic’ and modernity, and how this manifests itself, in particular, in the field of tourism. The first chapter of the book takes up the challenge of this theoretical problem. Anthropology has, so far, neither explained how the personal experience of the touristic journey relates to public culture images and narratives of tourist attractions, in particular the quasi-omnipresent claim to ‘magic’, nor has it explained how tourism helps tourists to maintain and recreate themselves as modern subjects.³ This first chapter is based on a systematic observation of tourists travelling through La Réunion. Taking on the role of tourist guide, I was able, as much as was logistically possible, to observe tourism as it happens on a daily base and in a normal setting. I developed relationships with many of the tourists I guided and revisited them back at their homes in Europe. Through ongoing exchanges and conversations, we dialogically worked towards the generation of an understanding about what tourism means to them and what it means at a more abstract level. This was a very enriching experience, both for me and – I do hope – also for my interlocutors. This first chapter is somehow distinguished from the rest of the book, which will focus on the transformations that tourism brings about in various social contexts in La Réunion. Yet it is important, as it will provide an epistemic anchor in that it suggests an explanation for how ‘magic’ relates to the grand paradigms of modernist thinking – beauty, truth, goodness, freedom, etc. – and the forms of social life shaped through tourism, in tropical islands in particular.

In the rest of the book, I will focus on the challenges presented by the modernist ontology of magic to the social lives and self-understanding of people living in the island of La Réunion. The case of this tropical island provides a good basis from which to study such challenges. Historically, for example, during the European Renaissance, representations of islands such as La Reunion have been formative of Western representations of paradise as a delightful tropical garden (Grove 1995). Merging various Golden Age myths described in ancient, classical and modern religious texts and the dream worlds depicted in Western Orientalist and Exoticist art, tropical islands became widely common tropes enabling tourists to indulge in ideas of original purity and authentic condition beyond time and history. Paradoxically, in a more recent context marked by the emergence of global tourism cultures, many tropical islands were being re-formatted in terms of the very representations they initially served as a model for. Through international development policy, the expansion of touristic infrastructures and spatial gentrification programmes, they were frequently re-‘tropicalised’ (Thompson 2006) and thus made to inhabit a generic Western model defining what a tropical island should look and feel like. In this sense, it may seem that the populations

living inside such tropical islands had rather little agency over the form that their integration to the global tourism economy would take.

The second idea I would like to get at in this book is that of a 'global gardening state' (developed in the third part). The idea here is relatively simple once again. I will suggest that the long-standing and widely common practice of contemplative gardening – cultivating miniaturised models of the world, invoking and thus bringing into being ideas of a wider cosmos, working with mimetic or metonymic matter related to such a cosmos – has flowed into the realms of international policy making and tourism development in particular. I will argue that entire inhabited spaces – islands, regions, deserts, city centres, mountains – are 'gardenised' through a post-national form of governance. They are gardenised as living artworks within a global modernity, invoking and thus bringing to life the grand modernist paradigms of beauty, nature and time. In a context of agronomic crisis in which the colonial cash crop economies that hitherto defined the economic life of most of these islands can no longer provide sufficient subsistence, the latter are transformed into large contemplative gardens within a new realm of world society. They become cultivated as 'human gardens' within a tourism specific form of modern world system; a fair ground in which a global middle class meets, parties, resources itself and recreates the symbolic order of their worlds.

Through the focus on different social actors in La Réunion and the changing contexts in which their lives evolve, the core chapters of the book will explore how the models and logic of such a 'gardening state' are implemented on the island; how they create conflict by challenging cultural practices and the aesthetic of everyday life; how they generate new forms of exclusion and of inclusion; and how they integrate the island and its populations into the framework of a global modernity. I will show that, from the perspective of 'destinations' such as La Réunion, the touristic attribution of 'magic' does in no way constitute what Marcel Mauss (Karsenti and Mauss 1994) defined as a total social fact, but rather a messy field of contacts within a global ethnoscape,⁴ with some clearly established shared symbols and carefully maintained boundaries.⁵ I shall argue that embracing and indigenising the – initially exogenous – idea of 'magic' becomes a means for a variety of local social actors in La Réunion to claim participation in a wider 'modernity'. However, the social realms, whence such claims originate, remain for the most part separated. As I will show in the chapters in the second part of this book, they remain governed by a largely resilient logic of 'giving a good image' in public while attempting to create links with what people consider to be 'influential strangers'. Though at a very different scale, gardening plays here, once again, an important role, both in communicating an image of order and participation, and in enticing (touristic) strangers, which, in turn, become a means of social participation within the realms of local social life.

Tourism, Magic and Modernity

Moral categories of authenticity, beauty and nature (as presumably unconditional, somehow divine) often remain basic ontological premises upon which many religious but also social science approaches are built (existentialist quest for the real; search for symmetry and its associations with moral values; search into elementary principals of social life by the structuralists).⁶ To recognise and theoretically engage with the omnipresence of claims of magic in tourism, we had to wait for the deconstruction of such notions. It seems today quite obvious that all politico-spiritual formations (including the 'established' religions, mysticist and other proto-religious movements) employ similar techniques in order to maintain and renew order and identity. They all appear to use invocation, mimesis, transfiguration and metonymy to enhance chance, effect reality, and maintain selfhood.⁷ In many ways, such techniques have previously been considered either as 'religious', when employed by recognised 'religious' institutions such as the church, or stigmatised as 'magical' or 'heretic' when emanating from 'other' or alternative religious movements or practices. Recognising the, by and large, similitude of such techniques both in terms of their approach and their underlying ontology, magic can no longer define the 'superstition' of others and, corollary, the moral superiority of a self but, in a much more useful way, that what generates the very common propensity of humans to 'accord beings and things beyond their immediate community a definite place in its reproduction' (Sahlins 1994: 387). Many anthropologists and historians have observed that the attribution of magical qualities and powers usually emerges from the uncertainty that marks situations of social contact and distance. In this sense, magic is frequently attributed to a social other located beyond the immediate here and now of a person, place or community: a spirit, a stranger, a God, an alien object, a distanced place, a past or a future, a person of different gender or social status. Following this observation, the conception of 'magical' qualities seems related to the ontological work of creating and maintaining separations and distance between a relative self and other.⁸ The general question underlying the study of 'magic', therefore, must be concerned with the way in which the 'authenticity' of distance and ontological difference is socially construed, and in which it is – convincingly – manipulated to maintain or transform specific forms of order and selfhood. In Marshall Sahlins' words (1994: 387), it must be concerned with the ways in which societies mobilise the attributes and qualities of divinities or enemies, ancestors or affines as a necessary condition of their own existence.

Acknowledging the fluid nature of the human condition and of those institutions formed to organise social life,⁹ magic can thus be resurrected as an analytical category which finds its epistemological foundations in the social (and historical) phenomenology of perception developed in Edward Husserl's early work (1964) on formations of subjectivity and subjectively perceived life-worlds. It is not pri-

marily important here to explain why certain practices – invocations of ‘magic’ through stories and images, collection of relics and other souvenir objects, material contact with attractions, etc. – do work for specific social actors, or to decry them as ‘tricks’, as many classical authors have previously done.¹⁰ In line with classical phenomenology, the approach instead needs to adopt what has recently been defined as ‘existential’ (Jackson 1998) and also as ‘reverse’ (Kirsch 2006) anthropology. It needs to be interested in the political, demographic and ecological contexts from which – in this case – tourism and its underlying symbolic universes emerge, and within which they are maintained. It thus needs to be interested in the type of historical ethnography developed by authors such as Edward Said (1979), Marshall Sahlins (1994), Maurice Bloch (1986), Michael Jackson (1998) and David Graeber (2007), demonstrating how different social entities and collectively held subjectivities have been formed as a result of historical contact, cross-appropriations, and processes of innovation and fetishisation, and how these are reproduced, maintained or transformed in the contemporary context.

A historical anthropology of ‘modernity’ seems a rather ‘gourmand’ project. Yet, I believe it is not impossible if the focus is placed on some of the structural continuities that seem to underpin modernist thinking. In this context, despite widely diverging epistemic perspectives and aspirations,¹¹ most historians, sociologists and anthropologists seem to agree that the historic formations of modern societies stem from, or, at least, were accompanied by, the emergence of a specifically modernist aesthetic of the human condition which was to deeply penetrate the order and organisation of everyday life in the Western world. This aesthetic is usually considered to be based upon a symbolic separation between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, both in terms of ontological and moral entities. According to this aesthetic, culture is thought of as growing out of an unconditional *ur-nature*.¹² It thus appears to be seen as conditional, in that it describes the consequences of a human choice to cultivate oneself in order to reach a higher state of enlightenment and to ‘go towards perfection’.¹³ This modernist aesthetic seems to take on cosmological qualities in that it provides an allegorical explanation for the origins of the world and a morally charged concept for reflecting on time, social separations and the future. It explains nature as a condition and realm that is detached from culture and that is, simultaneously, within culture, as an *ur-condition* of culture. The story of the ‘initial’ separation between culture and nature implies a morally charged aesthetic of time as ‘history’. Theodor Lessing (1983 [1919]), whose writings were largely forgotten after he was killed by Nazi agents in 1933, stresses that ‘history’ is not about a positive truth, but about diverging political claims regarding the order of the present and the future. According to his observation, various political stakeholders, in attempting to ‘make sense’ of history, merely use past events to construct a ‘historical’ narrative whose underlying ‘rational’ is to approve specific political and philosophical claims about the human condition

and the society of the future.¹⁴ Yet, he concludes, despite the ideological differences underlying these different historical narratives, the idea that culture (in the present) grows out of a somehow more 'natural' *ur*-condition in the past remains as the overarching, widely hegemonic aesthetic of modernist conceptions of time. A wide range of authors have demonstrated how this specific model and its underpinning moral frameworks have been used to make sense of other separations marking modern society, e.g. the separation of the male from the female, of children from adults, of working classes from noble classes, of pasts from presents, of Europe from the rest of the world, of humans from gods. In each case, the separation between one and the other seems symbolically embedded in a relationship between an 'authentic' *ur*-condition and a 'historical' condition defined in terms of various historical 'logics', e.g. those of humanisation, progress and, also, disenchantment. 'Magic', as a way of affecting the 'normal' occurrence of reality (usually thought of in terms of cause-and-effect relationships), is here generally attributed to a relative 'other', mainly those described as 'being closer to', or 'in contact with', a presumed *ur*-condition of nature, e.g. women, children, Gods, spirits, priests, strangers, 'indigenous people', 'mad' artists, etc.

However, it seems to me that such ontological separations not only fashion and maintain boundaries enabling us to think about a relative 'self' and 'other' (as the cultural and postcolonial critics of the 1980s and 1990s have put it), but that they also constitute a phenomenon of mutual co-constitution. In Julia Kristeva's terms (1991), the uncanny qualities of the respective other do not only lead to the self, as Sigmund Freud (2003) suggested, but are actively cultivated and maintained as constitutive parts of the self. In this sense, the 'self' is sacralised through the embodiment of qualities and beings a priori situated outside an immediate here and now (Csordas 1997). As with the surreal figures developed in Jorge Luis Borges' writings,¹⁵ one and the other thus form a whole. They 'bewitch' (Cyrulnik 1997) each other, colonise and affect each other, possess and become part of each other, and cannot live without each other.¹⁶ Roger Caillois (1950) and George Bataille (1988), and also some more recent commentators – for instance Victor Turner (1969), Maurice Bloch (1992), or Thomas Csordas (1997) – describe how such ontological differences and the political and moral order of selfhood, society and the cosmos they entail are maintained and renewed by means of festively embedded ritual transgressions. Through contact, invocation, the symbolic recreation of a presumed 'initial' condition and ceremonial re-enactments of the violence believed to have marked the 'initial' separations, such ritual transgressions appear to allow various social actors to reaffirm and maintain orders of social life. What legitimates order eventually always seems to relate to a power or 'force' stemming from an 'other' (Sahlins 1994), a past, a God, a distanced place. While this phenomenon has been abundantly observed in many societies studied by anthropologists, it has only recently been picked up

by anthropologists studying modern society.¹⁷ Tourism, travel, and hospitality provide here privileged social fields in which to study this phenomenon.

Dean MacCannell was one of the first authors to suggest a comprehensive theoretical study of tourism in terms of a modern social practice. In his still influential book, *The Tourist* (1976), he develops an approach of tourism in terms of a ritual, which he sees in its structure as being analogous to those observed by anthropologists in other contexts. For MacCannell (1999), modern tourism is motivated by a quest for 'authenticity' which is a classical concept that anthropologists had previously been observing, in various forms, in different contexts around the world (Frazer 1911; Malinowski 1992; Levi-Strauss 1966; Sahlin 1968; Fabian 1983; Delumeau 1992). MacCannell stresses that the concept of authenticity entails a particular moral order of modernity, specifically a particular relation to time and the idea of a 'lost' condition. According to MacCannell, tourism gives access to sites believed to have been 'preserved' from historical contact with the First World and thus being capable of bringing concepts of authenticity alive.¹⁸ They function as attractions that, similar to the relic shrines venerated by Christian pilgrims (Turner and Turner 1978), bring alive and renew the moral foundations and cosmological order of modern society. For other authors working in the same vein, tourism is seen as having the capacity to connect the touring to the grand narratives and symbols of modernity, and to insert itself in the rhythms of production that mark modern social life (Urry 1990). For Nelson Graburn (1977), it constitutes a 'sacred journey' to a realm outside everyday life from which tourists come home 'recharged', renewed. For Christof Hennig (1999), tourism constitutes a festive time-space bringing tourists in contact with various 'sacred' realms of modernity, the 'arts', 'cultural heritage', 'nature', 'wild people'. Eric Cohen (2004a) and Tim Edensor (1998) nuance this proposal, describing various 'types' of tourists who, while being driven by different motivations and following different paths of tourism, remain 'moved' by similar types and sites of attraction. Stephanie Melia Hom (2004) explains this 'being moved' in terms of ephemeral 'tourist moments' during which tourists experience both psychologically and culturally embedded epiphanies; the deep emotion of 'connecting' to an 'authentic' realm, a 'common humanity', the 'beauty' of artworks, the 'forces' of nature, the 'magic' of famous places, the 'injustice' of difference, the 'loss' of youth, the 'magnificence' of the human condition.

These different approaches indicate that tourism has brought about widely shared cultural patterns that transcend individuals and have agency over them. And such patterns can be studied. At the same time, while tourism may seem a 'mass' phenomenon, most tourists do it in small groups or on their own. Anthropology has not yet explained here the tension between the attraction of public symbols and personal experiences in tourism, in particular the 'magic' certain places seem to exert on tourists before and during the journey and in the post-

tourist context. Many authors seem content with the idea of tourism as a form of ‘visual consumption’, as if tourists, while on tour, were absorbing those images that initially were used to represent the places visited. As I will show, visual images may well attract or guide tourists to specific sites, yet they do not constitute attractions in themselves. Once on site, tourists are not moved by the pre-existing image, per se, in itself, but by the emotion triggered by the very site. The approach of tourism in terms of images may well explain the ‘cartographic infrastructure’ of their moving in and out of sites, but not the emotion generated by the material realms of the tour. Magic, approached from a phenomenological perspective, will provide here a better explanation of the emotions triggered by, and the forms of order mediated through, tourism. Before approaching the consequences of tourism in the specific context of La Réunion and the form of order it generates at a wider global scale, I, therefore, first suggest an approach to what actually happens when tourists ‘do’ tourism (Chapter 1).

Cultivating the Human Garden

Most of this study, then, will focus on La Réunion, an island in the South-Western Indian Ocean, first settled by French colons during the seventeenth century. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, La Réunion became an important cash crop colony marked by extensive sugar cane plantations and the settlement of colonials, forced labourers and contracted workers from Europe and the wider Indian Ocean region. It was transformed into a French overseas department (DOM) in 1946. During the Cold War, the French government and its local representatives institutionalised what Françoise Vergès (1999) calls a ‘colonial family romance’, metaphorically identifying the people of La Réunion as children of the French *mère-patrie*. According to this author, the rationale of this narrative implies that the Réunions were given the values of the French republic as a gift – leaving them in a condition of impossible reciprocity. France became a mythified white mother, whose goodness and pureness could never be achieved by its ‘ugly’ children, seen as degenerated as a result of endogamy and the mixing of races and cultures. The narrative was mobilised both inside the island to poeticise class divisions between *Grands Blancs* (mainly White land owners) and a large creolised proletariat, and between the island as a whole and the far away French ‘motherland’. In this context, deviations from cultural ideals associated with the French republican model (related to kinship, gender roles, language, humour, arts, diseases, drug consumption, etc.) were actively pathologised by colonial agents and local elites, who, in turn, gained their political legitimacy by referring to these agents and ‘France’ as their model. A certain idea of France was consequently widely appropriated through forms of mimesis and metonymy. The relative ‘magic’ – a kind of ‘re-

verse magic¹⁹ associated with the former coloniser – that seemed to stem from the wearing of French style clothes, the adapting of French style ways of talking, behaving and eating, the living in French style houses, the adopting of French leisure fashions, etc. became and, as we will see, largely remains today a powerful social means of establishing and legitimating political power and participating in the contemporary social worlds within the island.

The transformation of the island into a ‘tropical island’, willingly embraced by various social actors inside the island may be understood in these terms. As I will show throughout the remaining chapters of the book, ‘being’ a tropical island becomes seen as a means, at various social scales, of participating in modernity. Yet, the specific aesthetic of ‘tropical islands’ mobilised here to reconfigure the spaces and self-understanding of the islanders was not invented in La Réunion, but within the colonial and postcolonial realms of French and global modernity. According to Jean Delumeau (1992), this aesthetic finds its roots in pre-biblical idealisations of ‘happy islands’ (*Iles Fortunées*), which later merged with biblical visions of the Garden of Eden leading to the widespread belief in an earthly existence of paradisiacal islands. Throughout Western intellectual history, ideas of Eden or Eden-like islands, or islands that have been close to an ‘original’ Eden, have been cyclically revitalised through artworks, literature, pleasure gardens, TV series, tourism advertisements, fun parks, children toys, carnival costumes, nature conservation programmes and journeys through touristic island realms (Delumeau 1992; Crouch, Jackson and Thomson 2005). Nowadays, tropical islands remain one of the most cherished places-to-go in the pantheon of modern tourist destinations.²⁰ Their tourism-related aesthetic maintains a striking structural analogy with the initial descriptions of the Garden of Eden in *Genesis*, the first book of the Old Testament in the Bible. Similar to the biblical text, it evokes the idea of a time- and sorrow-less garden of blissful delight in which humankind endures in a condition of eternal spring, a garden walled off against the desert of the ocean, with a fountain forming rivers that bathe the land and produce fruits that are always ripe; an *ur*-garden guarded and gardened by a ‘first’ form of humankind. This tourism-specific model usually reduces tropical islands to a set of core signs, e.g. a ‘lush’, ‘exuberant’ and ‘pure’ nature, blooming flowers, clear water pools and rejuvenating sources, unspoiled white beaches and abundant platters of fruit and seafood that offer themselves for consumption, beautiful autochthones singing and dancing, or using rudimentary equipment to fish or work the ground. The observation of this analogy between the Christian myth of Eden and the widely generic model underlying modern island tourism indicates that tropical islands such as La Réunion are not just ‘out there’, as marginal cash crop providing peripheries of the modern world system, but have long been, and continue to be, formative of a global modernity within which they have been made to inhabit and act out a highly symbolic role.

Chapters two and three explore the processes of aesthetic transfigurations – social and moral processes by means of which the ugly becomes beautiful – that

the island and islanders undergo in the tourism contact zone. Adapting a concept initially developed by Jacques Lacan (1966),²¹ I will focus here on the triangular communicative logic of what I call a 'cultural' mirror stage triggered by the tourist gaze. Through the observations of a tourist guide and a museum project, I will show that this 'mirror stage' brings into play three types of social actors. Tourists and the tourist gaze seem to work here as a form of mirror in which local tourist agents candidly become aware of an island self-defined in terms of a 'beautiful', 'magical' place inhabited by 'beautiful', 'magical' people. This process of self-realisation takes place in the eyes of a wider island society, observing and reaffirming this newly discovered self. Performing 'magic' and 'beauty' for tourists thus becomes a way to 'give a good image' and to claim participation within the emerging public spheres of local society. In chapters three and four, I will deepen the understanding of these processes by focusing on the cultural logic and the often frictitious consequences of hospitality in La Réunion. Following the romantic relationship of a mixed couple, chapter four will observe the consequences of love in the context of inter-cultural contact – the struggles and challenges, and the new forms of social life it generates. Chapter five will explore a similar relationship, but at a wider institutional level; it will follow a tourist site development project led by a group of villagers who face the challenges of French environmental policy and spatial planning paradigms. Chapter six will further explore the issues emanating from this specific type of contact zone; it will focus on different paradigms of nature of, and the conflicts between, the different stakeholders involved in a project to transform the island's coral reef into a nature preserved area. 'Magical' and 'beautiful' in the eyes of the newly emerging middle classes and the institutional stakeholders of the French establishment, coral reefs remain an economic resource base for local fishing populations. In a context marked by an overwhelmingly dominant global environmentalist lobby and widely asymmetrical power relations in the local context, the fishing populations eventually get tagged as poachers. Chapter seven explores how such economic and social ruptures are socially negotiated. It follows a festive event in a former fishing village, showing how the theme of this event, the abolition of slavery, works as an allegory for these populations to make sense of, and express their feelings towards, these recent changes. Chapter eight will return to the initial premises of tropical island tourism and question what kind of society this type of tourism generates at the global scale. It will develop more fully the idea of a 'global gardening state' as a political form to govern and cultivate large inhabited spaces as 'human gardens'.