12 On (be)longing

The *Der Bergdoktor* phenomenon at the European cultural periphery

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Introduction

The convergence of media consumption and tourist practices convincingly refutes Meyrowitz's (1985) argument that media contribute to the emergence of "a placeless culture". Starting from the assumption that place is an experiential accomplishment binding people and environments (Moore, 2012), the present study aims to investigate how a television series' filming location becomes meaningful through the imaginative, practical, and emotional engagements of its audiences. In particular, we analyse how a German–Austrian TV series drama is accepted by the fans at the European cultural periphery in Slovenia. *Der Bergdoktor* is a German–Austrian TV drama series (2008–), which gained a considerable cross-generational audience in Slovenia when it first aired in summer 2016 and prompted increased interest in Tyrol, Austria, from Slovenian tourists in 2016–2017. We have sought to understand how Slovenian fans of this series make sense of Tyrol by consuming and producing media content, as well as via empirical encounters with place as tourists on tours. We will demonstrate how they reconcile imagined landscapes and topographical reality through their experiences by unravelling numerous intertwined personal, factual, and fictional narratives. We will also explore how these fans acquire a sense of belonging and identity grounded in and beyond the media content itself.

The present study is theoretically informed by and based on qualitative empirical research. In particular, we look at two distinct (albeit interrelated) stages of the spatial appropriation of the Tyrolean countryside and the acquisition of a sense of belonging. First, we discuss the ways in which audiences respond to the series, articulating the sense of "us" or "the symbolic ideas of Heimat" (Morley, 2001). We analyse particular instances of how the TV series engages audiences to comprehend their everyday reality through fictional narratives. We point out that *Der Bergdoktor*, with its emphasis on tradition, morality, and the romanticization of the idyllic rural lifestyle, addresses a specific "structure of feeling" in post-egalitarian Slovenia. The series' fictional narratives of Tyrolean daily life allow audiences to re-interpret their own post-socialist/post-egalitarian experiences and (be)longings in a multimedia environment.

Second, we examine how fans, as tourists visiting the series' filming location, connect to the place through embodied interactions, cultivating significant topophilic sentiments and feelings of belonging to an environment. We explore how they are quite aware of and able to navigate through different layers of their experiences of real Tyrol and *Der Bergdoktor's* Tyrol, combining the place's fictional and factual narratives to create a multilayered construction of the reality they wish to experience.

The accounts of fans/tourists in our study outline the complex convergence between the symbolic and material geographies within which people attach themselves to the world and sustain commonality in the contemporary mediatized world. European media production has traditionally been largely discussed from the perspective of combating the supremacy of Hollywood production in TV programs (e.g. Silj, 1988; De Bens & De Smaele, 2001). In relation to screen-induced tourism, current literature thus tends to focus on the dominant media culture/Western mediascapes, for example, with the focus on American production. When peripheral areas are addressed in literature on screen tourism, they are most commonly on American productions, for example, in relation to the *Game of Thrones* series in Dubrovnik, Croatia (e.g. Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017), or on the content produced by non-Western culture itself (e.g. Scherer & Thelen, 2018; see also Chapter 8 in this volume). Audience responses from peripheral, non-dominant Western cultures such as Slovenia have been overlooked in the media and tourism literature, especially in relation to non-Hollywood content. The present chapter tries to fill this gap by exploring the multifaceted ways in which media, culture, and place intertwine in a small locality on Europe's periphery. This study proposes a subtler understanding of the practices of specific pop-cultural tourists with special regard to how their engagements are grounded in interactions between global pop-cultural formats and local cultural conditions.

The television series as a cultural resource in the transmedia age

As noted, *Der Bergdoktor* gained a considerable cross-generational audience in Slovenia when it first aired there in summer 2016 on a local commercial TV channel. According to the Pro Plus media company and AGB Nielsen Media Research data (Kotnik & Cah, 2016), the TV series achieved outstanding ratings, capturing the most summer viewers among domestic and foreign series in the previous ten years. In its target group of 18- to 54-year-olds, it was mostly watched by university graduates over 45 years of age. Furthermore, the series was watched by almost every other Slovenian who watched live TV, that is, 39% of viewers, including every other Slovenian woman and every third Slovenian man. In general, the highest ratings were among those over 55 years of age. The first episode of the ninth season had a 51% audience share (11.8% rating), and

it was still most popular among women ('Proplus v jesen', 2016). These numbers are especially impressive in light of the pervasive global trend of TV audience fragmentation.

In 2016 and 2017, *Der Bergdoktor*'s high audience shares and above-average ratings prompted increased interest from Slovenian tourists in the series' filming locations in the Wilder Kaiser region of Tyrol, which is composed of four villages: Ellmau, Going, Scheffau, and Söll. In fact, Slovenian tourist agencies organized commercial travel packages year round. Ellmau and the entire Wilder Kaiser valley have always been tourist areas. Additionally, intensive destination marketing and commercial appropriation of fictional themes occurred after the rise of *Der Bergdoktor* mania, with the local destination management organization and tourism stakeholders adopting the strategy of eventification. For example, every May and September, Der Bergdoktor Experience Week hosts exclusive fan events in the scenic surroundings of Wilder Kaiser. These events have many synergies across the creative industries, resulting in a wide portfolio of products related to the same pop-cultural phenomenon.

Media has become more mobile, interconnected, and interactive in the transmedia age. From this perspective, it is essential to investigate the entire media ecology in which the *Der Bergdoktor* audience is immersed. Or, as argued by Sandvoss (2011: 246), "reception practices of a text within one medium need to be analyzed in relation to the inter-textual and inter-medial contexts of such a text".¹ We not only start from this standpoint but also call for a profound contextualization of the audiences' reception, arguing that historical context is key to the audiences' interaction with the texts. It is here that we follow Reijnders' (2010a: 370) suggestion to understand media-related tourism by taking into account its "cultural embeddedness" and acknowledging its relation to power configurations in society. That is why we turn in the next section to an overview of the cultural context of the series and its Slovenian audiences.

***Der Bergdoktor*: the Alpine way of life of the once-ruling nation**

Der Bergdoktor focuses on the Alpine way of living, characterized by a bucolic return to tradition and nature, while still enjoying the benefits of modern medicine embodied in a heroic doctor. The modern discourse on the Alpine region idealizes the Alpine way of life. This is probably most recognizable in the 1965 Hollywood production *The Sound of Music* (Graml, 2004). After its political secession from Yugoslavia, the so-called Alpine culture became a central point of national identity formation in Slovenia (Šaver, 2005). This was manifested in many re-appropriations and re-contextualizations of mythical elements of the Alps in local cultural discourses, most prominently in national (turbo)folk music and Alpine skiing, within which Slovenian nation-imagining has been exercised extensively.

According to Caramani and Wagemann (2005), nowadays, the concept of the Alpine region refers to a specific political culture: a set of attitudes and values overlapping with religious, rural – urban and centre – periphery (ethno-linguistic) dimensions, including strong anti-modern features and emphases on nature and Heimat in the political discourse and the incorporation of religious and traditional attitudes. These cultural elements are expressed in similar ways across national borders and are most visible in the conservative political party discourses of northern Italy, Bavaria in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

The concept of “Heimat” (or motherland) has been widely discussed within works on German national identity and screen production, for example, in relation to the film series *Heimat* (Silj, 1988; Von Moltke, 2005; Eigler, 2012), which we can count as an important precedent to the *Der Bergdoktor* series. Not much is known, however, on how non-German or Austrian audiences react to the bucolic and idealized representations within the German–Austrian production. Most importantly, for understanding Slovenian audiences’ reactions to *Der Bergdoktor*, we need to go far back in history to the Habsburg empire that also greatly influenced Slovenian history.

The territory of Slovenia was under Habsburg rule until its dissolution after World War I in 1918. As with other empires, the Habsburg empire had “ruling” and “ruled over” nations. The former were the (Austrian) Germans, making up 24% of the population in 1910, and the Magyars (20%), while the latter were mostly Slavs (50%). Amongst these, the Slovenians were a small periphery minority, making up only 2.5% of the overall population of the monarchy in 1910 (Sugar, 1963). At the time, Slovenian society was primarily agrarian and economically less developed compared to the Austrian population, and most of its society were lower middle-class people and peasants led by local clergy and schoolteachers (Cohen, 2007). An important legacy of the empire was the historical positioning of the (Austrian) Germans as the “first”, with the Slovenes historically positioning themselves as part of the second-order others (Kreft, 2016). At the time of the monarchy, the (Austrian) Germans were positioned as the rulers, with Vienna as the centre of culture and civilization at the end of the 18th century. This role was ambivalently confirmed but also critiqued in the Slovene literature of the time – literature that is still read in schools today as the canonical works of Slovene literary history (ibid). As demonstrated subsequently, Slovene audiences’ readings of *Der Bergdoktor* are immersed in the wider historical discourse on the idealization of the Alpine way of living and the status of the (Austrian) Germans as the more developed, once-ruling “first”.

Research methods

The present study attempts to understand contemporary fan audiences’ readings and engagements with the *Der Bergdoktor* phenomenon and the Tyrol region. We have used two qualitative research methods: 1) a discourse

analysis of the Slovenian *Der Bergdoktor* Facebook fan page and 2) an analysis of three in-depth focus groups of *Der Bergdoktor* fans who visited Tyrol, conducted in March 2017 and May and June 2018.

The Slovenian *Der Bergdoktor* Facebook fan page was accessed 6 March 2017, and all topics and discussions were archived. At the time of archiving, the fan page had reached 20,760 likes from Slovenian Facebook users. Approximately 42 pages' worth of written text and visual materials from the fans' posts and comments about Tyrol as a travel destination were analysed – this included the entire available online discussion up to that point in time. Most commonly, travelling to Tyrol was discussed and commented upon via the fans posting their pictures of trips to Tyrol on the fan page, usually consisting of the destination's scenery and/or pictures of fans posing with a cardboard life-sized image of the series' main character. The analysis also included the comments the fans made on such photographs.

The analysis of the online fan discourse was complemented by three in-depth focus groups of fans who had travelled to the series' location on their own or via an organized travel-agency package. Information on the participants' age, gender, and place of residence was collected using convenient sampling techniques: snowballing a request sent to the student mailing list of the Faculty of Tourism at the University of Maribor (if the students themselves visited or knew anyone who had visited the location due to the series) and snowballing amongst the researchers' friends and acquaintances. The focus groups included nine participants with an average age of 33 years. Due to the snowballing technique, the average age of participants was lower than the general average age of the audiences. Additionally, many of the included fans visited the site on their own with family or a group of friends and not with an organized travel-agency package. The focus group research is thus limited in that audiences that are younger and more independent in their travelling to the series' location.

In what follows, we avoided structuring our analysis according to the different types of research data provided. We presupposed that the differing background of the data was irrelevant given that our aim was not to grasp the meaning of the *Der Bergdoktor* series as a self-contained entity but to examine the discourses around the *Der Bergdoktor* phenomenon and, subsequently, the region of Tyrol, along with the wider range of cultural work that has been conducted around the series.

The borderless Alpine utopia: the evocation of an enchanted village life of order, diligence, and humility

Many would describe the basic plotline of the *Der Bergdoktor* series as follows: set in an idyllic mountain landscape, focused on family values and sincere, warm social relationships, *Der Bergdoktor* is a story full of romantic complications and tense life-and-death situations. The series is centred around Dr Martin Gruber, a charming, resourceful, and attractive doctor,

who is committed to his work but often turns out to be unstable in his intimate relations. Slovenian fans find the central roles that tradition, family, and morality play in the narrative, which contribute to the idealization of the rural Alpine lifestyle, to be the most significant aspects of the series. Accordingly, in response to the excessive aestheticization of the distinctive mythological attributes of the Tyrolean region in the TV series,² most focus group respondents shared a common perception of Tyrolean values, such as diligence, humility, and order:

There is such order, those houses are so low, they are more like in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, and the grass is so low cut, and those flowers, the whole landscape is, you know, nothing stands out, everything is the same, as if someone would have imagined it, as if someone would have drawn it. . . . Warmth, calmness, kindness, that there everyone is connected to others, that there is no everyday madness, well . . . so, everything goes well.

(Participant M.P., age 29)

For the respondents to have an affective affiliation with Tyrol, both aesthetic and ethical renderings of the place (see Savage, 2010: 118) seem to be crucial. Aesthetic statements of the beauty and neatness of the landscape emphasize its physical markers, and ethical statements connect each participant's own identity to Tyrol by accentuating its predominant values and the lifestyle of the local residents, as defined by its social markers. What seems to characterize the respondents' attachment to Tyrol is thus a precarious balance between abstract spatial referents (giving rise to profound topophilic sentiments) and specific ethical motifs referring to traditional cultural elements (family values, traditional gender identities, sincere social relations), grounded in the fictional narrative of *Der Bergdoktor* and indicative of the rise of re-traditionalism in the Slovenian post-socialist reality.

When asked what makes the TV series so popular, one focus group participant stressed the following: "We lack this warmth, this social sensibility. And this is what the main character offers . . . Yes, in this sense of our health system as it is currently . . . I think we miss this when we visit our doctor" (Participant M.B., age 53). The series' fictional framework has come to play a substantial role in the process of re-assessment of the changed Slovenian post-socialist/post-egalitarian reality, as the following comments in the Facebook group suggest:

- In Slovenia we would also need one such doctor to do a little order in our health system!!!!
- Indeed, we would need him so much to make it all the same as it used to be!

Fans thus consume *Der Bergdoktor* in reference to the sociocultural context to which they belong. In various ways, they re-use the meaning of the

fictional universe of the text to discuss their own personal and social circumstances and make sense of the world in which they live. In their accounts, there is a sense of lost community and withdrawal from a life once known, yet there is also an intense claiming of moral authority on how things should be handled. Slovenian fans have thus largely articulated their relationship to Tyrol with enhanced moralizing about Slovenia's current situation, invoking specific local interpretative repertoires.³ Discursive resources actively deployed when discussing *Der Bergdoktor* in Slovenia seem also to be supplied by the existing folk schemata surrounding the mythology of the enchanted Alpine world.

Such mystification of Tyrol as a promised land by the Slovenian audience can be understood as a double entanglement of the current political and economic situation in Slovenia and the historical semi-colonial position of the country.⁴ In particular, *Der Bergdoktor* fans on Facebook argued that Austrians know how to turn everything into good business, implicitly referencing the historical position of the (Austrian) Germans as the economically better developed "first" versus the Slovenians as the inferior "Other". Similarly, in the comments, fans compared the Slovenian healthcare system to what they perceived as the better-developed system in Austria. Likewise, *Der Bergdoktor* tourists shared the same attitude that everything is better across the border in Western countries and that is to what the Slovenians should aspire: "Infrastructure, local roads, these are better than our highways. I mean the order and the cleanliness" (Participant M.B., age 53). The participants continued to engage in this moralizing discourse by describing Slovenia as delayed in development, expressing the need to look up to/mimic the West: "As regards tourism development they accomplished a lot. We could learn a lot from that" (Participant J.G., age 48). The focus group elaborated on the differences between the tourist destinations of Kranjska Gora, Slovenia, and Tyrol, primarily highlighting the shortcomings of the former. These comparisons depict an attitude where Austria is positioned as the ideal against which Slovenia as the Other is judged. This does not seem to be merely an external imposition. Investigating some of the complexity of the east/west dichotomy, Bakic-Hayden (1995: 922) introduced the notion of "nesting orientalisms", which was evident in the former Yugoslavia and its successor states, demonstrating how "the designation of 'other' has been appropriated and manipulated by those who have themselves been designated as such in orientalist discourse".

The significance of these claims is not so much their content but rather what unfolds within these claims – what they bring into being. In such enhanced moralizing, many respondents regularly contrasted a "clean", "orderly", "successful" Austria with a "sad", "still", "belated", and even "dishonest" Slovenia. In doing so, they performed a self-othering process, reproducing the constructed divide between delayed-in-progress Slovenia and prosperous, reasoned Austria. This is an example of how contemporary neoliberal developmental discourse becomes infused with older

tropes of colonial discourse.⁵ By being both complicit in and victim to the process of othering, Slovenians occupy an “in-between” space that provides “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” (Bhabha, 1994: 1) through which cultural value and authority are negotiated and the idea of society is defined. In doing so, they exhibit the nostalgic longing for highly desirable, traditional lives grounded in community and righteousness on the one hand and modern achievements and comfort on the other. The popularity of *Der Bergdoktor*’s Tyrol, with all its attributes, has become a vehicle of historical longing for a home and a sense of community – the idea of Heimat. However, Tyrol seems to paradoxically represent an object of desire for its emphasis on traditionalism (the trope of the idyllic, calm, and bucolic landscape) and an object of fascination for its modernity (the “superdoctor”, medical technology, and helicopters to hospital). This leads Slovenian audiences into a precarious oscillation around the mythical core of Alpine imaginary, alternately stretched between glorifying its progress yet simultaneously cherishing its traditionalism, diligence, and humility – “simplicity, orderliness and cleanliness” to use the words of one focus group respondent.

The mediated Tyrol in *Der Bergdoktor*’s inter-textual and trans-media context is a symbolic tool with which the audiences’ desires and longings are played out and reflections on their own lives are offered. The concept of elective belonging (Savage et al., 2005) can be used to understand the attachment of Slovenian fans/tourists to Alpine Tyrol, as it implies an attachment that has nothing to do with personal history claims or knowledge arising from residence in the locality. Instead, it implies a distinctive ethics of belonging that is premised upon values (ibid: 53). It overstates the importance of symbolic attachment to place, claiming the affiliation and belonging that Slovenian respondents predominantly display in relation to this cultural and historical region of the Alps:

I mean, I would live there right away . . . honestly I would live there. If I had the chance to go and live anywhere, that I would have money for it, I would go and live there . . . You feel safe in this world. . . . Everyone knows each other and they all hang out at that village square.

(Participant M.P., age 29)

Life in Austria is closer to all of us anyway, if you compare, like America or else . . . and, of course, you identify easier, there are no big cultural differences, somewhere on this level it is that I think we are alike.

(Participant M.B., age 53)

In this first part of the present study, we showed how a TV series induces a longing for a shared sense of community and belonging to a borderless Alpine utopia. To comprehend how Slovenian audiences use popular culture to shape their identities as members of the historical and cultural region of

Alpine world (beyond national boundaries), we need to understand that readings and re-constructions of the spatial imageries of the Alps are deeply interwoven into the popular mythical narratives of Alpine culture in Slovenia, feeding on existing meanings from a shared cultural history.⁶ What this suggests is that it is not simply the (properties of) the TV series as text but the specific historically contingent positions from which the Slovenian audiences “read” the text that make the series so popular.

Practical engagements with place: touring *Der Bergdoktor's* Tyrol

In the second part of the present study, we would like to identify the practices in which Slovenian fans, as tourists, engage at the filming location and expose how these are determined by their utilization of the fictional *Der Bergdoktor* universe. The argument unfolds in two analytical sections through exemplary fan testimonials depicting their experiences at the touring site, detailing the many ways of inhabiting the place and reconciling topographical reality with imagined media landscapes.

A road turn that has to be experienced

The first case highlights the importance of embodied interaction with place. Buchmann et al. (2010: 245–246) claim that film tourists are stimulated by a multisensory encounter with geographical places in ways that are not dissimilar to the embodied performances of adventure tourists. One of our respondents departed from the tour group to experience by herself the road turn that is so often depicted in the series:

For example, I just had to go see that road turn, where he [Martin Gruber, the *Bergdoktor*] comes down from home and turns to the clinic, the one road turn that is already worn out, right? I said, I have to take a walk here. And I went up to see it. It was the “thing” from the series for me. And I went up on my own on foot and took some photos looking down. There begins the scene when he drives down to the clinic.

(Participant M.B., age 53)

Similarly, other respondents explained how they felt the most connected with the series when they sat down at the exact table where the main character sits with his family and re-enacted a specific scene. Performing certain routines at the locations directly related to the series and photographing these locales intensified the feelings of connection to the place and the series. For fans/tourists, photographs seemed to play a particularly important role in identifying and symbolically marking these meaningful locations and their experiences of them, otherwise liminal and temporary by nature. Other

travel experiences were similarly depicted as presenting some analogy to the visual imagery or events from the series. Therefore, active participation at site and embodiment seem to be crucial for the overall experience of this “imaginary” place. All these experiences seem to comply with the notion of existential authenticity, as described by Wang (1999) and as elaborated in empirical examples by Belhassen et al. (2008: 684–685): “Experiences of existential authenticity are the result of socially constructed understandings about the places they are touring and the actions they are undertaking in those places, combined with their own direct, empirical encounters”. The following quotation shows how this was experienced by one of the travellers.

It was the most beautiful thing to me when we walked across the Village Square. When you look at those little houses and grass. It's so tight, you know, it's all tiny, it's a small road and you walk up, and a bit up and then down. Well, in fact, there are hills everywhere, everything is in order and arranged to perfection.

(Participant M.P., age 29)

Many respondents were also amazed that the Village Square was much smaller in real life, indicating that this made the place feel even more adorable. Counterintuitively, not only the similarities but also the inconsistencies between the series' depiction of the place and the visited site held unique pleasure for fans. For example, participant T.D. (age 22) was surprised that there were so many houses by the clinic that you do not see in the series, while participant A.G. (age 21) acknowledged the clinic house was not so formidable and impressive as the impression one gets from the TV. These insights did not ruin the experience for them; rather they were rewarding in themselves, as they provided additional knowledge about the place and offered fans the challenge to wonder and indulge in speculation about the underlying production process of the series. Participants accordingly wondered how the series producers managed to set up the tables outside the guesthouse and turn cars around at the same spot; they also concluded that a camera angle from below must be what makes the clinic seem bigger and more impressive.

In addition, many described the trip as very intensive and tiring, including a five-hour drive to the location and hiking at the site; however, this physical effort was appreciated as a supplementary validation of their experience as authentic. This echoes the ritualistic participation in activities, which are taken very seriously (one respondent described that the trip felt like a school excursion). In this way, *Der Bergdoktor* tours should be considered very committed acts that require considerable effort, namely strong personal commitments with the purpose of internalizing values and understandings about the place, which have been absorbed through media representations.

A fictional funeral and a visit to the real cemetery

With our second case, we would like to illustrate the intertwining fictional and factual narratives inscribed in a place:

The father of Bergie's⁷ girlfriend Anna has just died. And it was in that episode. Two days later we went on a trip. One acquaintance called me and joked, he said, now I know, you are going to the funeral. Do you have funeral garland? (laughs) Yeah, Arthur died. And we did also go to see the cemetery. And there actually is a cemetery. A nice, great cemetery. It was interesting that, and I was fascinated about it, that there is no marble, it is really a place to calm your soul. Greenery, grass, and everything was so modest, so simple.

(Participant S.B., age 32)

This anecdotal evidence returns us to Meyrowitz's (1985) perspective on understanding physical and media settings as overlapping social environments, making a tremendous impact on our sense of place. As tourists, fans are quite aware of and able to navigate through different layers of their experience of the "real" Tyrol and *Der Bergdoktor's* Tyrol, such as by experiencing a real/physical cemetery and recalling a fictional funeral taking place there. They may do this with wittiness and humour, as in the previous case. Moreover, the line between fictional and non-fictional elements in experiencing and re-constructing a place is often more nuanced and difficult to discern. The following testimony demonstrates the merging of the physical place and the TV series:

There we stood in front of that restaurant and we were just waiting for Susanne to come out. And that fountain. Wow, here I am. You are expecting that she will come out and do this [putting her hands on her hips] and say something. You can just see her. Perhaps when you're out there you experience the series more than at home, you know? . . . It is there where you feel the series, even though she is not there for real.

(Participant M.P., age 29)

Such a crossover of a specific place and a pop-cultural fictional element reveals the junction of distinctive tangible landscape properties with specific narrative events from the series. To see Susanne from the series as if she is really there resembles a spiritual experience for fans. The fact that Gasthof Wilder Kaiser (Wilder Kaiser guesthouse) at the Village Square in Going, where Susanne, the character of a waitress, works in her traditional Austrian folk costume, is not an operating guest house in real life but a private house does not reduce the attraction this location has for *Der Bergdoktor* fans. The Village Square is to be considered a specific "lieu d'imagination", a physical point of reference for fans that provides the opportunity to

construct and cross the symbolic boundary between an imagined and a real world, as described by Reijnders (2010b: 40).

What is more, the real physical setting and the shared collective meanings or ideology of the place that mediate the experiences of the fans/tourists (see also Belhassen et al., 2008) underpin the profound feelings of belonging to the place: “The beauties of the Tyrol . . . I must say it is even nicer than in movies. . . . I felt really good there” (Participant M.B., age 53). The respondents formed a connection to the place, revolving from topophilic sentiments to intense feelings of calmness and fitting into place.

All this anecdotal evidence implies that fans’ practical engagements with place are, in a way, always pre-structured by particular reference points from the text, such as a road turn, a village square, or a cemetery. According to Hills (2002: 116), these geographical points sustain fantasies of “entering” into the text, and, at the same time, allow the text itself to leak out into fans’ spatial and cultural practices. As described previously, fans visiting the filming site do not merely re-live the already established affective relationship with text; they re-use original material from the imaginary *Der Bergdoktor* universe in various ways beyond the established frames provided by the media producers in the first place. They actively curate a multilayered reality that they wish to experience by selecting and organizing the fictional and non-fictional elements into a unique assemblage with an increasingly eroding boundary between them.

Conclusion

“Places are not clear and obvious entities”, argued Urry (1995: 1). We started from the assumption that place is first and foremost a practical and emotional accomplishment (Moore, 2012: 94). As such, we looked at two distinct (albeit interrelated) stages of spatial appropriation of the Tyrolean countryside and of acquiring a sense of place and belonging by Slovenian fans of *Der Bergdoktor*, highlighting the ways these stages are informed by local cultural and historical conditions.

Our analysis of Slovenian fans’ immersion into *Der Bergdoktor*’s transmedia framework identified concrete patterns of referential engagements with the story that affirm the prevalence of particularly moral interpretative repertoires about Slovenia’s belatedness, grounded in a historically specific self-othering process and a comparative/relational metaframe that can be traced back to the semi-colonial historical position of the country. As culturally dominant and recurring patterns of discourse about *Der Bergdoktor*, these serve as a resource for making claims about the contemporary phenomenal realities of Slovenian post-egalitarian society. They also showcase how the past still permeates the cultural discourses of the present. Clearly, the cultural historical context is important for the engagement with media text and viewing pleasure. Future research could explore how this may also affect the perception of a filming location and the spatial practices related to it.

We have demonstrated how culturally specific readings of media representations of place (text negotiations within distinctive local interpretative repertoires, grounded in the historically repackaged self-othering discourse and the folk schemata surrounding the mythology of enchanted Alpine world) and experiences on site (embodied interaction with place) are inextricably embedded in one another, jointly producing a sense of place. Through a multifaceted interplay between mediatization, imagination, and concrete material practices, Tyrol as a place of the idyllic Alpine community-grounded way of life is thus materialized and enacted again and again. The present study refutes the contention that contemporary existence is becoming increasingly placeless (see also Moores, 2012). Rather, it advocates for the ongoing significance of locality in the contemporary mediatized world and promotes investigating related place-making processes at the intersections of the material and the symbolic.

Notes

- 1 It is, nevertheless, important to note here that media products were multidiscursive and intertextual long before the arrival of digital technology. See, for example, Bennett's (2017) work on the Bond phenomenon.
- 2 Similarly, see, for example, Askanius (2019) and Waade (2017) on how the imagery of dark and dangerous post-welfare Scandinavia is constructed through aesthetics of Nordic Noir.
- 3 As argued by Spasić and Birešev (2012: 141), enhanced moralizing in a post-socialist context could be explained to some extent by radical structural transformation and sudden shifts in patterns of social reproduction.
- 4 See, for example, Owczarzak (2009) on examining the post-socialist context through the lens of postcolonial studies.
- 5 For Buchowski (2006: 465–466), contemporary European orientalism is a “refraction, a derivative or correlate of a phenomenon covered by such concepts as globalization, the expansion of multinational capital, flexible capitalism, transgressions, migrations, transnationalism or the media-covered global village”.
- 6 On how audiences in dialogue with popular culture shape their identities as border crossers between geo-cultural entities, see also Askanius (2019).
- 7 “Bergie” is a pet name for Martin Gruber, *der Bergdokter*, among many fans in Slovenia.

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