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## Beyond the tourist experience

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**Beyond the Tourist Experience:  
Analyzing the Imagination of Place and Travel in Everyday Life**

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## Abstract

This article advocates a new agenda for (media) tourism research that links questions of tourist experiences to the role and meaning of imagination in everyday life. Based on a small-scale, qualitative study among a group of seventeen respondents of diverse ages and backgrounds currently residing in the Netherlands, we offer an empirical exploration of the places that are of importance for people's individual state of mind and investigate how these places relate to (potential) tourist experiences. The combination of in-depth interviews and random-cue self-reporting resulted in the following findings: 1) all our respondents regularly reside in an elaborate imaginary world, consisting of both fictional and non-fictional places; 2) this imaginary world is dominated by places which make the respondents feel nostalgic; 3) in this regard, the private home and houses from childhood are pivotal; 4) the 'home' is seen as topos of the self and contrasted with 'away'; 5) the imagination of 'away' emerges from memories of previous tourist experiences, personal fantasies and, last but not least, influences from popular culture. We conclude that imagining and visiting other locations are part of a life-long project of 'identity work' in which personal identities are performed, confirmed and extended. By travelling, either physically or mentally, individuals anchor their identity - the entirety of ideas about who they are, where they come from and where they think they belong - in a broader, spatial framework.

## Key words

Imagination

Tourism

Popular Culture

Home

Everyday life

## Introduction

In recent years, Dubrovnik has experienced a major influx of tourists, eager to visit the filming location of the worldwide popular TV-series *Game of Thrones*. This new interest in the city was initially well-received. However, the idea of Dubrovnik being transformed into the fictional Westeros and swamped by tourists soon started to generate discomfort among the inhabitants: "The whole thing is chaos [...] It's like living in the middle of Disneyland" (Associated Press, 2018). In 2018, the mayor of the town decided to combat overcrowding by establishing a limit on the number of tourists entering the centuries-old city center.

Dubrovnik is not an isolated example: around the world, cities and regions are welcoming (sometimes rather capricious) tourism flows after being in the spotlight of popular media products. Once a grassroots, fan-based activity, media tourism has gradually grown into a multi-million-dollar industry (Beeton, 2016). Many tourism boards across the world are increasingly cooperating with the film and television industry as well as videogames producers, eager to cash in on the "place-promotion potential" of popular culture.

The academic attention for this topic has grown likewise. Starting with a few stand-alone, exploratory studies in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Cohen (1986), Butler (1990), Riley et al. (1992) and Riley et al. (1998) and followed by the work of Sue Beeton in the 2000s (2001, 2006, 2010), recent years have seen a boom of multi-disciplinary, global interest in the relation between popular culture and tourism (e.g. Anonymous, 2021; Lundberg & Ziakas, 2020; Tzanelli, 2018; Yamamura & Seaton, 2020).

Nevertheless, many dimensions of media tourism still remain unexplored. One of the most pressing questions in this regard is undoubtedly the individual experience of the media tourist (Connell, 2012). Several authors have used ethnographic approaches to dig deeper into the mind-set of media tourists, analyzing for instance how film and music fans

experience the places associated with their beloved films and albums (Bolderman, 2018; Waysdorf, 2017). In doing so, however, these authors mostly focus on the meaning of ‘being there’ – visiting the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, standing on Abby Road, or walking the ‘Walk of Shame’ in Dubrovnik. At the center of these works is the act of *consuming* ‘places of the imagination’ as a tourist: experiencing geographically identifiable locations in real life that can act as portals to another, imagined world (Anonymous, 2011).

Notwithstanding the importance of this experience of ‘being there’, it is only one specific moment in a *longer sequence* of events, feelings, dreams and experiences (Crouch, 2021). Many of the fans will have daydreamed about this moment for a long time, thinking about ‘how it would be’ to stand there, to touch the Iron Throne, to hear the police sirens down there on the streets of Manhattan, to smell the fear in the woods of *The Walking Dead*. Yet the question remains: how do these daydreams and memories relate to the tourist experience of ‘being there’? Raising such questions forces us to acknowledge that we know quite little about the wider picture – about the role of imagination in everyday life. When, why and how do individuals mentally reconstruct other places, and how are those imaginative practices related to past or future travel experiences?

By examining this relation between everyday life and tourist experience we follow the call for a more relational approach to tourism. In the past, several authors argued that tourist destinations draw their attractivity from their symbolical opposition to home (Crompton, 1979; Dann, 1981; Salazar and Graburn, 2014); they are by definition ‘extraordinary’ places that stand in fierce contrast to people’s everyday life (Craik, 1997; Urry, 2002). This perspective has increasingly been criticized for separating the phenomenon of tourism from its wider social and cultural context. As André Jansson (2018) argues, the rise of spreadable social media has ‘de-differentiated’ tourism from other spheres of social life. The boundaries between tourism and everyday life have become less clear:

nowadays, being on holiday doesn't by definition mean being cut off from professional or social networks. At the same time, tourist experiences are easily staged for and shared with others who at that point in time are not travelling but simply living their daily lives.

This paper aims to contribute to this new line of research on the relation between media, tourism and everyday life by zooming in on the role and importance of imaginative practices. in the daily lives of a small group of respondents living in cities and villages scattered around the Netherlands. The question guiding this research is formulated as follows: What kind of places populate the imagination of people living in contemporary Netherlands, and how do these imaginations relate to travel and tourism practices? We will keep a close eye on the role of popular culture in this process, without limiting ourselves to it. Focusing on the whole of imaginative practices within one specific country allows us to contextualize our findings in time and place. But before exploring these practices in detail, we will first provide a theoretical foundation for our use of the term 'imaginative practices'.

### Imagining place in everyday life

Although the capacity to imagine is a key characteristic of the human mind, the study of this phenomenon has never really established a firm foothold within modern science – and certainly not when it comes to the role and meaning of imaginative practices in everyday life (Streminger, 1980). Important early exceptions to this are the works of the eighteenth-century philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant. For Hume, imagination is an essential part of cognitive ability, responsible for the creation of ideas and other mental images. According to Hume (1790/2000), these images are always reproductive, because they are derived from sensory perceptions. Kant continued to build on Hume's line of thought, by emphasizing a productive capacity of imagination in addition to its reproductive power. For Kant (1781/2015), imagination is both a *process* and the long-term *product* of

humans' cognitive capacity, resulting in a cohesive whole of imaginaries within the individual's mind that grows over time. According to Kant, people are surrounded by a torrent of sensory stimuli. It requires imagination to categorize and interpret that chaos on the basis of patterns of thinking, the so-called 'schemata'. In Kant's approach, the imagination does not follow the sensory experience (Hume's 'copy principle') but precedes it by creating schemata through which the senses are interpreted.

Although Hume's and especially Kant's ideas about imagination have been regarded as important contributions to Western intellectual thought, it is only in recent decades - against the background of postmodernism and discussions about contemporary media culture - that imagination has once again been adopted as a serious philosophical and scientific subject. One of the contributions to be mentioned in the context of this article is the book *Imagination and the Imaginary* by the British philosopher Kathleen Lennon (2015), who combines Kant's theory about imagination with insights from phenomenology.

This phenomenological approach as advocated by Lennon has three consequences for thinking about the role of the imagination within the context of everyday life. Firstly, it presupposes that imagination is not fixed, ingrained in the 'schemata' transferred to us; human beings themselves also influence the design and selection of thinking patterns. This implies a diversity in the way reality is represented and experienced. Secondly, Lennon assumes that the development of the imagination takes place within a social context. Individuals learn from the people around them to look at the world in a certain way and to interpret new experiences. Finally, it means that imagination is an affective matter. The way we form an image of absent places is not a cold and technical operation but is strongly connected with feelings that individuals can develop for specific places. In other words, feelings of belonging are integral to the imagination - as are feelings of fear or horror (Lennon, 2015).

Drawing on the above works of Hume (1790/2000), Kant (1781/2015), and Lennon (2015), in this paper we define the imagination as *the mental construction of a place where the individual is not present at the time*, and we hypothesize that imaginative practices – that is, using one’s imagination - form a key part of human consciousness: it transforms the chaotic flow of sensory stimuli into an unambiguous perception of the reality around us. The imagination lifts us from our immediate environment and places our existence in a larger world that extends beyond our view, with its own past and future - a world which the individual feels part of and relates to affectively.

Over time these imaginative practices will unavoidably result in certain ‘place attachments’: strong emotional bonds between a person and a place (Lewicka, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Places have the power to become important benchmarks in the way in which one's own identity is experienced and narrated (Taylor, 2010). These place attachments are rooted in a diverse mixture of personal memories, cultural meanings, social settings, and physical characteristics (González, 2005; Mendoza et al., 1982, p. 479). We expect that popular culture will also turn out to be a crucial source for building such place attachments in contemporary society. Some of these place attachments will be positive and potentially also lay the seeds for future travel experiences. One could even argue that travelling to places one feels attached to – e.g. through stories from popular culture – acts as nothing more than the ‘materialization’ or ‘realization’ of a journey one has already taken on an mental level.

However, there is of course no simple causality, and place attachments will not always result in travel experiences. Places can also evoke extremely *negative* associations such as conflict, anxiety, or hatred (Tuan, 1990). Likewise, feelings towards places are dynamic; they can change over time. For example, travelling to a place that has become famous because of its association with popular culture can also result in negative



experiences (e.g. because it doesn't meet the expectations) and even in a loss of interest for the original story world. It is precisely this complex dynamic between imaginative practices, place attachments and travel experiences that will be empirically explored in the following sections.

### Method

In order to establish what kind of places populate the imagination of our respondents, and how these places relate to notions of travel and tourism, two methods have been employed: respondent random-cue self-reporting and in-depth interviews. In total, seventeen respondents currently residing in the Netherlands were invited to participate in the study. The respondents were selected from the researcher's close environment, based on the idea that an existing basis of trust would be beneficial for cooperation and for the depth of the interviews (Blichfeldt & Heldbjerg, 2011). To ensure diversity across the sample, we included participants of different ages (22 and 73 years), genders (7 female and 10 male), and residing in different urban and rural locations across the Netherlands (see Appendix 1 for more details about the participants in this study).

The employment of random cue self-reporting is based on the assumption that the working of imagination usually takes place on a semi-conscious level and has a strong associative character. Thoughts about other places will sometimes be consciously summoned and communicated, but in many cases such thoughts will take place spontaneously: they are evoked by external stimuli or by an associative step within a train of thought. Random-cue reporting is an intervention in this respect: it takes a snapshot during the normal course of events in everyday life.

In particular, we draw on the Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM, cf. Reed & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In the first phase of the study, respondents received a text message

on their mobile phone ten times for a period of two weeks, asking them to take notes of the thoughts they were having at that moment, and where possible, also to describe the places with which these thoughts were connected. These short logbooks had two functions. Firstly, they served as orientation material for the analysis: what places did recur in the respondents' imagination and in what contexts? Secondly, the logbooks served as input during the interviews. Ultimately, eleven of the seventeen respondents were willing to cooperate in the self-reporting process; the others restricted their participation to being interviewed.

The second phase of the research consisted of a series of in-depth interviews. As it was anticipated that the respondents are not often conscious in day-to-day life about their imaginative practices, the decision was taken to start the interviews with an inventory of both existing and fictitious places that were important – either positively or negatively - in the respondents' life. The places mentioned in the logbook were also discussed. The respondents were then asked at what moments and in what contexts all these places were thought about and what kind of significance these places had for them. Finally, the respondents were asked how these different places were connected.

Transcripts were manually coded in order to uncover recurring themes or striking exceptions. The content analysis process drew on the recommendations of Elo and Kyngäs (2008) and consisted of immersion in the interview data in order to gain a holistic understanding of the context followed by open coding to create and make sense of (sub)categories, and finally organising these categories in a conceptual map, which served as the basis for the subsequent reporting of our analysis. The following sections discuss the respondents' imaginative practices on the basis of the type of places that were most frequently mentioned during the interviews: 1) places of residence, 2) places outdoors where people feel 'at home' and 3) 'away' consisting of more remote, both real and non-existent places.

## Findings

### *Returning home*

In 1992, Robert Riley, an American professor in landscape architecture, raised the following question: “Is this possible that the greater power of place lies not in inhabiting it but in remembering it? Do we all live, relive, a Proustian landscape?” (p. 20). Based on the interviews, this question seems to be answered in the affirmative. One of the most counter-intuitive, and thereby striking patterns that emerged from the interviews was the central position of places of residence or homes in moments of daydreaming – contrarily to fictional, ‘romantic’ or ‘far-away’ places.. For the respondents, homes are much more than just a place to sleep and eat. The home is the topos of the 'Self' in all its complexity: it is simultaneously a storage room for cherished memories, a bunker where one can hide from the outside world and a sanctuary for moments of reflection and creation.

What is further noticeable is that an important role is reserved for homes of parents and/or grandparents, associated mainly with (positive) feelings of nostalgia. Almost all respondents - without being explicitly asked – express warm memories of these locations from the past. As Sid says:

It is of course a very warm place because my parents live there, it is also that... I often see my family, all my brothers and sisters there. [...] It is a huge, rugged place with a large orchard. You are completely free, left to your own devices, you don't have to have anything to do with anyone except with your own family.

Sid (man, 41, Amsterdam)

For Sid, the parental home is a ‘warm’ place, because the family members come together, without many other factors playing a role. Similarly, Mikhail speaks with love about the country house of his grandparents in Moldova, where he spent several summers and together with them grew watermelons and at night looked at the stars. Maja talks about the years she lived with her grandparents, and how her grandfather was waiting for her at the gates after school. Furthermore, as illustrated by Elina’s experience, the mere thought of parents’ and grandparents’ home frequently offers a certain sense of relaxation to the interviewees:

I have this comfortable place in my mind, when I feel like I need to take a little relaxation or something, it’s a place from my childhood. So we used to have this ‘dacha’, this Russian like summer house. And then we would go to the forest with my grandma, and there was this swing looking over the pond of water, and so, that’s my like nice, safe place I always think about.

Elina (woman, 28, Rotterdam)

For Elina, the idea of her grandmother's summer home is not only a beautiful memory. It is also a tool that she actively uses as a form of mood management at difficult moments in her life, to remain calm and avoid stress – a pattern that also recurs with other respondents. Sometimes this goes even further: Bartek, for instance, recalls that picturing the swings near the house of his youth was a first step towards healing when struggling with depression in early adulthood.

Many of our respondents spent their youth in the countryside but were drawn to the city at a later stage of their lives. The accounts of these interviewees typically involve stories about the first city dwellings that were available to them and at which they still regularly shudder. This is what Sietske says about her first independent place in Rotterdam:

I thought it was terrible. And certainly at the beginning, when I sublet a room in the West of the city. It was very dirty and there were mice just walking through the living room. And I could not even cook there, because it was really dirty. [...]  
And then you'll just get home and.... and you don't want to touch anything....

Sietske (vrouw, 32, Rotterdam)

Sietske's quotation about the obstacles of appropriating the space that should ideally be her 'own' fits into a discourse that was also observed in a British study of the perception of private homes. When Stephanie Taylor (2010) asked British women how they remembered the houses of their past, 'the narrative of progression' was a recurring phenomenon: many people were extremely negative about houses from the past but were satisfied with their current home. This progress was attributed to personal qualities of resoluteness and perseverance. The 'career path' in the field of houses symbolized a more general progress in life and a sense of agency attributed to that by the narrator.

The integration of topophobic notions of home into the narrative of progress recurs in other interviews as well. Most respondents are, however, positive when they talk about their dreams or daydreams about (former) homes. For example, Paula regularly finds herself in her old houses in her half sleep, an activity reminiscent of the opening chapter of *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust (1992), in which the protagonist lies in his room and recalls all the bedrooms from his past as a form of virtual tourism *avant-la-lettre*. Also, if she cycles through the city during the day and comes close to former homes of hers, she goes back in time in her thoughts:

I really feel that if I cycle through the neighbourhood. [...] I also like it that these places are still there. . I would really care if those houses were demolished, say.

[...]At the moment that it is no longer there and they build something new there, I would really hate that. Because then it is no longer there and then you cannot visit it in that sense anymore.

Paula (woman, 41, Amsterdam), author's emphasis

The closing words of Paula are telling. In her mind she regularly visits her old houses, but this imaginative practice is only possible as long as she knows that the building concerned is actually still there. Paula is afraid of losing these memories without them being anchored in the stones of the actual buildings (cf. Cresswell, 2015).

Although the house is often described as an indivisible entity during the interviews, some respondents emphasize specific spaces within that house, spaces that capture the core or essence of the house. For example, Yu-Chin sees her house - and especially her bed - as a warm and soft shelter which she can crawl into and where she is safe from the cold and wet Dutch climate and where nothing is expected of her. At times when things go wrong, the desire for her own bed can also rear its head:

Today, in class, I was thinking: 'oh, I have a bad grade, I want to go back home and I just want to sit [on bed]. [...] I'm a coward, maybe, but often when I want to escape I think about home, yeah.

Yu-Chin (woman, 23, Rotterdam)

For Krisztián it is the roof of his parental home in Budapest which he regularly remembers. Sitting on the roof, together with his friends, Krisztián was able to look out over the city during his youth and at the same time escape the hustle and bustle of city life:

I always took friends there, it was a place of long conversations [...] I really liked that I had a vantage point for observing and contemplating. [...] I think the rooftop pretty much represent for me - I don't know - certainty perhaps? It was very shaping during those years.

Krisztián (man, 36, Amsterdam)

Krisztián visits his mother regularly, but no longer feels the need to climb up onto the roof. The roof has become a symbolic place - a place he associates with his own mental growth and with the friendships developed over years.

#### *Visiting extended homes*

The residence is not the only location where respondents feel at home and which they identify with. Krisztián, for example, regularly recalls his working days in the Bushuis library in Amsterdam. The Bushuis is now closed to the public and so no longer accessible. But every time Krisztián prepares himself to write a new piece, he tries to recall the atmosphere of the Bushuis in his memory:

When I'm thinking about the ideal way of being productive as an academic, then I often associate it to this place. Because sometimes I remember that there were days at the Bushuis when... Basically, I wrote my first article, my paper, within two weeks in the Bushuis. So somehow it went extremely fast, quickly. Somehow there was something in this place that really, really helped.

Krisztián (man, 36, Amsterdam)

In the imaginary world of Krisztián, the now inaccessible Bushuis has grown to almost mythical proportions, as the archetype of the ideal library, as a space that is fully equipped to facilitate introspection and reflection. For example, Krisztián describes how he had a fixed pattern for entering the Bushuis, leaving the bustle of the city of Amsterdam step-by-step behind him. Just like the roof of his parental home, the Bushuis library for Krisztián offers an opportunity for seclusion and contemplation - a state of being he likes to recreate - and is also a place where he thinks he can get the best out of himself. In that sense, both locations could also be regarded as 'dreamscapes': as places where the conditions for the imagination are optimal (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010).

Although these dreamscapes might be experienced as highly personal, the symbolical meanings of these dreamscapes are of course also heavily tied to time, place and social group, and effected by ideas and stereotypes circulating in wider social setting. For example, the notion of the library as a place for seclusion and intellectual freedom is intrinsically related to a Western intellectual history – a world Krisztián wants to connect to. Compare the interview with Connor. This Irishman has been living in Rotterdam for a few years but is often still in Northern Ireland in his thoughts. The Irish bar in Rotterdam, where he works, forms a logical connection for him with his 'home' and motherland:

I work in the Irish bar, around Irish people a lot, so I still have this connection to Ireland, you know. And I'm speaking in English all the time, with all these Irish people, and so in a lot of ways I'm still, you know, connected to Ireland. My thoughts are still with Ireland a lot of the time. And we're talking about things that are Irish and, you know, stuff that's happening in Ireland and Irish news and such. [...] The natural beauty of the area is something that I miss here, living in the city of Rotterdam.



Connor (man, 22, Rotterdam)

For Krisztián and Connor, it is specific locations that serve as extended homes and can generate a feeling of being ‘at home’ by symbolizing larger in-group identities. For other respondents, such as Paula, it is not specific locations but the city as a whole where they feel at home and which they identify with:

For almost as long as I can remember, I wanted to live in Amsterdam and that was also my idea of who I wanted to be in my life. What kind of person I wanted to be when I grew up, that was always someone who lived in Amsterdam. [...]  
And still when I think of [who] I want to be in the future or something, then that is always connected to Amsterdam. [...]

Paula (woman, 41, Amsterdam)

Amsterdam is not only Paula’s place of residence, but also a spatial persona that she identifies with and that she wants to actively promote: “I often think of Amsterdam, even if I am not traveling”. The feeling of affection with the city of Amsterdam is the strongest in Paula during a very specific activity: cycling around the canals. For Sid too, cycling through the city is inextricably linked to the identity of ‘Amsterdammer’ and the memory of his first years in the city:

[In my student days] I went out late into the night, and then we cycled back across the canals at four or five o'clock in the morning and that was really an unreal experience. [...] Especially the canals, which are [still] a magical place, a bit of the magical power of Amsterdam. Well if you cycle around on your own then that's ... Yes, that has something very special then.

Sid (man, 41, Amsterdam)

While cycling through the canals of Amsterdam, Paula and Sid experience a sense of freedom and have the idea of being close to the city's 'magical power' - the *genius loci* of the city that appears only at certain moments. Although both respondents have now become older and cycle through the city at night less often, it is the generic memory of those early years in the city, cycling over the canals, which forms the basis of their current affinity with the city as an 'extended home'. Again, the notion of cycling as a metaphor for freedom does not stand on itself and is not solely derived from personal memory. Instead, the love for cycling and its association with freedom and romance is also a well-known stereotype in the history of Dutch photography (e.g. Ed van der Elsken) and Dutch cinema (e.g. Paul Verhoeven's *Turks Fruit* and *Zwartboek*). In that sense, extended homes seem to be derived from a complex combination of personal memories and cultural stereotypes derived from popular culture.

Although this kinship with their own hometown does not return to the same extent among all the respondents, the search for a homely feeling in the place where they live is a recurring pattern. An exception to this rule is the interview with Bartek. For him, his place of residence, Rotterdam, is not that important; he identifies himself much more strongly with a city far away, in another country, where he has been briefly in the past:

It's really because I see New Orleans as a reflection of myself. You know, even though I grew up in Poland, and you can make an argument that I'm purely Polish, I do see myself as a mix of places, because my significant moments of growing up and forming my identity took place abroad. And it was very different. It was India, it was the US, it was Norway at some point, because I

spent a summer there. What I really like about New Orleans is that it's the same mix.

Bartek (man, 25, Rotterdam)

In the imaginary world of Bartek, New Orleans occupies an important place: he sees the romantic image of the multicultural history and identity of this city as a reflection of his desired self-image, as an indication of what he is and what he would like to be. Bartek consciously localises his 'I' in the outside world.

### *Going 'away'*

As previously stated, homes are by far the most important places in the imaginary worlds of the respondents. We saw in the previous section that a similar form of 'being at home' is also sought in the outside world, usually at locations in the respondents' own city. Outside these 'homes' and 'extended homes' there is a large, widespread collection of places that the respondents commonly address as 'away'. This 'away' consists of locations that are explicitly not considered as 'their own', but which derive their meaning from the fact that they are seen by the respondents as 'extraordinary' or 'different'. Based on the interviews, the 'away' label can roughly be divided into three categories. The first category of is formed by cities, regions and countries that are remembered based on previous travel experiences. For example, Maarten regularly thinks of his beloved holiday address in South Limburg, in particular the view he enjoys there in the Geuldal and Epen. With equal pleasure, Elina often remembers her stay in Brighton. The memory of Brighton is particularly striking during moments when she is fed up with Rotterdam - her current residence:

When I go to the pub it's always crowded. [...] Or when I see these ugly buildings in the background, I'm like 'Oh, I want to be there, in Brighton, and have proper fish and chips, and see the seagulls.

Elina (woman, 28, Rotterdam)

Elina contrasts her holiday experience with the everyday reality of her immediate environment and fantasizes sometimes that she is back in Brighton. Similarly, Krisztián cannot get on a train without thinking back to his first research trip, which began with a two-day train journey to remote villages in Romania:

Train rides always evoke a feeling of 'I'm an explorer'. Going to a new terrain that I have to make familiar. [...] When I get on a train - and it's not about the commuter train to Rotterdam but when I'm on holiday or I must make a bigger distance - I kind of have the same excitement of exploring.

Krisztián (man, 36, Amsterdam)

Paula often lies in bed, thinking about the places she has visited during her travels:

If I cannot sleep, then I think [for example] of which cities in Chile I have visited and then I try to recall the names. And how I slept there, in a hostel or uh... [...] These are the places that are mine and that are about me. I don't want to go back, but I visited it once, I did it once, and then like 'Look, I was here in that hostel'...

Paula (woman, 41, Amsterdam)

For both Krisztián and Paula, the memory of traveling to and from these travel destinations and the feeling of freedom that these memories evoke is just as important as the actual destinations – a feeling of freedom that usually contrasts with the secure confinements of the home. Or as Julia puts it:

I associate that with happier times, with more outgoing times, driving in my car with the windows down, listening to music... Like, this feeling of freedom.

Julia (woman, 27, Rotterdam)

Former travel destinations are usually far from home and from that they derive their positive association. Nevertheless, the distance from home and the absence of security can also turn out to be negative, with certain locations being thought back on with horror.

A second category that can be considered under the heading of ‘away’ concerns places that people know from images and stories from popular culture, such as books, films or TV series. These places are also explicitly regarded as ‘other’ than normal: more exciting, bigger, more beautiful or more dangerous than what the respondents are used to at home. It is striking that almost all the respondents talk with love about such places, whether they are existing, ‘real’ locations or completely fictitious locations, varying from the forest in *Shrek* (Connor), the island from *Death in Paradise* (Eva) to the fictional Hogwarts from the *Harry Potter* series (Julia).

Most of the locations which can be traced back to concrete locations are situated in the United States, such as the Washington DC of *House of Cards* (Bartek) or the New Orleans of *Treme* (Sid). For Floris, the associations with popular culture are not only decisive in the making of his image of America, it is also a reason for him to visit the associated locations and to perform mimetic activities:

I would like to live in LA for some time [...] That is very much prompted by the movie *Drive*, with Ryan Gosling. It is also stimulated by [the books of] Easton Ellis. That first book of his about Los Angeles... I mean the slightly decadent Los Angeles of the 80's. So I want to do that. If I went back to LA again, I want to try to recreate that moment in some way or other... of driving at night...

Floris (man, 35, Rotterdam)

For Floris, the associations with popular culture are not only decisive in the making of his image of America, it is also a reason for him to visit the associated locations and to perform mimetic activities that can evoke the atmosphere of the film.

The strong presence of America in the imagination of the respondents is striking, but perhaps not very surprising given the continued dominance of American productions in popular culture worldwide. This is recognized by the respondents and in some cases also criticized:

As a child I actually thought about the U.S. quite a lot, because I grew up during the collapse of the Soviet Union and all the things that started to arrive, like different foods and like TV series [were American]... And I remember myself, being 4 or 5 years old, singing in American, which was just like crazy.

Elina (woman, 28, Rotterdam)

If it is true that people remain elsewhere in their minds for a large part of the day, then that 'elsewhere' is disproportionately the idealised or dreamed version of America in popular culture.

Furthermore, places outside the US are frequently fantasized about through images from popular films or series with an American background. For example, even though he himself has never been to Vietnam, Connor has strong and strikingly positive associations with the Vietnamese jungle, based on American films about the (unsuccessful) war in Vietnam:

I always enjoyed that world, it always stuck with me. [...] There's Vietnam movies, for example like *Apocalypse Now*, it's a really beautiful film that I really, really love and it comes up in my mind quite a lot. [...] *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*... I've never been to Asia at all, but it has this dense, tropical environment, really humid, especially [...] the jungle.

Connor (man, 22, Rotterdam)

Although Connor himself has never been in a jungle, or maybe because of that, his imagination of the tropical rainforest has become almost mythical for him. In his experience the jungle forms a sort of counter-world, the extreme 'Other':

Like, I've never seen anything like a jungle, you know, [...] all these animals and different fruit and vegetables and stuff growing... Because also Ireland is quite a barren environment. Although there's lots of green and lush, we don't have, you know, many interesting animals. And like, Asia and these jungles, they seem very foreign and it's odd to me, it seems like the very opposite of what I was raised in and where I come from. [...] It seems unreal, it's something I've only ever seen from fantasy and these movies...

Connor (man, 22, Rotterdam)

The way Connor speaks about the jungle is a clear example of a symbolic landscape: it is not a specific forest or a specific location, but a general, idealized image of a certain type of landscape, in which the extreme characteristics of the landscape are related to its symbolic meaning. The jungle is first and foremost the ‘other’: the elusive, the feminine, the dark ... This exotic image seems to be inextricably linked with the image formation in the Vietnam films that he mentions. Connor’s exoticism is in that sense a typically *American* exoticism.

This example shows what we could call the ‘cultural triangle’ of global media culture: a representation of a country by media producers from another country, consumed by audiences from a third country - an *Irishman* imagines *Vietnam* through the eyes of *American* movies. Yet that is not quite the whole story: in the quote above Connor speaks about ‘fantasy *and* these movies’ [author’s italics]. According to Connor, there is thus a combination of impressions from American popular culture, supplemented with his own fantasies and possibly those arising from other sources

Other symbolic landscapes are also covered during the interviews. And just like Connor's jungle, these landscapes are also partly based on images and stories from popular culture. Particularly noteworthy is ‘outer space’, a landscape that returns to various respondents and for which science-fiction films and books form an important source of inspiration:

It just remains a very big fascination for me to travel [...] between the stars, to visit other planets. Yes, just totally other-worldly. That is something by which [I] really give free rein to my imagination.

Danny (man, 28, Rotterdam)



For Danny, outer space is a symbolic landscape that he loves to fantasize about. It is not one specific cultural product that has formed his imagination, but a cluster of video games, films, books, non-fiction books and personal fantasies that together form his idea of outer space.

While the jungle of Connor and the outer space scenario of Danny evoke strong positive associations, symbolic landscapes can also acquire negative connotations through a mix of stories from popular culture, stories about the environment and personal fears. For example, Sietske hates forests in the dark:

A dark forest, in the evening alone ... No, I do not like that at all. [...] As a woman, you are also constantly being told that there are things that you definitely should not do. I also remember very well from when I was young, the case of Andrea Luten, who was found murdered in a forest. That happened right in our neighbourhood. That was really the big example, you should not go cycling through a forest as a girl.

Sietske (woman, 32, Rotterdam)

For Sietske, the forest - at least at night - is a place of fear. Of course, morphology plays a role here: there is no unobstructed view in the woods and something unexpected can be lurking behind every tree. The forest is isolated and almost by definition separated from the relatively 'safe' social environment of the village or city. The fact that a violent sexual abuse and murder took place in Sietske's youth, in her immediate environment, will have further intensified her fear. But this image formation around the forest is of course not unique to Sietske or the time and place of her youth; Western culture has a centuries-long tradition in which the forest is attributed a highly loaded form of symbolism (Le Goff, 1992). On the

one hand the forest is glorified as a pure and unspoiled landscape. On the other hand, it is cursed to be the terrain of robbers, bandits and wild animals.

Finally, in addition to former travel destinations and locations from popular culture, there is a third and final category of 'away' that recurs during the interviews. This third category involves entirely fictional worlds, which are not so much based on external stimuli from popular culture, but which are first and foremost the product of the respondent's own imagination. As Sid says:

If I just sit down with a pencil and start drawing... [...] Then yes, the stories will roll out. I can only draw a tree, say, and then I've already made up a whole story about that tree and where that tree is now. It just gets a role in a landscape. It just goes with you, or at least, it goes with me. So there is actually, yes actually every day, a fictional world in my head.

Sid (man, 41, Amsterdam)

By sitting at the kitchen table and drawing freely and associatively, Sid starts his own fantasy and imagines himself in a fantasy world created by himself. This creative way of fantasizing also returned in the interviews with Floris and Elina, but in a different way. Elina's fantasy world is not so much based on an artistic image as on 'sociological' imagination:

I came up with an idea to create a virtual country. So like, you would have a virtual country and people could be citizens of it. And it's like: everybody would have a passport and the laws can be made online. Because nowadays the world is so globalised, it just doesn't make sense to have these kinds of border and stuff like that.

A similar 'sociological' fantasy is used by Danny and Floris. They fantasize regularly about 'what if' worlds (cf. Engel, 2005). What if something else had happened in the past? What if that one historical battle had just turned out differently? What would current society have looked like? This alternative reality is also projected onto the personal living environment. Look out of the window, says Danny, and see what the world would look like if the Nazis had won and were still in power today.

### Conclusions and Discussion

This article has investigated the spatial dimension of the imaginary worlds of fifteen individuals currently residing in the Netherlands. What places populate their imaginary world and how do these places relate to (potential) tourist experiences. Based on seventeen in-depth interviews, the following conclusions can be made.

First, it appears that nostalgic places are emphatically dominant in the imaginary worlds of the respondents. When the imagination is directed towards the future, it is mainly the near future that is summoned up and then with the purpose of dealing with practical matters.

In addition, in the imaginary world of the respondents one place is pivotal: the home. That is particularly striking. The imagination enables humans to travel everywhere in their thoughts, to every corner of the universe and even beyond. But in practice, their thoughts mostly return to their own homes and to (former) homes of parents and grandparents. The parental home is in these memories symbolic of the solidarity with the people who once lived in them.

Likewise, the private home is also an important topos in the perception of the respondents. Here, however, negative thoughts occur, which are usually projected onto private homes from the past, for example dilapidated student rooms that they had to put up with during their first years in a city. These past experiences are then contrasted with the current home, where people do live to their satisfaction. Here, there is a clear link with a recent interview study conducted among British women, where a similar 'narrative of progression' was indicated (Taylor, 2010).

The fact that homes are so important in the imaginary world of the respondents offers an empirical confirmation of assumptions from previous studies and the sociological claim that the tendency towards 'home and belonging' is a consequence of globalization (e.g. Bachelard 1964; Duyvendak, 2011; Easthope, 2004; Lewicka, 2010; Morley, 2001) At the same time, this interview study has also shown that these homes form part of a broader imaginary world, in which the homes are perceived as the topos of the 'self' and are contrasted with an outside world commonly described as 'away'.

This outside world, far away from the home, is partly constructed based on memories of previous travel experiences, but far more important are the narratives and images derived from popular culture. It also seems that the influence of popular culture on the respondents' imaginative practices increases with the distance from their home. This pattern might be partly related to the fact that the respondents of this study are all currently residing in the Netherlands. After all, the consumption of popular culture in the Netherlands is mostly a consumption of *foreign* media productions – predominantly American and British – often set *abroad* in global media centers like New York, London, Paris or Los Angeles or – following the logic of the 'cultural triangle' – in 'exotic' locations outside the West. However, further comparative research is needed to investigate this assumption and the underlying dynamics of the 'cultural triangle' introduced in this paper.

The dichotomy between one's 'own' and the 'other' is a well-known phenomenon in sociology. Groups of people are constantly making a distinction between 'we' and 'them', in which their own identity is usually glorified and contrasted with the assumed identity of the 'other' (Hall, 1997; Said, 1978). What the current study confirms and highlights, is the spatial dimension of this process or, in Said's words, the 'othering in space'. This distinction between 'home' and 'away' runs parallel to dichotomies of the ordinary and extra-ordinary in tourism imaginaries (Salazar & Graburn, 2014; Urry, 2002).

We argue that imagining other locations and visiting those locations as a tourist is part of a life-long project of 'identity work' in which personal identities are performed, confirmed and extended. By travelling, either physically or mentally, individuals can anchor their identity - the entirety of ideas about who they are, where they come from and where they think they belong - in a broader, spatial framework, in which the 'other' - their reflection - is cherished and at the same time kept at a distance. Perhaps this dynamic between home and away can best be seen as a process of appropriation. Instead of 'home', we should talk about 'home-making' or 'becoming-at-home' as a constant process of domestication in which the outside world is made familiar through individual experiences and the resulting build-up of personal memories (cf. Dovey, 1985; Edensor 2002).

What are the implications of these findings for future research on media tourism? First of all, the omnipresence of 'home' in the imagination of our respondents and the dynamics between this 'home' and its counterpart 'away' both suggest that media tourism – and for that matter tourism in general - should not be analyzed as an isolated phenomenon. Media tourists might be undertaking 'extraordinary' activities while travelling and they might be having experiences that they would themselves label as 'unique' and full of meaning. However, these experiences cannot be understood to the full if we do not take into account the larger, holistic context in which they take place: the tourists' everyday life. What

makes their media trip so extraordinary and how will these experiences impact on their imaginative practices once they have returned home? How do these experiences and practices shape the cross-overs and links between ‘media words’ and normal words’ (cf. Couldry, 2002)? These questions can only be answered by an ethnographic approach that takes into account the cultural background and everyday life of media tourists. In particular, it invites comparative research on imaginative practices in everyday life that are closely connected to media tourism, such as daydreaming, fantasizing, reading fiction, watching television or world-building practices (both online and offline) among fans.

Second, the dominant role of nostalgic places in the imagination of our respondents also begs the question: what the role of nostalgia and related memory practices in is the phenomenon of media tourism? Until now, little research has been done on how feelings of nostalgia affect the motives and experiences of media tourists (but see: Grek-Martin, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2017). On a more theoretical level, more research needs to be done on the conceptual relation between memory and imagination.

Finally, the fact that we found such a diverse set of imaginative practices even among this relatively small and homogenous group of respondents underlines the importance of being attentive to sociocultural, educational, and economic differences while studying media tourism. The ultimate goal of doing research on media tourism is not to come up with final, one-size-fits-all answers to the question how the imagination works, why people travel or how they decide their next tourist destination. The ultimate goal is to understand that media tourism is nothing more or less than a key hole through which we can get a unique glimpse of the diverse fears, memories, daydreams and desires that populate our worlds, exactly at that point where our inner and outer worlds meet.

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[Include Figure 1 (ERC Logo) and Figure 2 (EU flag) here]

## Appendix 1

First name	Age	Gender	Place of residence
Bartek	25	Male	Rotterdam
Connor	22	Male	Rotterdam
Danny	29	Male	Rotterdam
Dorus	34	Male	Rotterdam
Elena	28	Female	Rotterdam
Eva	26	Female	Rotterdam
Julia	27	Female	Rotterdam
Kristzián	36	Male	Amsterdam
Maarten	73	Male	Den Burg
Majella	71	Female	Den Burg
Maximilian	23	Male	Rotterdam
Michael	35	Male	Wenen
Paula	41	Female	Amsterdam
Rein	34	Male	Rotterdam
Sid	41	Male	Amsterdam
Sietske	30	Female	Hoogeveen
Yu-Chin	23	Female	Rotterdam

*Table 1: List of respondents*

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