1 Imaginative heritage

Towards a holistic perspective on media, tourism, and governance¹

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Introduction

In the south of Croatia, on the coast of the Adriatic Sea, lies the port of Dubrovnik. This ancient fortified city is widely known as the “Pearl of the Adriatic”, a reputation which derives largely from its medieval city centre and the impressive city walls that rise high above the harbour. Dubrovnik has been attracting a steady stream of tourists for decades. However, the flow of tourists has recently increased dramatically. Since the city centre of Dubrovnik has been used as a recording location for the worldwide popular TV series *Game of Thrones*, the harbour town has become one of the major tourist hotspots in Europe. Groups of tourists are already assembling in the city at dawn.

At first, the local population was happy with the increased interest; tourism was an important tool for strengthening the local economy after the crisis of the Yugoslav civil war of the 1990s. But as the influx of *Game of Thrones* fans began to grow significantly, the mood changed. Residents complained not only about the massive number of tourists but also about the underlying idea that tourists were not so much there to visit Dubrovnik as to experience the fictional city of King’s Landing: “The whole thing is chaos” locals commented, “It’s like living in the middle of Disneyland” (Associated Press, 2018). In 2018, the mayor decided to combat over-tourism by setting a limit on the number of tourists, and crash barriers were installed at the gates to the city.

Dubrovnik is not an isolated case. More and more often, it happens that a certain city or region suddenly becomes the centre of attention because of its association with a well-known film, TV series, book, or video game. Popular culture, in other words, has a growing influence on the way people form an image of the world around them and on the affection that they may or may not develop for certain cities or countries (Reijnders, 2016). This phenomenon is not new: as early as the 19th century, literary pilgrims went to Scotland, England, and France in search of traces of novels beloved to them. It could even be argued that there is an age-old, mutual relationship between travelling and telling stories (Gottschall, 2013; Lean et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the increasing influence of popular media in our society has accelerated

this development. It is no longer just traces but a network of popular associations that extends to every corner of a city or region (e.g. Roberts, 2012). Every year, new films, TV series, and books are released which show the city or region from a specific perspective. Some stories fall into oblivion; others are the source of inspiration for new expressions of popular culture. Thus a rich cultural “soil layer” is built up over the years (Roberts, 2012).

With the boom in media tourism in recent decades, academic attention for this topic has likewise grown. Starting with a few stand-alone, exploratory studies in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Cohen, 1986; Butler, 1990; Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Riley et al., 1998) and followed by the work of tourism scholar Sue Beeton in the 2000s (e.g. Beeton, 2001, 2004, 2006), the research field of media tourism took off a decade ago (Roesch, 2009; Beeton, 2010; Reijnders, 2011a; Kim, 2012; Connell, 2012; O’Connor & Kim, 2014). Recent years have seen a further flourishing of a multidisciplinary, global interest in the relationship between popular culture and tourism (Reijnders et al., 2015; Smith, 2015; Mansfield, 2015; Beeton, 2016; Cohen, 2017; Seaton et al., 2017; Kim & Reijnders, 2018; Lundberg & Ziakas, 2019; Tzanelli, 2019).

Notwithstanding these diverse contributions, most of the existing research remains limited to two major themes: the impact of media tourism on local communities and the way media tourism is experienced by tourists. This question was particularly important during the early phase of media tourism, when this phenomenon was still driven by the interest and fascination of individual travellers. However, over the years, media tourism has grown into an important niche within the tourism sector with a huge economic impact and has gradually been taken over by the media and tourism industries. At the same time, the media and tourism industries are increasingly converging (Tzanelli, 2004; Tzanelli, 2007; Gyimóthy et al., 2015). These power dynamics behind media tourism have remained off the radar for (too) long. Therefore, we need a broader, multiactor approach to media tourism that takes into account not only the fans and travellers but also the role of media producers, tourism professionals, locals, and other stakeholders involved in the development of media tourism.

Following this line of thought, this chapter argues for a holistic, process-based approach to the development of media tourism. To be able to investigate and map this dynamic, the term “imaginative heritage” is introduced in this chapter. In particular, I refer to the multitude of popular fictional narratives that have been projected upon or appropriated by specific sites throughout time and that together make up an important part of local place identity. As I will argue, imaginative heritage results from an active involvement of not only fans and tourists but also the media industries, the tourism industries, and the local governments.

What is the added value of the concept of imaginative heritage? First, and in line with the previous, it allows for an in-depth analysis of the power configurations behind media tourism, looking at the roles of the different actors that are involved in the development of this phenomenon. Second,

this concept forms a welcome intervention in a research field that is strongly compartmentalized. Media tourism includes a wide range of media, including literature, film, novels, video games, and animation. In practice, these media also overlap. But research into this phenomenon still largely takes place along the lines of traditional disciplines: literary scholars investigate isolated examples of literary tourism, and media scholars keep an eye on tourism related to specific movies or TV series, while game researchers focus on the interfaces between tourism and video games. The concept of imaginative heritage invites scholars to transcend individual cases and to look beyond the boundaries of “their” medium.

Third, this concept aims to intervene in the domain of heritage studies by addressing the role that popular stories play in shaping heritage. We typically think of heritage as based in reality; it derives its power from being “authentic” (Otero-Pailos et al., 2010). As this chapter aims to show, the fictitious can actually contribute to heritage and in some cases might even be at the heart of a local place identity. Fiction doesn’t flow freely above places but is engrained in the very “roots” of a place. By exploring the reciprocal nature of the relation between fiction, heritage, and place, this concept also questions the dominant dichotomy between tangible and intangible heritage, in line with the work of critical heritage scholars like Rodney Harrison (2011). Imaginative heritage is not about the tangible or the intangible but precisely about the cross-pollination of both dimensions.

Last but not least, and as will be argued in the following section, the concept of imaginative heritage can be used as an important instrument by local governments. On the one hand, it allows them to stimulate new media tourism initiatives that align with other types of local heritage. On the other hand, it will help them to unlock “forgotten” forms of imaginative heritage from the past.²

Theorizing imaginative heritage

The starting point for this chapter is the idea that media tourism emerges from a more general process of place identity formation. As is now generally accepted, places do not have one static identity. On the contrary, the identity of a place is constantly being (re-)negotiated, based on an intrinsic dynamic between the geographical characteristics, the living practices, and the symbolic representations of a certain location (Vanclay, 2008). In theorizing about place, cultural geographers have, for a long time, acknowledged the presence of the symbolic dimension, while never particularly emphasizing it (Lefebvre, 1991; Gieryn, 2000; Easthope, 2004; Vanclay, 2008). However, in order to acknowledge today’s increasingly mediatized society, several authors have argued that the effect of popular culture on the formation of place identity needs to be put more to the fore (Morley, 2001; Edensor, 2002; Orgad, 2014; Gyimóthy et al., 2015: 21–22). In addition to popular culture, other “sign industries” (Tzanelli, 2004, 2007) should also be taken into

account, such as the tourism industry. Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries and is increasingly involved in the formation of place identity.

This chapter proposes to launch a new concept to further pinpoint and theorize this dynamic between popular culture, tourism, and place. With “imaginative heritage”, I refer to the multitude of popular fictional narratives that have been projected upon or appropriated by specific sites throughout time and that together make up an important part of local place identity. In a sense, imaginative heritage is composed of the sum of literary heritage, cinematic heritage, television heritage, videogame heritage, folk tale heritage, and so on, while also acknowledging the many links between these domains. For example, as van Es and Reijnders (2018) showed in their study on detective tours, literary heritage and cinematic heritage are often combined in media tours, especially where cinematic adaptations of original novels are concerned. In these instances, the literary links are often considered “more authentic” and closer to the “core” of the city than their cinematic counterparts (van Es & Reijnders, 2018: 511).

Imaginative heritage has become an increasingly relevant player in the competition for tourists, yet popular culture as a legitimate vehicle for articulating place identities often remains contested in the localities concerned, especially in those instances where representations from popular culture are seen as non-native and hostile. For example, while many international tourists are eager to visit locations related to the Netflix series *Narcos* (2015–2017), many Colombians decry the underlying negative associations between their country and drug traffic, which reinforce traditional stereotypes of Colombian history and identity. Another example would be the popularity of *Dracula* tourism in Romania, cherished for the tourist revenues but at the same time criticized by many Romanians for the portrayal of Romanian culture as backward, in particular concerning the association between Dracula the vampire and national hero Vlad Tepes (Reijnders, 2011b). That said, there are also examples in which imaginative heritage is actually celebrated by the local community and seen as complementary to other, more factual heritage discourses, such as in the case of *Twilight* in Montepulciano (Larson et al., 2013), *Game of Thrones* in Northern Ireland (Mannheimer, *forthcoming*), and *Millennium* in Sweden (Lind & Kristensson Ugglå, 2019).

The concept of imaginative heritage is partly inspired by the notion of “cultural landscapes”, as discussed by Beeton and Seaton (2018), Salazar and Graburn’s use of “tourism imaginaries”, (2014) and the concept of “imaginative geographies”, as developed by Said (1978; cf. Roberts, 2012 on “cinematic geographies”), but differs from these in two ways. First, it focuses more explicitly on the role of *fictional narratives* in the formation of place identity.³ Imaginative heritage refers to the reciprocal nature of the relation between fiction and place. Media tourism often involves everyday places such as an alley or a square, which would not normally be worth visiting. But precisely because of the association with a beloved story, these places

suddenly acquire a special quality: they form a gateway to that other, imaginary world (Reijnders, 2011a). Everyday places gain something “special” from being associated with powerful stories, while these stories themselves derive their power partly from their near-real character. As such, it escapes the classical, Cartesian binary between tangible and intangible heritage (cf. Harrison, 2011). Imaginative heritage is not so much about the material or the spiritual world but about the many instances when those two worlds meet and mutually reinforce each other.

Second, it shifts the emphasis from actual landscapes and their representations to the heritage practices performed by the stakeholders involved. Here I interpret “heritage” in line with the critical heritage studies approach as advocated by scholars like Harrison (2011) and West (2010). Imaginative heritage should not be seen as a static and undisputed collection of artefacts (e.g. the canonical novels and movies set in a specific city) but as a dynamic, social process of heritage-in-the-making, involving several actors and authoritative discourses, as well as conflicting notions of identity and heritage. Heritage needs to be “performed” – for example, by doing a walking tour – in order to exert its power. The challenge is to capture the dynamics of this dispute between the different actors involved, investigating how sites related to popular culture become designated (or not) as a valuable part of local, national, or transnational identity.

In this process, three key steps are identified (see Figure 1.1). First, the media industry and its fans are involved in the production and consumption of popular movies, novels, films, and video games. As I will argue, popular narratives are always set in specific places, either real or not. Thus, the media industries are engaged in imagining place. Fans and other audiences expand these imaginary worlds through world-building practices and co-determine which of these productions become truly popular. Second, the tourism industry is eager to appropriate these imaginations and “drag” (Torchin, 2002) them to recognizable, geographical locations within their vicinity, making them part of the imaginative heritage of a place. Tourists are evidently part of these practices, but they are, just like fans, not easily manageable; tourist flows are notoriously unpredictable. Finally, local governments try to develop policies that help to stimulate the media and tourism industries and their joint ventures, thus hoping to contribute to a community which is economically viable and comfortable to live in. Some of these governments will also have to deal with grass-roots place-making practices that actually protest against media tourist initiatives, for example, because the local community is dissatisfied with the way it is represented by the media and “consumed” by tourists. Ultimately, these place-making practices will prompt and streamline new initiatives for imagining and touristifying place – an unending process that adds layer upon layer of imaginative heritage to a place. These three steps of imagining, touristifying, and making place – each with their own dynamic – will be further elaborated upon in the following subsections.

Figure 1.1 The co-production of media tourism.

Imagining place

In pre-modern societies, it was mainly oral narratives that painted a picture of the outside world. Myths, legends, gossip, and songs described distant wars, violent crimes in nearby towns, or magic and supernatural events in places outside the safe borders of the village community. In modern societies, a major player has been added: media. In particular, film and later television are considered the storytellers of the 20th and 21st centuries, joined more recently by the genre of video games. Recent years have also seen an increasing collaboration and convergence between these different media platforms (Jenkins, 2006), creating powerful transmedia franchises build around successful “brands” such as Harry Potter, whose world is rolled out in novels, movies, cartoons, theme parks, etcetera (Boni, 2017). These popular representations together offer the promise of literally being able to see events far away (cf. Orgad, 2014). As argued in the Introduction, all these stories, circulating in the media and beyond, together create a rich associative imagination of the world (Lukinbeal

& Fletchall, 2014). Of course this imagination is not equally spread across the globe; the popular imagination has its own centres and peripheries. Likewise, not every individual and every country is equally involved in these world-building practices (Boni, 2017). But overall, one can identify an intimate relation between popular culture, imagination, and place on a global scale.

How do these associations between story and place come about? As I've argued elsewhere (Reijnders et al., 2015), stories do not occur in a vacuum but always literally take place somewhere. Narratives, defined here as a string of events (Bal, 1994), need a space in which to unfold. In some cases, these narrative spaces might be little more than a backdrop to the story. In other cases, the narrative space takes a leading role in the narrative development, steering the story in certain directions and – as was the case in many Romantic novels from the 19th century – symbolizing the emotional states of the central characters. When popular narratives occupy recognizable, “real” locations, they even have the potential to “inject” landscapes with certain symbolic meanings that go beyond the narrative realm. In this way, the media industries, mostly unintentionally, pave the way for the construction of imaginative heritage – waiting to be appropriated and “anchored” in space by their audiences. Fans have a pivotal role in this process: their consumption practices not only co-determine which media products become truly popular, but many fans are also involved in world-building practices. For example, the fantasy world of *Game of Thrones* has been expanded way beyond the original TV series in the many online fan productions, such as narrative maps, drawings, and fan fiction, together creating a rich “hyperdiegetic world” (Hills, 2002) of the Seven Kingdoms.

Little is known about how this process of imagining place takes place in practice. What locations are selected as backdrops for popular media products? Who are the gatekeepers in this process (O'Connell, 2014), and how do they choose locations, based on what criteria? What is the role of the tourism industry in this process? How do fan practices affect the imagination of place? At the same time, it is relevant to investigate how places might actually take an active role in the creative process of media production. More than just being backdrops, places have the power to inspire the creative professionals of media industries from an early phase onwards in the production process and steer the narratives based on the geographical, cultural, or social conditions of a place. Moreover, little is known about how these production practices might differ between media such as film, television, video games, or literature.

“Touristifying” the popular imagination

From the moment a film, TV series, book, or game breaks through and enjoys popularity among the public, the likelihood increases that the locations from these stories will become tourist attractions. The tourism industry is aware of the influence of popular culture on travel and consumer behaviour and

has therefore developed various strategies to influence this process (Busby & Klug, 2001; Connell, 2012; Gyimóthy et al., 2015; Lundberg et al., 2018). However, research into these strategies is still scarce and fragmentary (Lundberg et al., 2018). I would like to propose to investigate these strategies in relation to each other under the umbrella term of “touristification”. I follow Freytag and Bauder (2018) in interpreting the term “touristification” in a broad sense as “the process of a tourism and tourist-based transformation” of specific locations, involving a wide spectrum of stakeholders and actors, ranging from national tourism boards and travel organizations to individual guides. In the case of media tourism, I distinguish three steps of “touristification”: appropriating, marking, and commodifying.

The notion of “appropriation” refers to the phenomenon in which people interpret cultural products in a way that is in line with their world view and interests (De Certeau, 1980). In the case of media tourism, it involves mostly a *spatial* appropriation, in which a fictional environment is linked to an existing geographical location by individuals or companies that benefit from this association. Such appropriations are increasingly being made, but in essence, they remain an artificial construct. Fiction, by definition, takes place in an imaginary world. Even if the media product contains literal references to geographical realities, it is by no means true that both worlds are actually the same. The artificial nature of this act is confirmed by the fact that there are several known cases in which locations compete with each other for the “authenticity claim”.

The appropriation of fictional worlds into more general “tourism imaginaries” (Salazar & Graburn, 2014) is followed by the marking of specific locations in the (urban) landscape as being “special” because of their link to fictional worlds. Buildings, squares, rooms, or doors that have figured in popular stories are highlighted by guides and guidebooks as concrete proof of the supposed link between both worlds, thus celebrating the imaginative heritage of a place. In some cases, placards or information boards are posted that report on the scenes recorded at these locations. Part of the “marking” also takes place online, when fans on Instagram or other social networks testify as to their presence at a movie or TV location. But in all cases, the same claim arises: here a place of the imagination is marked in everyday life, and therefore this place is worth a visit.

The process of “touristification” is completed by linking the experience of being there with the consumption of concrete products. Buying such a product is not only a financial transaction but also a symbolic act in which one crosses the border between the “ordinary” and the “imaginary” world. Almost all parts of the tourism sector have become involved in this process. For example, tour operators offer film and television tours and – more recently – apps that provide users with information and accompanying images from films, series, and games on location. Event managers are involved in organizing temporary exhibitions of popular film props. The publishing industry produces maps and travel books on media tourism, while several hotel chains

are advertising “special” rooms where certain characters or actors slept. These are all examples in which imaginative heritage is being commodified: turned into an economic good.

Some might protest this commodification claim by stating that there are also a lot of non-commercial initiatives, such as fans organizing an individual “media pilgrimage” to filming locations or authors’ homes. Indeed, fans are often the first explorers of new places of the imagination, paving the way for other travellers. However, as soon as these fans share their experiences with other fans and stimulate the awareness of a certain site, they will, at least to a certain degree, contribute to the overall process of touristification. It’s also important to acknowledge that tourists are not always that easily manageable. Whether a (media) tourist site will become a popular attraction, and for whom, depends to a large degree on the individual choices made by fans and other tourists.

I expect that the more intensively the media and tourism industries work together, the more intertwined the processes of mediatization and “touristification” will become. However, empirical research is required to critically investigate these claims. Media theme parks like *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter* in Orlando, *Bollywood Parks* in Dubai, and *Star Wars: Galaxy’s Edge* in Anaheim would offer a great point of departure for these research lines.

Developing media tourism policies

In addition to the media and tourism industries, a third major party is involved in the development of media tourism, namely national and local governments. They are responsible for the development of policy in both sectors and therefore have a significant influence. The starting point is the idea that in the long term, governments will not benefit from the unilateral encouragement of more and more tourists. I assert that the cultural policy of governments should not limit itself to “branding” a certain country or city but that it should think about what a community needs from a more holistic perspective and how tourism can play a role in that. Tourism must serve a community in a sustainable way, without disturbing the local balance between “people, profit and planet” (Waligo et al., 2013; Twining-Ward & Butler, 2002). In that sense, tourism is not an end in itself but a means. Greg Richards (2017a, 2017b) points out the importance of place-making as an alternative to place marketing. Lundberg et al. (2018) and Mason and Rohe (2019) also point to the possible contribution of media tourism to forms of place-making.

A disadvantage of the concept of place-making is that it has not yet fully crystallized and is interpreted differently within different disciplines. According to a recent review article, at least two different approaches can be identified (Lew, 2017). On the one hand, from an urban planning perspective, place-making is discussed as a top-down policy instrument, aimed

at organizing and regulating public space. On the other hand, the concept of place-making within cultural geography is interpreted in a completely different way, as a bottom-up process assuming that individuals and social groups are naturally inclined to shape their environment in line with their own values, needs, and world vision (Lew, 2017).

What I propose in this chapter is that governments play a dual role in this field of tension. They will have certain ideas about how the city or the country should be organized and what role (media) tourism can play in this, but at the same time, these governments and local councils are dealing with locals who may not agree with the choices made and protest against the way in which their habitat is taken and used by the media and tourism industries. In the past, various cases have arisen in which local residents and environmental action groups have protested against the admission of media productions into their community and the resulting tourism flows (e.g. Kousis, 2000; Novy & Colomb, 2016; Hughes, 2018; Barton, 2019).

In practice, this will most probably come down to finding a balance between, on the one hand, the development of an active media tourism policy in which new media productions are welcomed and facilitated as much as possible and, on the other hand, listening to the needs and experiences of the local population. Media tourism can be used to contribute to a culturally proud and economically viable community, but the imaginative heritage of popular culture can also conflict with other notions of heritage, such as local histories or religious heritage. Consideration could also be given to making cooperation between the media production team and the local population a requirement. Past experience has shown that deploying locals as extras or advisers can have a positive effect on both the production team and the local population (Mayer, 2016).

An interesting suggestion has been made by Lundberg et al. (2018), who argue that local authorities should try to align new media productions with local heritage, because this would add to the “authenticity” of the place. Although notions of authenticity are highly debatable in this context, and there has in fact been no proper investigation into these dynamics, it would be a valid idea to do further research into the relationship between popular fiction and local history. In my view, the concept of imaginative heritage, which is being launched in the current chapter, offers a valuable tool to pick up that particular gauntlet – this based on the premise that popular fiction offers more than only a boost to existing heritage; it has the potential to become heritage itself.

In this setting, it is crucial to pay attention to the societal context in which media tourism is created. A clear blueprint for the development of media tourism does not exist, as each national or urban community has its own challenges and local issues. It is precisely for this reason that it is essential to conduct empirical, comparative research into current policies with regard to media tourism in different contexts.

In conclusion

At the end of the afternoon, when the cruise ships have departed, peace returns to the centre of Dubrovnik. The city walls are deserted, except for a few last visitors, and Venus, the evening star, appears high above the sea, followed by several stars that light up one by one in the evening sky. The stars above the Adriatic Sea have something magical: they show the immense size of the universe, the gaping vortex above us. Perhaps it was precisely the fear of this vortex that once moved man to develop a system of constellations, through which the overwhelming chaos of the starry sky could be partially contained and framed in earthly metaphors such as Scorpio, Sagittarius, and Cygnus.

For a long time, research into media tourism has also been driven by a fascination for individual cases: one square, street, or house that has suddenly acquired something “magical” through its association with a well-known story from popular culture. These places functioned as magical, star-dusted portals that offered access to another, fictional reality. Research into such individual cases has yielded a great deal, but I think it is time to enrich the field with more case-transcending research, looking at the way in which these cases relate to each other, both in space and in time, and together form networks scattered around the world. Only in this way can we acquire a better understanding of the phenomenon of media tourism. Such a holistic approach not only provides insight into recurring patterns in a multitude of individual cases but also reveals the relationships and hierarchies between these cases. In this context, explicit attention must also be paid to the diachronic dimension: how popular stories have contributed to the development of a place identity over time. Old histories are forgotten but also make way for new stories in the “soil layer” of our culture. Moreover, instead of focusing only on the experiences of individual fans, it is time to acknowledge the complex power configurations that are at play behind media tourism, exploring why certain narratives are told, while others are not.

It is like looking through a magic filter: suddenly we see the Earth with all the routes that fictional characters have ever travelled in a myriad of stories, from the first Egyptian stories to the latest video games. The world is littered with a layered network full of such stories and characters, visible to anyone who wants to see it. One of the ways to explore these networks and their underlying mechanisms is through the concept of imaginative heritage introduced in this chapter.

Notes

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- 2 It would be challenging to visualize these networks of imaginative heritage (per city or region) on a digital map. Such a map should then have a layered character, in the tradition of “deep maps”, in which each medium or franchise is assigned its own layer (Bodenhamer et al., 2015; Fitzjohn, 2009). A dynamic display with a historical lapse of time is also possible.
- 3 One could argue that place identities are always narratively constructed and as such, the difference between fictional and factual narratives is artificial. However, such a line of argument ignores the fact that this divide between fiction and fact is experienced as very real by most media tourists. The marking and temporary crossing of the symbolic divide between a world of fiction (rooted in imaginative practices) and the “real” world (rooted in sensory experiences) is key to understanding the *joy* of participating in such a media ritual (Reijnders, 2011a).

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