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Making Minds Matter

The role of imagination in the film tourist experience: The case of *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract:
Media fandom has moved beyond the screen, the page, and even the convention hall. It is now an integral part of the tourist industry, shaping how people imagine and experience distant cultures, times and places. Though the topic of film tourism has received attention lately from a wide variety of scholars, still little is known about the film tourist experience. Using interviews and participant observation with *Game of Thrones* tourists who visited filming locations in Northern Ireland and Dubrovnik, this article asks how, and in what ways, film tourists involve their imagination in practice when experiencing film locations. Drawing on concepts from fan studies, the article identifies three types of imagination pursued by visitors to *Game of Thrones* locations: hyperdiegetic, technical and 'historical.'

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*; film tourism; fandom; imagination; tourist experience

Perched atop a hillside, overlooking the medieval walled city and the brilliant blue water below, Fort Lovrjeniac was originally built in the 11th century to protect the city of Dubrovnik from seaside attack. Our guide tells us the story of its thick limestone walls and of the cannons that once stood there, but we are primarily here for another reason: Fort Lovrjeniac was the filming location for many scenes of the Red Keep – castle of the royal family in the hit HBO television series *Game of Thrones* (2011-). Our tour visits the place where King Joffrey's name-day tournament was held and Cersei Lannister had her dramatic conversation with Petyr Baelish.

It is not surprising that we are here for that reason. The idea of 'film tourism' is now mainstream, with regions making filming sites a cornerstone of tourism marketing campaigns and newspapers and magazines offering guides to filming locations. The study of film tourism is also well established as a segment of the study of tourism, media, and cultural studies and has addressed several main thematic concerns: questions of

authenticity (Buchmann et al 2010; Bolan et al 2011; Peaslee 2011), interpretive activity and performance (Aden et al 1995; Mordue 2001; Hills 2002; Aden 2007, Brooker 2007; Roesch 2009; Buchmann 2010; Kim 2010; Reijnders 2011), motivations and expectations of film tourists (Beeton 2005; Carl et al 2007; Connell and Meyer 2009; Roesch 2009; Kim 2012), issues of media influence and power (Couldry 2000; Peaslee 2011), and the understanding of places through media narratives (Hills 2002; Torchin 2002; Brooker 2007; Mills 2008; Mordue 2009; Reijnders 2011; Lee 2012; Norris 2013). Indeed, Beeton (2010), Karpovich (2010), and Connell (2012) have detailed the ways in which the field has developed, showing how 'research has progressed from speculation through to justification, developing knowledge of the implications of the activity, and, finally, to refinement of methodological and theoretical approaches' (Connell 2012:1009). Connell, however, notes that there is 'a general gap in the research literature with regard to the on-site experiences of screen tourists' (2012: 1018): a lack of understanding in the field as to how these destinations are actually perceived and experienced by tourists.

In this paper, we argue that considering the imagination is imperative to deepening our understanding of the film tourist experience. Strictly speaking, all travel is an imaginative act (Rojek 1997, Hennig 2002, Lean, Staiff, and Waterton, 2014), but the role of the imagination becomes particularly prominent when looking at film tourism. As we will argue in the next section, the imagination plays a crucial role before, during and after the concrete film tourist experience. Being there 'in person' can enhance the imagining the fan already does, confront it with a sense of 'reality', and stimulate the tourist's imagination once he or she returns home. Imagination should therefore be a core concept in studying film tourism. In this paper we ask how, and in what ways, film tourists involve their imagination in practice when experiencing film locations.

This article offers a case study of *Game of Thrones* film location tourists, and examines their imaginative interest in *Game of Thrones* locations in Dubrovnik, Croatia and Northern Ireland. What follows develops in two sections. First, to consider the role of the imagination, we complement work on film tourism with theories and insights from the domain of fan studies – a discipline that has until now been overlooked to an extent in discussions about film tourism. Since most film tourists are – at least to a certain degree – fans of the related film or TV series, there are further insights to be gleaned from research on fandom. We then examine the specifics of *Game of Thrones* tourism, focusing on our field interviews, in order to investigate how film tourists' imaginative experiences occur in practice and what specific modes of imagining they pursue.

Imagination and Film Tourism

Tourism in general is conceived of as imaginative. Rojek argues that 'myth and fantasy play an unusually large role in the social construction of all travel and tourist sights' (1997: 53). We have already imagined a version of them before visiting. Since our perception is based on their existing presence in our culture, tourist sites are socially constructed as 'extraordinary' places (1997: 53). Hennig discusses how tourist activity is therefore based on

widely held 'myths' concerning themes such as freedom, nature, or paradise. It is through these myths that tourism gains meaning; as a practice it 'takes place simultaneously in the realm of the imagination and that of the physical world' (2002:185).

Film tourism goes beyond the general tourist imagination in that it connects place to specific fictions. Existing studies offer several starting points for conceptualizing this central role of imagination in the film tourist experience. Brooker draws upon the science-fiction concept of parallel universes to discuss how fans of the *X-Files* and *Smallville* interpret their visits to filming locations in Vancouver's city streets and office buildings, 'treating them as fictional locations and gateways into alternative worlds' (2007: 443). *Lord of the Rings* tourists in New Zealand are seen as 'eager to test the connection between imagination and geographical places by physically travelling to the film location(s)' (Buchmann 2010: 79) and demonstrate 'a playful attempt to touch something untouchable' (Peaslee 2011: 42). Examining tourism at filming locations for the Korean drama series *Winter Sonata,* Kim shows how acts of photographing and re-enactment allow people to connect their personal experiences with that of the show's characters and 'consciously plunge themselves in/between representation and reality' (2010: 71). Going further, Lee claims that *Harry Potter* tourists in the United Kingdom 'may not only see what is physically before them but also insert into the landscape elements of a fictional narrative and historical accounts' (2012: 61). Roesch's study of several different groups of film tourists similarly found that the act of tourism brings the 'imaginary' and 'real' worlds together, and that the imaginative element is key to finding meaning in the experience. Tourists have 'the longing to connect with the imaginary world through visiting the real places, which, in turn, serve as the symbolic link between the real and the imaginary' (2009: 209).

Reijnders' concept of 'places of the imagination' elaborates on this by suggesting 'material reference points like objects or places, which for certain groups within society serve as material-symbolic references to a common imaginary world' (2011: 14). For Reijnders, such locations allow a play with the boundaries between the real and the imagined, becoming spaces 'where the symbolic difference between these two concepts is being (re-)constructed by those involved, based on what is considered 'factual' evidence' (2011: 16). Thus, visiting a film location is almost like visiting one's own imagination. At the same time, the imagination is confronted with the physical reality of the specific environments, creating a powerful dialectic between imagination and perception, between symbolic landscapes and physical reality (Reijnders 2011).

The dialectics between imagination and perception builds on a longstanding philosophical tradition, dating back to, amongst others, the seminal work of Immanuel Kant, who considered these dialectics to be one of the prime characteristics of the human consciousness. More recently, the American philosopher Colin McGinn returned to the topic of imagination, and stressed the deliberate, generated nature of imagination, which separates it from mere perception. According to McGinn, imagination requires human activity: '[f]orming an image is something I do, while seeing is something that happens to me; in short, imagining is a mental action' (2004: 13). For McGinn, it is through this action

that the world is made sense of, and given meaning, allowing us to contemplate what is possible outside of direct sensory input, offering an idea of what 'could' be (whether it is physically possible or not). Imagination is therefore the mental activity of thinking about what is not directly perceived and envisioning what is possible.

The separation of imagination from perception seems to disconnect imagination from experience. Yet for tourism, and especially for film tourism, imagination and experience are highly connected. It is imagination that makes the tourist want to 'see' and therefore experience the place in question. McGinn's notion of 'imaginative seeing' ('seeing-as') is useful in resolving this: 'the image comes to permeate the percept, to inhabit it, reach out to it, clothe it' (2004: 49). Essentially, in imaginative seeing, perception is given new meaning through imagination. It is 'seen as' something beyond what is directly sensed. McGinn's definition, however, ignores how perception can also influence the imagination. Within film tourism, 'seeing' each new place involves a process in which *both* parts influence each other. Imagining what 'happened' in the fictional narrative when visiting a site gives it meaning, but physical experience of the actual place also influences imagination. This process is not necessarily visual, but can involve other sensory input. Rather than just 'imaginative seeing,' we can therefore describe film tourism as an 'imaginative experience', pre-shaped by a mental process of imagination and followed by a process of reshaping our fantasy lives.

This is complemented by the way in which fans are said to perceive favorite texts. According to Hills, most fan texts feature a form of 'hyperdiegesis: the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text' (2002: 137). Their narrative worlds feel complex, inhabitable and able to be explored. While watching *Game of Thrones* a viewer will see only a portion of its geography; fans often desire to complete this missing space. Tourism theoretically offers a way to experience and explore hyperdiegetic spaces in a physical, embodied manner. Hills therefore refers to fans visiting filming locations as utilizing 'cult geography,' 'extend[ing] the productivity of his or her affective relationship with the original text' (2002: 149) into physical space.

It is in this way that the relationship between fan and filming location has generally been theorized. Roesch builds the concept of 'mental simulation': the tourist at a location disconnects from what is actually in front of him/her and instead 'takes on the personality of the film characters and simulates what they must feel and experience in the scene' (2009: 114). This is a fundamental component of a 'place insiderness' where the tourist is 'able to consume the imaginary beyond the filmic gaze' (2009: 160) and connect to it on what he considers the highest level. In other words, location is theorized as helping fans imagine, explore, and insert oneself into a cult text's hyperdiegetic space, as tourists connect the physical space to cult media such as *The X-Files* (Hills 2002, Brooker 2007), *Star Wars* (Roesch 2009), *Dracula* (Reijnders 2011), *Harry Potter* (Lee, 2012), or *The Lord of the Rings* (Roesch 2009, Buchmann et al 2010, Peaslee 2011). As film and television fans are believed to spend much time imagining what the world of their favorite narrative is like, visiting the

'actual' place is thought of as a way to make this imagining more concrete. Visiting their story's real location potentially gives them 'embodied' knowledge (Crouch 2000), moving their encounter beyond something merely cerebral and leading to a deeper experience of the hyperdiegetic realm. Therefore, fan tourists are seen as 'actively [seeking] to re-vision the landscape and see beyond the physical geography' (Lee 2012: 61) into the hyperdiegetic space, as they hope to expand their knowledge of the narrative and its setting.

Yet, is this the only way in which imagination plays a role in the fan experience of filming locations? The grounding of these narratives in physical space also connects them to reality in a more prosaic sense – it is not only that fictional locations gain physical presence, but there are real locations involved, with their own stories, and real work involved in creating what is seen on screen. Additionally, not every fan focuses their attention on the diegetic world of a narrative – there are many potential ways to be a fan, and contemporary media texts have many elements to focus fandom on. There has been much less attention paid to how different aspects of the intermixing of reality and fantasy affect the imaginative experience of fans. In the following sections, we will therefore investigate the different ways in which fans imaginatively experience filming locations, by focusing in particular on fans of *Game of Thrones* as they explore the different landscapes and environments that form the stage.

Method

The HBO television show *Game of Thrones* is a popular high-fantasy series based on George R. R. Martin's book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The series' sprawling storylines focus on several families and individuals vying for the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros; the major conflict is between the Lannisters in the capital city of King's Landing and the Starks of the North. As is typical of the genre, the show takes place in a world entirely outside of our own, but draws on the cultures, activities, and visual presentation of medieval Europe alongside recognizable fantastic elements (Selling 2004, Young 2010). Therefore, there is no 'real' version of King's Landing, but it clearly has historical referents. The production of the series is based in Northern Ireland, which also provides many locations for different parts of the Seven Kingdoms, especially the North, while Dubrovnik stands in for King's Landing and assorted locations in the outer lands of Essos. The show is highly successful, with record-high viewership for HBO, an active fanbase, and a prominent place in contemporary popular culture. These factors, along with the use of existing heritage locations, make *Game of Thrones* an ideal case study for examining the interaction of fandom, imagination and the experience of place in film tourism.

In the summer and fall of 2013, between the airing of the third and fourth seasons of the show, fieldwork was conducted around four *Game of Thrones*-related sites and activities. While the show had also at the time filmed in Iceland and Morocco, tourism had concentrated on Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland due to the number and accessibility of their filming locations. Since the study was concerned with mental activity, it was necessary to ascertain thoughts and feelings about the touristic experience of visiting. Semi-structured

interviews were considered the best method to obtain the data, as the visitors could describe their feelings in their own words and new themes could be followed up as they emerged (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Interviewees were selected from tourists attending a commercial walking tour in Dubrovnik sold through a popular travel website, a recently-launched commercial coach tour in Northern Ireland, a fan-run coach tour that was part of an annual nonprofit Northern Ireland fantasy convention called TitanCon, and individual tourists at Fort Lovrjeniac in Dubrovnik – a location prominently featured in guides to the show and easily accessible from the city center. This resulted in a broad range of tourists with a variety of connections to *Game of Thrones* and the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series, as well as capturing tourist activity as it was beginning to coalesce. We interviewed tourists who were specifically at the location or taking the tour because of *Game of Thrones*, in order to focus on the 'fan' audience rather than the general tourist audience. Different perspectives on *Game of Thrones* and its locations could be considered, from those that had been involved with the book series before the television show debuted to those who had recently begun watching, those that frequently participate in activities with other fans and those that preferred to watch on their own. We do, however, consider all of them fans, following Sandvoss' definition of fandom as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given narrative or text." (2005: 8) While this is a much broader definition than other uses of the term (see Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, Busse 2013), we agree with Sandvoss that typologies of fandom often end up making unnecessary value judgements between different kinds of fandom. There were indeed rough differences between the different groups, with the fans at TitanCon being more likely to be part of "participatory" fandom culture (Jenkins 1992), doing activities such as discussing the show regularly with other fans online and creating fanworks, and those interviewed in Dubrovnik being less likely to do such things. However, this does not mean that the fans in Dubrovnik cared less about the program than the ones found at TitanCon, only that they expressed their fandom in different ways.

In all, 48 film tourists, aged nineteen to sixty-three, were questioned alone or in small groups. 30 of these were between the ages of 24-35, with 12 older and six younger, which is fairly consistent with the known demographics of the *Game of Thrones* viewership. (Bark, 2015) If people had the time and willingness to talk in the moment, they were interviewed on site; a practice that had the benefit of gauging immediate reactions. Others were questioned nearby, shortly afterwards. A minority of volunteers also participated in follow-up interviews via Skype; these tended to offer a more measured reflection on the experience. Two visitors who participated in both the TitanCon tour and a later trip to Dubrovnik with friends from the convention were interviewed after each trip. In all there were thirty-one interviews, lasting from seven to forty minutes. Those questioned have been given pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity.

Participant observation was used as way to complement the interviews. The Dubrovnik tours were daily walking tours of a few hours in and around the UNESCO-protected 'Old Town' with local guides who had also been extras on the show; the

commercial Northern Ireland tour was a coach tour along the coastal route outside of Belfast lasting the entire day; the fan-convention tour was considered the second day of an annual convention dedicated to discussing the show and its genre, and was also an opportunity to be social with a large group of other fans, thereby gaining their confidence prior to the interviews. Finally, Fort Lovrjeniac was an easily-accessible spot for interested tourists who might not have been willing or able to spend the money on the tour or who wanted to experience it on their own time.

Transcripts of the interviews and fieldnotes underwent a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) in order to determine similarities and differences within the tourist's imaginative experience of and at the locations. This was done in several parts. First, transcripts were read through as a group in order to gain a sense of general themes in the responses. Following this, the interviews were analyzed more closely and coded with Atlas.ti. From there, individual codes were investigated, looking at the way similar concepts were discussed by different interviewees, and particular quotes were chosen to use here in order to illustrate them. Analyzing the data in this fashion revealed the central role of the imagination in the film tourist experience. More particularly, the interviews showed that there are three main types of imagination at work: hyperdiegetic, technical and historical.

Imagining Westeros

When standing at filming locations of *Game of Thrones*, many tourists do imagine the narrative world of the TV-series:

> We went swimming down by the city walls the other day, and just thinking, 'oh my God, that's King's Landing! We swam right next to it! That's fantastic!'
>
> (Dan, English, 22, Dubrovnik)

Such a 'hyperdiegetic' mode of imagining has been noted before in other studies. Being at a place related to famous story lines allows the play of narrative imagination. These locations, as Hills discusses, 'sustain cult fans' fantasies of 'entering' into the cult text, as well as allowing the 'text' to leak out into spatial and cultural practices' (2002: 151). They evoke an embodied sense of the narrative:

> I just take everything. But really, the city walls, the landscapes, trying to picture in my head what King's Landing would have been like.
>
> (Josh, American, 27, Dubrovnik)

Not only can fans imagine that they are swimming in the water outside of King's Landing, as if they were a character on the show; they can also refine their mental image this location. Physical sensations not transmitted over television can be experienced. Narrow streets of Dubrovnik's Old Town can prompt ideas about what else there is in the city that has yet to be shown on screen.

This imagining of the narrative space of the show is also sometimes performed, either through the repetition of lines from the show or re-enacting its scenes on-site. Visitor performance is, however, constrained by 'communal conventions about "appropriate" ways of acting as tourists' (Edensor 2000: 327). In Dubrovnik, where the fans mingled with casual tourists in city-center locations, re-enactments or recitations were seldom seen; they were, nevertheless, expected either where film tourists were isolated or formed large enough groups to dominate an area. At the locations visited as part of the TitanCon tour, re-enacting scenes were a fundamental part of the experience. This is something encouraged by the convention's leaders; previous years also featured such re-enactments and such a repetition can provide the event with a ritual character. The organizer of TitanCon is a dedicated *Game of Thrones* fan and feels that reenactments are important to the day and tour experience:

> It sort of…links people to that location. It's like, 'I was there.' When you rewatch the scenes, you go 'oh yeah, that! I recognize that! I was there!' That's a special feeling for a lot of people.
>
> (Thomas, English, age 37, TitanCon)

In re-enacting, the tourist gets to connect him or herself to the location, and become part of the show and its world. It heightens their imaginative experience by incorporating an embodied, physical action, one that suggests a 'feeling-as' part of the narrative. It also strengthens the memory of the visit by connecting it to such a special performance.

Hills sees such re-enactments and 'cult geography' in general as functioning in a near-religious sense, 'offer[ing] a physical focus for the cult's sacredness' (2002: 150). The religious terminology is also invoked by frequent use of the word "pilgrimage" when discussing fans visiting filming locations (Aden 1999, Couldry 2000, Hills 2002, Brooker 2007, Buchmann et al 2010, Norris 2013), suggesting a certain solemnity towards the location, the travel to it, and the experience there. As Beeton (2005) and Buchmann et al (2010) describe, there are certainly some similarities in form. Yet the 'sacred' aspect of being at the space seemed to be absent among the *Game of Thrones* tourists. In some cases, it was even directly rejected:

> It's not really a religious experience. It's more…it's more pleasant location and you are there with friends and…
>
> (Fredrik, Swedish, 31, TitanCon / Dubrovnik individual)

This suggests that while the pilgrimage can be a useful *metaphor* for film tourism, it is not necessarily the most fitting. The connection of pilgrimage with sacredness and solemnity overshadows the other ways in which tourists engage with filming locations, even for films and programs of which they are fans. Rather than a religious moment, the experience for

Game of Thrones tourists at the sites was usually playful. Re-enactments, especially, were described as fun:

> But yeah, we did the re-enactment of the Hound, sorry not the Hound, the Mountain, doing the jousting. That was something to do. We've done the crowning of the King in the North, and other bits… it just adds to the fun of the day.
>
> (Lisa, English, 35, TitanCon)

Tourists involved in the re-enactments tended to laugh and joke with other fans while doing so, exaggerating their movements and making humorous references to the narrative. While some might argue this represents a self-conscious distancing from the connotations of fandom as 'religious' pursuit, it could equally be said that fans do not need solemnity to feel bonded together. The *Game of Thrones* audience is also largely made up of younger, well-educated people that are likely to be "post-tourists" (Urry and Larsen 2011) to some degree, aware of the constructed nature of tourist experiences but finding value in them anyway, often through the treatment of tourism as a 'series of games' that allows the site to be interpreted in a range of ways. A playful approach is no less meaningful here as it offers ways of recalling and imagining the world of *Game of Thrones* that allows them to feel part of the narrative. Visits also allow them to imagine what the world feels like in an embodied manner.

Tourism therefore differs from text-based explorations of hyperdiegesis. As Crouch (2000) suggests, physical encounters produce a different knowledge, a 'multi-sensual' understanding of place, and in this case, of narrative. Sensual and emotional experience can be as important to the tourist's sense of connection with the narrative as the locations themselves. Reijnders (2011) found that connecting with the *Dracula* story on-site was not only about visiting exact locations. It also meant participating in activities that matched the emotional state of the novel. Experiencing something 'like' the story while being in its environment is part of what makes the experience meaningful. Buchmann et al (2010), in their investigation of *The Lord of the Rings* tourists, found that connecting to the themes of the text, identified as "fellowship, adventure, and sacrifice," (Buchmann et al 2010: 240) were as important as being at the actual place. In finding "fellowship" with other tourists at the location the text "happened" and experiencing an adventurous landscape they are more authentically experiencing the text by participating in something emotionally like it.

Game of Thrones fans were no different. Many of the TitanCon tour participants especially enjoyed the concluding activities: group workshops on archery and sword-fighting, as well as feasting in a large stone hall in a forested estate. These activities allowed tourists to experience what being in the show's narrative world would be like but in a way that also involved having fun with other fans. They got to play with the general narrative space of *Game of Thrones* alongside others who were equally happy to be part of the moment. As Roesch (2009), Kim (2010), and Buchmann et al (2010) discuss, being with

others who "get it" can be an important part of the film tourist experience – perhaps just as much as visiting the locations themselves. The presence of others potentially enhances the experience by reinforcing the importance of the location to each other and encouraging deeper participation in the activities that occur around it. The tourists are not only immersed in the location, but within the community. Interestingly, within the TitanCon group, the larger collective of fans present encouraged a more playful attitude towards the text and attendant activities than reported in other studies on film tours. As discussed above, the reenactments were particularly playful. This matches with the somewhat ironic and post-modern tone of *Game of Thrones* towards other medieval-styled fantasy texts (such as *The Lord of the Rings*). As will be discussed in more detail later in this paper, *Game of Thrones* presents itself as a more "realistic" take on the genre, without the mythologizing of the past and its society that is often seen to characterize it. Within a group of fans, this presents itself as a less reverent stance in general. Instead of solemnity, they are encouraged to feel how the past 'really' was and have fun with the text – which includes jokes, songs, and drinking.

While there are moments of slippage for tourists between our world and Westeros, these were mostly constructed playfully and were somewhat fleeting. A tourist might feel for a moment that he or she is swimming next to King's Landing, but this is not the total experience with Dubrovnik. Rather than complete immersion in fantasy, the key places instead function as ways to grasp the narrative in greater detail and precision. It is not that Westeros really exists, but rather that it *could* exist; tourists therefore use these locations to have an embodied idea of how it might feel.

Imagining the Technological Details of the Production

A second aspect of the film tourist imagination is connected to the show's production. Narrative space is not the only thing imagined by *Game of Thrones* fans that visit the key sites. For some, imagining the program's technical production process is more prominent:

> Certainly [I enjoyed] looking at the surroundings, and seeing how they turned that into King's Landing. It's not so hard appreciating that when you're in a medieval town like Dubrovnik in the old town, but certainly when you're at this modern hotel that was also just covered in graffiti and windows smashed because it was derelict, and we were walking down and finally found where they'd filmed and I was just thinking, gosh, they brought actors here and everything, and how did they get in, how did they do it, and how did they find this place in the first place? It's quite impressive.
>
> (Jane, Scottish, 41, TitanCon/Dubrovnik individual)

> Well, you can imagine that you were in the production. […] That would be…yeah, it's a sort of dream to be.
>
> (Fredrik, Swedish, 31, TitanCon/Dubrovnik individual)

For such tourists, experience at the location is not centered around imagining how the fictional world 'is' or how the characters interact with it, but how the show itself is actually made. During their visit they found not only locations that were already shown onscreen, but also ones that were going to be part of the upcoming season. This meant that fans could imagine the work that the production staff had put in to make the scenes they had already appreciated and how the site they were standing on would be transformed in the future. They could, as Fredrik did, imagine themselves as part of the team that created the show they love, a production mode of imagination.

On one level, tourists like Jane and Fredrik exhibit the fascination with the 'media world' that Couldry (2000) credited with the appeal of the *Coronation Street* set and the Granada studio tour. They are intrigued by the work of the television production team and want to see how they function:

> I've always enjoyed television and been interested in television, and all aspects of it, so I think that's what I'm liking about [*Game of Thrones*], it's just appreciating, from all the people who work on it, from the people who are stitching up the costumes to the lighting guys to everything, it's quite impressive.
>
> (Jane, Scottish, 41, TitanCon/Dubrovnik individual)

Jane is an interesting example of this kind of tourism. As a long-term reader of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* books, she has been interested in the television adaptation from when it was first announced, even visiting the filming of the pilot, which was nearby her home in Scotland. She already had knowledge of the show's storylines (at the point in time of interview) and a sense of the narrative locations involved. This gave her a different perspective on the show compared to other television programs that she had been interested in, and she found herself wanting to know how the show was made – the work and effort that went into bringing the Westeros she had always imagined into real life. While she had always been interested in television production, with other series she did not want to lose the tension as to what would come next by finding out the behind-the-scenes stories. With this concerned lessened for *Game of Thrones*, she could focus more on production practices. For Jane, as well as attending fan conventions like TitanCon, visiting *Game of Thrones* filming locations is a chance to see the way in which the 'special,' usually concealed world of the media operates. In doing so, Jane experiences hints of the 'deep backstage' of actual film production (Beeton 2005) that is rare and therefore exciting. This gives her a deeper understanding of the actual world that surrounds the show's making, rather than its fantasy world, one that helps her to appreciate the show in a new way:

> How do I feel about it? Satisfying, I suppose, to sort of figure out that gosh, look at the lengths they've gone to, etcetera. Another situation was a surprise

location that we found was when we were on the island of Lokrum, one of our group asked the barman has there been any filming around here for *Game of Thrones*? And he said, oh they used our storeroom. And we got taken into the storeroom, very kindly, and we were clambering over bits of polystyrene and plastic on the floor and there's broken umbrellas and chairs and things, and we suddenly realized we were in this beautifully painted hall which was used in one of the scenes. And we could only see that when we set the flash off on our cameras, because it was so dimly lit, and it was amazing, the artwork and things on the wall. And how the *Game of Thrones* production team discovered about that place, I have no idea.

<div align="right">(Jane, Scottish, 41, TitanCon/Dubrovnik individual)</div>

Couldry sees the audience's interest in television production as a way of reifying the 'specialness' of the media world, one that is potentially more interesting, creative, and fulfilling than their own. Yet, any concept locating the 'media world' as a single entity obscures something significant: fans are interested in the making of *Game of Thrones,* not necessarily a more generalized television production process:

> Well … to get inside information, to maybe … I have an eye for detail so I could maybe spot some errors before they get to the screen.
>
> <div align="right">(Fredrik, Swedish, 31, TitanCon/Dubrovnik individual)</div>

Fredrik, a friend of Jane's, does not want to work on just any television show; he wants to work on *Game of Thrones*. Like Jane, he is a long-term reader of the book series, as well as a fan of the television show, and his interest in working on the production is because of this fandom. Rather than an interest in television production generally, he wants to either learn things about the program before it airs, or suggest ways of 'fixing' poor episodes. By imagining himself as part of the production staff, he explores the idea of assisting the show he wants to be part of. While it might also be exciting to be part of the 'media world,' it is most exciting because that media world makes *Game of Thrones*. This is consistent with Kim's (2012a, 2012b) study of tourists at the filming location of the popular Korean television drama *Daejanggeum*, where involvement with the narrative was credited to higher interest in 'behind-the-scenes' experiences there. Media production in itself might be interesting, but emotional involvement in the narrative makes it more meaningful and imaginative.

Jane and Fredrik were among a group of friends who met at the TitanCon convention and subsequently took a trip to Dubrovnik together to see filming locations there. Since *Game of Thrones* is an ongoing series, over the course of their trip to Dubrovnik they also found remnants of filming locations for episodes that had yet to air. They are therefore assisted in imagining what would happen in future episodes. They had some idea of what would take place and were excited to see how key ideas would be transferred to the screen.

The nature of the ongoing adaptation – both knowing and not knowing what would come next in the series – gave the production elements not just the sense of relics, but of the future. It also gave the group a sense of exclusivity, compared to other fans: they had seen something special and new about the production.

Additionally, fantasy fictions like *Game of Thrones* are sometimes 'considered [as] not "serious" or "mature"' (Cecire 2009, 398) – the preserve of children, teenagers, or adults who have not grown past what they enjoyed at early stages of their life. Telefantasy fans are often equated with 'geek' or 'nerd' stereotypes (Jenkins 1992:11), an unappealing image. Some *Game of Thrones* fans are therefore keen to stress that their show is of high quality:

> [*Game of Thrones* is] just a really well-written character drama that happens to be swords and dragons and…as I said again, dead geeky, but similar to how I feel about *Battlestar [Galactica]*.
>
> (Wayne, English, 32, TitanCon)

> Every once in a while you come to a show that really takes the time to create engagement and a plotline that really fits in with the story and it, you feel more connected with the characters.
>
> (Afra, American, 28, Dubrovnik tour)

Calling attention to high production values, represented by the creative work put into finding and transforming locations, is a way to stress quality. It is not something that was cheaply put together or lazily executed. Rather, it is something that HBO (itself an arbiter of a certain taste level) deemed worthy of a large budget to hire high-quality set designers, location scouts, and state-of-the-art CGI. In admiring and envisioning this effort and skill, film tourists show that the program has rewarded the time and effort they have put into being its fans. By visiting its locations, they can better imagine the skill involved in its production, and how that might maintain its future appeal.

Imagining History

A third type of imagination pursued by film tourists visiting sites connected to *Game of Thrones* can be described as historical. For certain visitors, experience of a filming location is only partially, and in some cases not at all, connected to the narrative or production world of *Game of Thrones*:

> I think in terms of, uh, some of the older buildings and so on, it's more just a sense of wonder as how these things could be constructed and so on. I didn't really associate it as much with the show, more just with the buildings themselves. It was kind of … I was almost divorced from it.
>
> (Duncan, Scottish, 28, TitanCon)

For these tourists, *Game of Thrones* is only a portion of the imaginative experience of the locations they visit. Although it is what brings them to the filming location, while there, and while thinking about it afterwards, they imagine other aspects, in particular the historical narratives on which the respective place identities are built. As discussed in research on the impact of film on tourism (Iwashita 2006, di Cesaere et al 2009, Macionis and Sparks 2009, Croy 2010, Croy 2011), film is usually more of an incidental driver for tourists rather than a direct one, with filmic destinations primarily functioning as an image enhancer, or even changer, for regions rather than a primary motivation to visit. Those who actually visit the filming locations are still seen as a more niche audience within the general tourist market, as most tourists might become interested in visiting a region because of its depiction on screen and its resulting emotional resonance but will not necessarily seek out the exact spot of filming.

The tourists interviewed here, however, while having a range of reasons for visiting Dubrovnik or Northern Ireland itself, did all make a point to visit the specific locations used in *Game of Thrones* while there, making them part of this niche. Intriguingly, we can see in many visitors to filming locations a companion to the situation described by Croy (2010, 2011) and others, in that *Game of Thrones* creates a frame to begin experiencing the place, both in terms of the exact location of filming and general region around it. Once at the location, their sense of it as being part of the show is less important than a feeling that it is a space worthy of investigation on its own terms. Facilitating this approach, in both Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland, many *Game of Thrones* locations are altered through decoration and CGI. The real places contain elements that are on the show, but not everything that was on screen. This makes a direct comparison impossible and forces the tourists to understand differently:

> It's just … because most of these places, they don't really look like how they look on the screen anyway, they're not really that recognizable, so you just sort of enjoy them through what they are, for the spectacular view, rather than for the fact that they're in a show.
>
> (Melanie, English, 31, TitanCon)

The locations are not what Melanie (who, like Duncan above, came to Northern Ireland for the *Game of* Thrones-focused TitanCon experience) imagined them to be, so, alongside fellow tourists, she has to make other meanings to enjoy the day: either consider the fine production work used in spotting and creating the locations, or appreciate these sites as part of the beautiful, previously unknown Irish landscape.

Of course, however, some locations do resemble their on-screen appearance. The arching beech trees in Northern Ireland known locally as the 'Dark Hedges' were, in *Game of Thrones*, a striking element of the 'King's Road' that connected two regions of the Seven Kingdoms, travelled by one of the leading characters at an integral point in her storyline.

Such iconic locations make up an important part of the commercial *Game of Thrones* tour in Northern Ireland. The trees, however, have existed longer than the show, and they come with their own narratives:

> The only thing I've done since I've got home is look up the Dark Hedges. […] That hedge was built as a spectacular entrance to their home, and probably in 1750 or something? I mean, I'm just fascinated by those hedges!
>
> (Julie, Canadian, 63, Northern Ireland commercial tour)

Game of Thrones sparked Julie's initial interest in the hedges, but for her, it was used as an impetus to learn the 'real story' and imagine the lives of the historical Stuart family. Her interest in history is what had brought her to Northern Ireland in the first place - she went in order to encounter her family heritage, which her father had traced back to Northern Ireland. That *Game of Thrones*, one of her favorite TV shows, was filmed there was a happy coincidence, and she made a point of taking the day-long tour of *Game of Thrones* locations which provided some emotional relief from the more serious obligations of her trip. Yet it was still history that ended up occupying her thoughts after she went home. Filmed in locations that are embedded in the historical structures and landscapes of their respective countries, the show therefore acts as an entry point to the exercise of historical imagination. The possibility that such places might be interesting beyond their connection to the series means that many tourists pursue their visits as a way to understand not only *Game of Thrones*, but 'real' places as well. Tourists can use what they already know about the show as a starting point to find out what they do not yet know about the existing place-narratives of Northern Ireland and Dubrovnik.

That *Game of Thrones* tourism can occur like this is perhaps because of the specific way that fans like Julie feel about the show. She, and many of the other interviewed tourists, were particularly interested in their show's connection to history and its sense of 'historical realism.' Unlike Jane and Fredrik, who had a longer-term interest in fantasy fiction, Julie's primary interest in the series was in the way it depicts history. *Game of Thrones* appeals because:

> It's mainly history. That's what I liked about…you know, it took me a while to get into the book. When you have White Walkers and, it's kind of the equivalent of our zombies, you know, or maybe that's the appeal for the younger generation? That would not be my main draw for that series. I think it's more the struggle, I mean it's the story of, it's our history. It could be anywhere, struggling for power, right? […] Is this the way these people lived? You never knew if you were going to live or die or live to see the next day, and … you just can't imagine, what it was like.
>
> (Julie, Canadian, 63, Northern Ireland commercial tour)

While a sense of the medieval is common in high fantasy, part of *Game of Thrones'* claim to distinction as a 'quality' program is that it has successfully created a sense of historical authenticity. Despite its fantastical elements, the show prompts audiences to imagine what the historical past was 'really' like, and presents itself as a fictionalized but not inauthentic version. Learning about the 'real' history of the place in which it is filmed for many tourists affirms the imagining of the past through the show as valid. Tourists across the age groups and fan types expressed an interest in history, making it one of the most common linkages between fans, although older fans were more likely to pursue this interest outside of *Game of Thrones*. Tour guides knew this and pleased their audiences by discussing the real history of key locations. Historical structures both shown and not shown in the show were explained, as tour guides discussed how they were built and used. In describing Dubrovnik's past as the Roman Catholic Republic of Ragusa, one guide also pointed out where the characters of *Game of Thrones* would have lived and worked, if they had lived there. Through such framings, tourists can imagine what historical Dubrovnik (and potentially King's Landing) was like.

The appearance of historical imagination among film tourists is not uncommon. New Zealand, one of the most well-known locations of film tourism, deliberately drew on its existing branding as a place of 'raw nature' to enhance its suitability to not only be the filming location, but tourist destination, for the epic fantasy landscape of *Lord of the Rings*' Middle-Earth (Barker and Mathijs, 2007). Buchmann et al. (2010) show that many fans on the *Lord of the Rings* tours wanted to 'see New Zealand' in addition to the filming sites, but 'most if not all participants continued to interpret New Zealand as a green and friendly place without any significant problems' (Buchmann et al 2010: 239). They viewed the country and their experience of touring in a manner that aligned with the myths of the 'timeless' rural nature of Middle-Earth, despite also visiting urban environments. Focusing on science-fiction fans in Vancouver, Hills (2002) and Brooker (2007) found that film tourist versions of the city go beyond the 'regular' tourist spots, in search of any location that 'replays the 'hiddenness' of *The X-Files'* own tropes and secrets' (Hills 2002:148). By focusing on the 'secrets' behind the every-city façade of Vancouver, it becomes mysterious place waiting to be revealed by the traveler. Similarly, the *Harry Potter* tourists studied by Lee (2012) interpreted Britain by conceiving a magical world alongside, but hidden from, everyday reality. Their tour stopped not only at *Harry Potter* locations but also at ones associated with local legends and mystic sites to create a pseudo-historical, 'magical' picture of the United Kingdom. In this sense, historical imagination is never neutral. It takes a particular form depending on the text being de-mediated. This separates film tourists from 'regular' tourists, insofar that even if they are interested in aspects of the location that are not strictly part of filming process, the contours of their imaginative experience are shaped by a notion of history provided by popular culture. Just as *Lord of the Rings* fans see New Zealand as timelessly pastoral and spectacular, so *Game of Thrones* fans frame Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland as part of a mythic-medieval world. In Dubrovnik, this sense is reinforced by the city's well-preserved historic status:

> It's everything we thought it would be. […] It's as beautiful as people said it
> was. The history, the culture, the preservation of everything. It's all there.
>
> (Josh, American, 27, Dubrovnik individual)

In this way, visiting filming locations confirmed the association of Dubrovnik with a sense of beauty and the long-ago past. In Northern Ireland, however, impressions of the country were often challenged through the visit:

> I was a little nervous at first, of coming, wasn't I? […] I imagined it to be more
> of towns […] and this is going to sound bad, but less…taken care of? But it's
> not. It's actually a lot of greenery and it's very beautiful.
>
> (Liz, English, 34, TitanCon)

Many tourists generally associated Northern Ireland particularly with the Troubles: the sectarian violence that gripped the country in the second half of the 20th century which has been the focus of most of its media representation (Donnelly, 2005). *Game of Thrones* heritage locations offer an alternative, more positive image of Northern Ireland, as a green and aesthetically pleasing land – one filled with forests, castles, and stunning wild views. The use of *Game of Thrones* as a jumping board therefore facilitates a specific imaginative experience that connects to the show as a kind of ur-text.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that the concept of the imaginative experience may provide a valuable framework for analyzing the film tourist experience. Using the idea of the imaginative experience opens up our understanding of how fans / tourists can pursue multiple readings of a site and its relation to its associated text. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with *The Game of Thrones*-fans in Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland, we aimed at showing how this imaginative experience takes place in practice and which varieties can be distinguished. As the interviews showed, fans of *Game of Thrones* involve their imagination in three distinct ways.

First, in the hyperdiegetic mode of imagination, fans primarily draw on the show's narrative, imagining places in which the show happens and envisioning themselves as part of its story. Being there not only offers these fans the possibility to explore the space where it 'all took place', but even more: as film tourists they are in the position to walk outside the set and discover the surrounding 'hyperdiegetic space' of *Game of Thrones* that has not (yet) been used as backdrop for the filming. Wandering through the streets of the old city centre of Dubrovnik, the *Game of Thrones*-fan is able to imagine a possibly endless stream of new storylines and future episodes.

Secondly, film tourists use their imagination to create a mental reconstruction of the filming process. As it turned out, this can be somewhat of a challenge in the current CGI era.

But in most cases, the locations did offer the tourists with enough markers to let them form an image of the technical challenges as well as the creative performances of the production team. In addition to admiring the work that was done to the location, some film tourists also liked to envision themselves as part of the team that put it all together. Whereas the hyperdiegetic imagination focused on the whereabouts of the fictive characters, the technical imagination was aimed more at retracing the steps of the production team.

Finally, there were tourists who utilized the *Game of Thrones* narrative as a frame to understand the 'real' history of the places that they visited. For these tourists, the association with *Game of Thrones* formed only a jumping board to explore the rich history of the respective places. That being said, the frame of *Game of Thrones* did leave its stamp on the kind of histories people were interested in. For example, in line with the pseudo-medieval profile of *Game of Thrones,* film tourists in Northern Ireland expressed an outspoken interest in the medieval history of this region. The more notorious association with the recent history of the Troubles stayed in the shadows, a side-effect which will probably be welcomed by the local tourist boards, in their search for a more positive image of this part of the United Kingdom.

It is also worth mentioning that tourists adapted these modes to fit with *Game of Thrones* specifically, in that *Game of Thrones* as a text and the way they feel about it influences the way in which they were experienced. Its 'realistic' take on the medieval fantasy genre shaped the way in which tourists interacted with the actual history, while also encouraging a less reverent stance towards hyperdiegetic imaginings. This is consistent with other studies on film tourism, such as *The Lord of the Rings* fans finding New Zealand a land of epic adventure and fellowship (Buchmann and Frost, 2011) and *X-Files* fans in Vancouver delighting in 'discovering' the more hidden parts of the city (Hills, 2002). It suggests that, while the different modes are likely applicable across different examples, the way they are experienced by tourists will be shaped by the text.

As the analysis showed, tourists have different imaginative experiences as they visit filming locations and each opens up a multiplicity of potential readings. Future research might provide more in-depth insight into the individual modes and their functioning, particularly in terms of their demographic specificities. *Game of Thrones* viewers are, as the ones here, largely younger and well-educated, which is worth taking into account in discussing how they experience locations. This might be different for a programme with an older demographic. This would expand the field's understanding of the imaginative experience and delve deeper into the ways in which the tourist engages with filming locations. In particular, more insight into the role of film production in location visits would be of benefit, as this has received less attention than the other modes. It would also be of interest to see how these modes function when the narrative focuses on a 'real' location, rather than a fantasy location as in *Game of Thrones*. Being set in the area in which the text is filmed presents different challenges to the imagination. Finally, further investigation of the links between tourism and other fan practices would be worthwhile, as this research

suggests that tourism is more likely to appeal to 'non-participatory' fans, a finding that is beyond the scope of this paper but would be worth developing further.

Fans are fluid in their imaginations as tourists, and therefore, we do not intend this to function as a typology of film tourism. While any one individual might favor one mode over the other, what was evident from fieldwork was that on location the modes tend to blend into and influence each other. Indeed, the same tourist might find him or herself experiencing them all at different times or even simultaneously; they are not so much distinct types of tourists as ways of imagining that any fan might slip in and out of during their visit. We have also found each mode occurring among the different groups of tourists, with some of the highly-organized and traditionally active TitanCon fans interested in the history of Northern Ireland, and fans in Dubrovnik who had never interacted with other fans dreaming of what it would be like to live in King's Landing while walking there. There is, moreover, no clear formula that can predict when a certain mode will dominate. We might expect places that strongly resemble those from the show to inspire hyperdiegetic imaginings, but this is not necessarily the case. Although made memorable because of one narrative, any 'place of the imagination' can provide links to others. Each narrative shapes the others. *Game of Thrones* makes the places where it is filmed seem more vibrant and exciting, but those places also lend the show a renewed sense of meaningfulness because tourists become aware of their physicality and 'real' historicity. A fan who has been to Dubrovnik in the summer may think of King's Landing as hotter than he or she did before. In a similar vein, while the 'real worlds' of Northern Ireland and Dubrovnik are not completely obscured by the notion of Westeros, they are not left unaltered. Rather, fans start to experience them more like their televised counterpart and they acquire a mythic-medieval glamour.

What this suggests is that the study of the experience of film tourism needs to not only take into account the affective nature of the text being visited, but also the different ways this affective relationship can be played out in the tourist imagination. Imaginative experience is not uniform, even among tourists focusing on the same text. More generally, this paper has shown how fandom has become an important factor in imagining other lands, other times, and other people. It has become a way of exploring the world.

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