

Sport, Landscape, and the National Identity: Representations of an Idealized Vision of Nationhood in Slovenian Skiing Telecasts

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Abstract

The paper explores the role of the televised landscape in presenting alpine skiing as a Slovenian national pastime as well as being a distinctive TV sport. Alpine skiing is one of those sports where the Slovenian nation-imagining has been exercised extensively throughout the last decades. In Slovenia, alpine skiing with its related natural scenery, sporting events and national heroes, is one of the main sports arenas in which the recent Slovenian emancipatory nationalism has been significantly negotiated. After Slovenia's political secession from Yugoslavia, with the so called "ten-day-independence-war" in 1991, the new nation-state also needed a new national landscape. Many tourist resorts, natural monuments and sights and places perceived as well-known Slovenian identification symbols since the 19th century, were noticeably revitalized through live sporting and cultural TV broadcasts. Our findings show the ways in which skiing and its natural setting have been utilized by Slovenian National Television to establish and reproduce an idealized vision of nationhood and national identity in past decades, but particularly in recent winter seasons.

Key Words: *alpine skiing, landscape, national identity, sport telecast, anthropology, Slovenia.*

In this article I explore a very specific and limited but not unnoticeable aspect of the cultural construction of national sport in Slovenia: the role of the televised landscape in presenting alpine skiing as a Slovenian national pastime, as well as a distinctive TV sport.¹ More concretely, I will try to reveal, by referring to my analysis and ethnographic experiences, certain aspects of how television has constructed the sport of skiing as a national activity by presenting it through natural scenery which has the strong potential of becoming established national symbolism and able therefore to attract a powerful collective identification among members of certain *imagined community* (Anderson 1991[1983]). Given that modern sports emerged as part of a wave of *invented traditions* (Hobsbawm 1993) in Western-centered cultures associated with nation-building at the end of the 19th century, it is

not surprising that different disciplines have incorporated sport into their research agendas. Although anthropology has perceived sport as a research object with a certain disciplinary delay, today we know that it can contribute original and insightful understanding of how the significance of sports can be best understood when we locate them through ethnographic enterprise. Recently, anthropological studies on sport (Blanchard 1995; Sands 1999; special issue "Anthropology and sport" of the *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 2002, edited by Catherine Palmer; Moore 2004:37–46) have noticeably widened the field, firstly, by stressing the ubiquitous nature of sport, and secondly, by showing that sport is a culturally conditioned imaginary or social category that, along with material artifacts, social customs, and ideologies, is transported across cultural lines and national identities (Lapchick 1996).

In the Alpine countries of Europe (Switzerland and Austria particularly) and in Scandinavia, skiing has been developed as a distinctive and tremendously significant sport (Weiss in Müller 1997:571–579; Sörlin 1995:147–164). Compared to these examples, Slovenia's case, while less-known to the broader international scene, is certainly not insignificant or negligible. For decades, the Slovenian public, from the cultural, political, and sports milieu to the media, has come together in the belief that alpine skiing had an important part in building the self-image of the modern Slovenian nation. This text therefore intends to reveal a brief account of how alpine skiing became a supposedly indigenous and autochthonous national winter practice in Slovenia through a specific aspect which was till now more or less ignored or little expressed, i.e., through the television creation of a "natural" correlation between skiing and its natural setting: the Slovenian national landscape. Thus I will consider examples of how mountain landscapes, but also other types of landscape inscribed deeply into the very heart of Slovenian national ideology, and skiing are utilized by Slovenian television to represent and reproduce an idealized vision of nationhood and national identity. By explicating this, I hope that the premise of the article offers both an original and engaging approach to understanding national identity and ways outside the political arena in which identity is created and contested.

Methodological Remark

Before giving a brief account of what kind of specificity and particularity might have been reserved for the Slovenian construction of televised sport and national landscape, I shall make some methodological remarks on what is presented here and, further, elaborate a brief theoretical framework.

This article is part of wider research (Kotnik 2001) carried out in 1999–2003 and supplemented in 2005 and 2006. As an anthropologist, I draw the analysis from a combination of methodological approaches and analytical instruments belonging to different fields of social sciences and humanities: from ethnographic method to discourse analysis of selected TV materials and other sources. The data collection consisted of three main components or phases: first, readings from academic literature on the topic of nation, sport, landscape and the media; second, collecting TV materials as basic source to analyze; and third, carrying out a short ethnography.

When analyzing telecasts of alpine skiing, I was, above all, encouraged by Michel Foucault's concept of discourse which helped me treat TV representations as specific discourses of particular practices that form, according to Foucault, the objects of which someone speaks (1969, 1971). In other words, I tried to be engaged in seeing what telecast directors actually do when telecasting alpine skiing competitions; what commentators do when commenting upon the TV picture of *skiscapes*; what their assumptions and motivations are in saying or showing something. The collected material comprises TV records of live TV transmissions of the World Ski Cup races from eight winter seasons 1999/2000–2006/07. More than 400 of these telecasts and about 50 telecasts of alpine skiing have been analyzed in detail. The empirical material, all broadcast by the second channel of the Slovenian National Television (TVS 2), covers all ski disciplines for both men and women (slalom, giant slalom, super G, downhill, and alpine combined).

The third component of data collecting, drawing upon a short ethnography, was carried out discontinuously in 2005. When pursuing my anthropological research "at home" (Jackson 1987; Peirano 1998:105–128) and programming my fieldwork, I was essentially informed by the texts of fundamental relevance in the field of methodology and epistemology of social anthropology, such as the studies of Sanjek (1990), James, Hockey and Dawson (1997), Ingold (1996, sections 1–9, 99–146, 147–198) Bernard (1988), Gupta and Ferguson (1997) and Leach (1982:24–41). In order to add to my personal experiences and perceptions I drew upon several sources whose common characteristic is that they are in some way connected with TV representations of skiing in Slovenia; whether they are from the realm of Slovenian alpine skiing TV

broadcasting or from the realm of the TV audience or from related sport/media domains. Among them, I interviewed a retired TV sports broadcast director who had specialized in skiing broadcasting; a cameraman who has been involved in sports broadcasting, including skiing; an editor of ski magazine; a sports journalist from a Slovenian newspaper; and a small group of skiing fans who are also regular consumers of sports television. On a final technical note: to keep their identities secret I attributed their statements by job or function.

Naturalist Origins of Slovenian Skiing Identity: Hills, Peasants, and the *Smukanje*

Alpine skiing with its attractive mountainous landscape in countries such as Austria or Switzerland or regions such as the Italian Dolomites, the French Alps, the American and Canadian Rockies, as well as Slovenia, addresses a collective identity. In Slovenia, alpine skiing with its natural scenery, tradition, rich amateur background, sporting events, media attention and national heroes is one of the main sports arenas in which Slovenian nationhood and national sporting identity were imagined and negotiated. After Slovenia's political secession from Yugoslavia with the so called "ten-day-independence-war" in 1991, the new nation-state needed new symbols of national identification. This transformative process has operated at all levels of people's lives: in culture, language, history, economy, tourism, cuisine, landscape, art, and sport. Among sports practiced on the (inter)national level in Slovenia, skiing certainly took the most prominent role in constituting the nation, the newly established nation-state and its symbols. Also, many tourist resorts, natural monuments, sights and places that had been perceived as symbols of Slovenian identification from at least the 19th century, were now successfully re-created or revitalized in accordance with newly established emancipatory ideologies. For example, Slovenian ski centers, particularly Kranjska Gora and Maribor, internationally recognized as ski resorts hosting World Ski Cup races, became intensively involved during winter seasons after Slovenia's independence in building national sporting iconography.

The Slovenian geographic and territorial situation alone has provoked constant national struggle since the concept of the nation and its identity emerged in Europe in the late 18th and, especially the 19th century, and later in the 20th century constantly reestablished (Anderson 1991[1983]; Gellner 1987; Hobsbawm 1990; Smith 2001, 1986; Thiesse 1999). In Slovenia, skiing has been represented as the prototype of "Slovenianness." Skiing allegedly already existed as early as the 16th. There is a documented story, well-known to all Slovenians, which says that traditional Slovenian downhill skiing was born in the region of the

Bloke plateau, south-west of Ljubljana. Since the 19th century the traditional Bloke skier has become the proto-skier of Slovenian modern skiing, and has gained new meaning and accentuation in recent media. In the 1990s in particular, details of this story had been often referred to by TV anchors, sports journalists, field reporters, studio commentators and sports analysts with an obvious passion and attention. They invoked the baron Johann Weikhard von Valvasor (1641–1693), a Carniolian scholar, who wrote precise reports on skiing activities in Carniola, (present-day Slovenia) in the 17th century. Carniola (Slovenian: Kranjska; German: Krain), a traditional and historical region of Slovenia, became in the 19th century constitutively important for creating the Slovenian national territory. As part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the region was crown land until 1918, officially known as the Duchy of Carniola (Slovenian: Vojvodina Kranjska; German: Herzogtum Krain). In 1689 in his nationally renowned book *Die Ehre Deß Herzogthums Crain* [*The Glory of the Duchy of Carniola*], Valvasor, nobleman, scholar, and polymath and member of the London Royal Society, described skiing by Carniolian peasants as *smukanje*—an archaic Slovenian term for, literally, “downhilling.” His comprehensive book is a description of Carniolian geography, nature, history, customs, and language of the time. In this monumental work he presented skiing as an “odd practice of sliding down snow-covered slopes” by the peasants on the slopes around Turjak, the Bloke Plateau and in surroundings (Valvasor 1977[1689]:94; Badjura 1956). This text was, in the past, usually perceived among Slovenian researchers and sports journalists as a key historical document revealing an indigenous status of skiing on Slovenian soil, proving that skiing was an ancient Slovenian tradition. But if we read it through the perspective of landscape, then it can serve also as a reference to a traditional correlation between skiing and the rural environment. In the period of Slovenia’s integration into the Yugoslavian Socialist reality, Slovenian skiing and its attachment to the specific natural setting, that is the alpine landscape, was often represented as an identification point of “Slovenianness” and was used particularly to identify divisions between “us” and “others,” between Slovenians and other Yugoslavs. Thus, we can see this sport inscribed into the Slovenian national landscape perhaps more deeply than any other sport practiced in this country because of its attribution to naturalist agendas.

Yugoslavia as Skiing Country: Slovenian Mountains, Skiers, and Medals

The Slovenians lived under the rule of the Habsburg dynasty from the 14th century until 1918, with the exception of Napoleon’s 4-year tutelage of parts of modern-day Slovenia—the “Illyrian provinces.” While the elites of these

regions mostly became Germanized, the peasants strongly resisted Germanization influences and retained their unique Slavic language and culture. In 1918, after World War I, the Slovenians joined with other southern Slav peoples in forming the State of Slovenians, Croats and Serbs (October 29, 1918) and then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (December 1, 1918) under King Peter I of Serbia, renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. After the World War II, the country has been part of the SFR of Yugoslavia from 1945 until gaining independence in 1991.

In the entire Yugoslav period, skiing as a relatively popular sporting pastime became perceived as a traditional Slovenian sport that was revived after three centuries. Because of its alleged long-standing tradition and precise territorial origin, downhill skiing was presented as an exclusively Slovenian sport, i.e., a non-hybrid, authentic national sport. Its reputation as the Slovenian national sport was further legitimized by the fact that it was poorly practiced in other parts of Yugoslavia. Thus, it remained exclusively attributed to the Slovenian people, a perception circulated all over the Yugoslav federation. Even within the discourse of brotherhood and unity that successfully united the Yugoslav nations until the 1980s, skiing preserved its “Slovenian character” and was posited as one of the most distinctive signifiers upon which Slovenianness was built without much objection. In late socialist Slovenia, in the 1980s, when antagonisms between Slovenianness and Yugoslavness arose, alpine skiing was used as a tool of socio-political mapping between the “Slovenian sporting identity,” showing its closeness to the “Western European identity,” and imaginings of the Balkan communities of the other Yugoslavs, nick-named “the Southern Brothers.” These competing symbolic geographies noticeably paved the way from the pre-Yugoslav and Yugoslav sporting body to the emancipated Slovenian skiing identity (Starc 2005: 64–88).

In a turbulent late Yugoslav political reality, skiing not only kept a privileged position in the national imagination of Slovenianness but growing international successes of Slovenian skiers during the 1980s gave it epic proportions. Alpine skiers, such as Bojan Križaj, Mateja Svet, Boris Strel, Rok Petrovič, Jure Franko and Nataša Bokal were the athletes who were presented with small crystal globes for the season’s best runner in particular ski discipline on several World Ski Cup podiums, World Championships podiums, and titles and Olympic medals made material the myth of skiing as the Slovenian national sport. Their astonishing accomplishments were promptly transformed by radio broadcasting, the press, and particularly by TV, into a matter of national pride and symbolic of the nation’s cohesion.

After Slovenia’s separation from Yugoslavia, skiing immediately became a euphemism for independence and

as an all-encompassing symbol of the Slovenian struggle for independence. All earlier skiing victories were perceived as Slovenian, not Yugoslav, even though they were accomplished under the Yugoslav flag. One of my informants, a Slovenian ski broadcaster, explained this situation as follows:

After the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia was not only faced with the situation that called for a clear definition of its identity, but also had for the first time in history a unique opportunity to present its specifics to the world. For example, before the world knew only of the successes of Yugoslav skiers. But the irony of this multinational country was that there were no Yugoslav skiers. There were actually only Slovenian skiers who represented abstract Yugoslav identity. Thus, Yugoslav medals were actually Slovenian ones. Also, Yugoslavia was often introduced as an alpine country due to its participation at skiing competitions, but this was due to the Slovenian Alps.

As we can see, landscape has never arisen from nothing. On the contrary, it is a part of wider social discourses which act as frameworks that include different combinations of national narratives, political myths, aesthetic and moral ideologies and signifying practices within which the landscape is considered to be national. For example, Boštjan Šaver in his two texts (2005a; 2005b:17–21) meticulously analyzed the cultural and historical attachment of Slovenian people to mountain setting. His analysis shows that different social domains (from politics, folk culture, religion to sport) have been intensively incorporated into the local and national mythology of Slovenian alpine culture. Based on evidence from those consulted, we can conclude that mountain landscape in Slovenia is not merely a physical environment appropriate for skiing, but it represents a cultural text involving questions of citizenship and experiences of national identity.

Ski Telecasts as Performances of a Nation: Slopes, Sceneries, Sights

In the Alpine countries of Europe—principally Austria—alpine skiing has been developed as distinctive television sport. The purpose of television sport in general is that it is constructed by TV producers as the only real sport. National TV services have played a significant role in this cultural transformation of sports, particularly of those whose attractiveness and development was directly caused by media and technology. Dynamics, dramaturgy, attractiveness, tradition, and the rich amateur background of alpine skiing were among the conditions which have made skiing so interesting for TV broadcasting.

In Slovenia, the eminent position of alpine skiing within the TV sports program schedule was clearly maintained

from the very early TV broadcasts of this sport in the 1960s. The process of Yugoslav disintegration at the end of the 1980s further underlined the importance of media as television took by far the most visible part in the cultural transformation of skiing. In more precise terms, as well as creating a potential TV audience, it also created an audience of consumers (for example, greater interest in alpine skiing; the production of national sporting heroes; the commercialization of winter sports and the visiting of ski resorts as a synonym for winter holidays). In Alvin Gouldner's (1976) words, television created a powerful dialectic of technology and ideology.

According to a nationally inspired reading of geography, the Slovenian landscape traditionally consists of four types: the Alpine landscape (the Alps, the Pre-Alpine Hills, and the Ljubljana basin), the Pannonian landscape (the Pannonian plain), the Karstic landscape and the Mediterranean landscape (the Adriatic coast, Littoral Slovenia). Here, the biodiversity of the country is particularly kept in mind. A similar proliferation of "typical Slovenian tourist attributes" is also confirmed by Slovenian national TV each year when the World Ski Cup visits Slovenian Kranjska Gora, for the men's giant slalom and slalom. These two central mediasports events take place in the prestigious pre- or post-New-Year's period, i.e., the "prime time" of the ski season. In this context, Slovenian TV viewers follow a relatively stabilized ritual: the host broadcaster of the events is Slovenian National TV, with many other foreign and worldwide TV services as "client" broadcasters tuned to its output. Twenty minutes before the start of the race, TVS 2 links to the Eurovision program, and then immediately starts with a promotional spot for Slovenia's natural landmarks, beginning with images of the prestigious tourist destination town Bled, its lake with its island; the highest Slovenian mountain peak of Triglav; the scenic beauties of the Julian Alps; the town of Lipica, the home of the thoroughbred white horses (these horses, better known under the Germanized name "Lipizzaner," were actually imported from Spain, and the stables at Lipica were imperial or at least of Habsburg's foundation, but this fact is in Slovenia even today perceived as the result of Austro-Hungarian imperialism); the Adriatic coast; the Planica Valley, the very symbol of the Slovenian ski jumping with the biggest ski jump in the world; the alpine ski resort Kranjska Gora with the hilly ski trails of the Vitranc Hill; the flat land of Pannonia the Postojna Cave, one of the breathtaking Karstic wonders, etc. All these landscapes, transformed into telescapes, represent not only physical geography or pure nature but national symbols with great cultural meaning. As the landscapes of alpine skiing are particularly related to natural settings and less urban sportscares (Bale 1994), this set of TV shots illustrating national landscape perfectly fit the alpine skiing as prominent "outdoor sport."

Pages 24–26 show some sequences of such “picture postcards” by the Slovenian TV director Stane Škodlar in 1999.

These continuously alternating images presented to viewers are combined in three pictorial phases:

- introductory or “establishment” shots: 1 live invitational panoramic view of the site of the event (the picture of Kranjska Gora where the ski race takes place); 2 opening graphic announcement of the event which is underlaid with the same panoramic picture as in the first shot;
- filling shots—pre-prepared tourist material of “picturesque national discourse”: 3 graphic image of Europe with the exposed silhouette of the Slovenian territory; 4 close up of Slovenia; 5 the picturesque graphic announcement of what you will see in the following shots, namely “the green piece of Europe”; 6–12 visuals of typical Slovenian spots: Planica valley as natural “temple” of Slovenia’s and world’s ski jumping; Kranjska Gora as well known winter resort; pastureland; the lake of Bled with its island; horses of Lipica; the sculpture of an ibex (as symbol of mountainous land) placed in the Triglav national park; traditional Slovenian house;
- “familiarization” shots: 13–14 show an approach to the ski resort of Kranjska Gora by a gradual narrowing of perspective onto the race site; 15–18 multi-perspective panoramic views of the ski polygon in live pictorial and pre-prepared graphic version.

These images were sent to more than thirty TV stations all over the world. During this demonstration of national symbols the telecaster Igor Evgen Bergant constantly referred to these Slovenian wonders:

I’m sure this afternoon we are going to be the witnesses of yet another successful Slovenian day in alpine skiing. The Slovenians can truly be proud of our beautiful country. And not only that: we can truly be proud of our beautiful ski centre Kranjska Gora, where the next skiing race for the World Ski Cup is going to take place today. (Said by Bergant commentating on the men’s slalom race in Kranjska Gora on TVS 2, December 21, 1999)

He also stressed that “we” truly have to be proud of “our beautiful homeland,” which represents us through such elite sports events all over the world. He furthermore emphasized that the Slovenian viewers were, just like Jure Košir, Mitja Kunc, Rene Mlekuž, and other Slovenian professional skiers, equally participating in this competition. Consequently, the individual’s predisposition to skiing was transformed into the typical characteristic common to all members of the nation. This kind of commentary invites the viewers into the presenter’s discourse, and thus builds a nationally shared experience within the domestic routines of the TV audience. Such a media-driven pretext constitutes the way in which TV spectators are engaged in constructing for themselves a solid image of a sporting

(skiing) nation and are aware of the fact that they, also, form part of it. Or, if I quote one of my informants, a Slovenian sports journalist:

You know, the Slovenian alpine skiing professionalism is importantly related to the natural resources we have. Look, the essence of the Slovenian story of skiing nation is actually hidden in this simple sentence ‘let’s go ski on Saturday and Sunday in Kranjska Gora or in Mariborsko Pohorje.’ So, I’d like to say that everything began in a family context. ‘Let’s go ski for the weekend’ was and still is a regular family ritual during the winter season in Slovenia. Definitely, we, the Slovenians are vitally connected with our mountains, hills and traditional ski resorts and with everything what is related to them. Don’t forget how successful we are in sporting Alpine climbing. Slovenia is an alpine country for sure. In Slovenia, there are excellent natural conditions for alpine skiing. So, without knowing this landscape context you can’t understand the symbolic power of the presence or the lack of success of our skiers. And TV has, with this natural background, significantly helped in transforming the alpine skiing into a national sport. When watching telecast of alpine skiing contest of World Ski Cup from Kranjska Gora or from Maribor, each Slovenian viewer and visitor identifies with these places, not to mention the huge national symbolism of another famous, almost sacred, Slovenian resort, the Planica valley where the ski jumpers fly the furthest in the world; over 200 meters.

Speaking in technical terms, this “picturesque postcard” (6–12) is a spot recorded in advance and tele-visualizes the highly symbolic beauty spots, inviting TV viewers all over the world to witness the national beauties of Slovenia. It is there to take the TV audience through the ritual initiation with the nation. The images are organized dramaturgically from a global to the local context: it starts with the graphic visualization of Europe (3) and then quickly focuses on the graphic silhouette of Slovenia—reminiscent of the image of a hen (4); gradually the graphics (5) are replaced by the views as from a window opening onto Slovenian tourist scenes (6–12); after that, the camera’s eye travels through the region and the location of the ski contest and presents the organizer’s location (13–15). At the end of this edited journey, the picture stops at the panoramic view of the ski polygon where the race takes place (15–18). By transforming landscape into televised and virtual mapping, the landscape is put *in perspective* on TV. It is like a tiny skin laid over the distant spatial structures of multilayered TV screening.

However, in analytical terms, this picturesque spot is more than just a collage of landscape. It is there to be considered as *résumé*, emblem or identity of the nation. It tells us that national landscapes are not just natural facts but socio-historical constructions. Numerous countries



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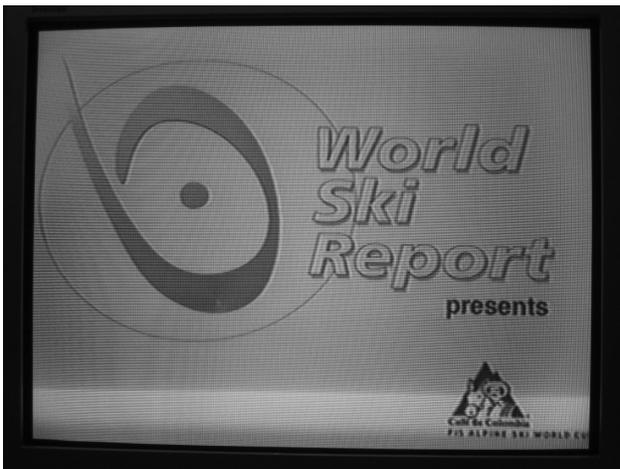
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maybe possess a complete or partial range of the same or similar elements (mountains, lakes, horses, flats, slopes, etc.) but *these* were imagined by Slovenian people and thus are perceived as something culturally specific and different from the others. This spot actually tends to be a résumé of the cultural construction of the Slovenian national landscape by showing it as neither as exclusively flat (like Hungary) nor mountainous (like Austria) but as a mixture of everything. This gives us an impression that the Slovenian landscape is not homogenous but regionally heterogeneous.

Historically, it is probably the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century which puts on a pedestal the conception of the Slovenian landscape based on the variety of natural resources of the country. But it was after Slovenia's independence in 1991 that the national character of its territory and landscape was abundantly revitalized with a new political rhetoric showing the country as "the heart of Europe," "Europe in small," an "ideal résumé of natural sights" where one can find in a such small place so many different aspects (for example, the Alps, the Pannonian flatland, the viniferous regions, the hilly land, the Karstic region with caves, the littoral region along the North Adriatic sea, etc.) that elsewhere exist only separately or in a large territory. During the period of preparation for Slovenia's accession to the European Union, the concept of Slovenia as a harmonious synthesis of contrasting landscape, as a country of moderation, as a country with a unique strategic territorial position (the crossroad of Romance, Slavic and Germanic cultures and bridging the gap between developed Europe and the unstable Balkans) became increasingly negotiated as political, tourist, promotional and symbolic *topos*.

Television Grounding of Skiing: Mountains, Ideologies, Identities

Television is today probably one of the most effective sites where mediated ideologies and identities of all kinds are imposed, contested and negotiated.² Or, if I paraphrase Louis Althusser's (1993 [1976]) writings on ideology a canonical text for cultural studies: in order to become or stay real, a live TV sports event has to be represented by institutions or mechanisms of cultural transformation (such as the TV screen, TV technology;³ further, the instance of the commentator, anchor person or reporter recognized as legitimized or authoritative) and consumed by the audience (as virtual members) of the media event.⁴ In other words, what the sports telecast discourse produces is an ideology in which TV viewers are urged to live in an imaginary social relation to that televised reality, and which is in sharp contrast with their real conditions of existence. That is how ideology operates and how televised sport goes real.⁵

The sports telecast is a form of television representation inevitably creating different constructions of a national community, of other nations and of "typical" national images. So it contributes to local histories and the perspectives of how we look at them and understand them. Sports telecasts reproduce national landscapes, symbolic geographies, territorialities, social boundaries, national mythologies, legends, famous traditions, sharing histories, established successes, common legacy and sport heroes through the production of the *TV picture* as a starting point of all televised constructions.

As discussed, telecasts of alpine skiing have been of significant importance in building the Slovenian nation through sports media narration from the very early TV broadcastings of this sport. The mediatory function of live TV alpine skiing events as transmitters of a kind of *collective memory* (Halbwachs 1968), i.e., national, cultural, historical, as well as sport memory, was clearly present from at least the 1970s onwards. When interviewing people from the realm of Slovenian alpine skiing TV broadcasting, many of them agreed that alpine skiing telecasts occupied a special position, not only in the history of the Slovenian television sports broadcasting, but in the entire history of Slovenian live TV broadcasting. Roughly, alpine skiing telecasts in general are about the very basic human intention of how to frame the widespread space and the extensive ski action. More precisely, they are about the way television technology is able to subdue the physical nature; the dispersed environment or the external world.

Since the plebiscite for Slovenia's independence from Yugoslavia, the media embarked on an extensive recounting of the story "of how Slovenians became the Slovenians." In this context, telecasts of alpine skiing were a good opportunity to remind the national TV audience of how skiing became an "autonomous" and "authentic Slovenian tradition" and the "Slovenian identity" a skiing identity. The new country needed a positive self-image and positive national story. The successes of racers in alpine skiing became a significant catalyst in constructing the national identity. Successful individuals had become the symbols of the nation-state.

The independence of Slovenia activated some old traditions and symbols. The highest Slovenian mountain Triglav was one of them. The following example confirms the constant presence of the symbol of "mountain" in Slovenian skiing imaginary, and also in commentary discourse:

Unbelievably, our Kunc and Schönfelder are sharing first place at the moment. There is no difference between them ... they are separated only by the Peca Mountain. (Said by Bergant commenting men's night slalom race in Schladming, January 22, 2002)

Peca Mountain is the border line mountain between Austria and Slovenia and has also many literary (Lovšin,

Hribar, and Potočnik 1979; Strojín 1980) and photographic (Stele 2003) instrumentalizations in Slovenian literary history, as well as in mountain and travel literature. The mountain reference here is interesting because the Slovenian skier lives on the Slovenian side and Rainer Schönfelder (the Austrian skier) on the Austrian side of the Peca. What is especially worthy of attention is that this sentence shows a multiple building of nationhood between both skiers by means of a natural sign symbolizing different cultural meanings (for example, the mountain as a natural barrier, border line, etc.). Briefly, separating them is truly nothing but the “mountain.” Or yet another example:

Drago Grubelnik is taking the lead at the moment ...
he is truly the right son of the Pohorje. (Said by Bergant
commentating men's night slalom race in Schladming,
January 22, 2002)

Grubelnik is another Slovenian skier from the hilly Pohorje region of the Styria (Eastern Slovenia). In the 1990s the meaning of the ‘mountain’ became connected with the national political and tourism discourse in Slovenia when building its base on the materialization of natural monuments. The presence of these two discourses makes natural monuments more important and important monuments more national. Tourist slogans such as “Slovenia—my homeland,” “Slovenia—the country on the sunny side of the Alps” behaved as eminent political paroles for Slovenia's emancipation from other parts of the former Yugoslavia. Additionally, in Slovenian society there exists a very deep-rooted imagination of a traditional correlation between mountains and national symbolism. The highest Slovenian mountain Triglav is intensively involved in formal state iconography, not only in sport issues and sport-related purposes, but above all as the most useful and appropriate symbol of Slovenianness (Šaver 2005). The image of the Triglav (which in the Slovenian language signifies the mountain with three “heads”/peaks) is also portrayed on the Slovenian national flag, important accompanying requisite of the Slovenian sporting heroes (beside the national anthem). This national instrumentalization of the Triglav Mountain as the very symbol of the Slovenian collective self-consciousness was taken even further in the media. In the last decade it has been the media which has spread the message: “Each Slovenian should conquer the top of the Triglav at least once in his/her lifetime” (in order to prove their Slovenianness). So the Triglav Mountain is mobilized as the national identity signifier. In the case of alpine skiing broadcasting, the Triglav represents a cultural text conveying a TV materialization of the mountain, both visually and verbally.

When the World Ski Cup visits the Slovenian Kranjska Gora or Maribor, the two regular skiing polygons for men's and women's giant slalom and slalom, the Triglav Mountain is often part of the Slovenian ski telecasts. Such takes,

pre-planned prime positions, television's looking for aesthetical or visually attractive shots, etc., play the role of the so-called filling event which indicates that these images are far from being created by accident. On the contrary, they are intentionally inserted in order to address the collective identification of domestic TV audiences.

The alpine skiing broadcasts are thus increasingly strong reproducers of such domestic symbolism, ensuring a more collective representation of the mountain. The mountain is represented as something that has been “eternally there,” that could be perceived as being deeply and naturally rooted, physically static or geographically immovable, and even culturally stable; it thus serves as an orientation point.⁶

Boštjan Šaver's (2005) extensive research on the presence and symbolism of alpine culture in Slovenia shows that the lives of Slovenians are so mountain-oriented because mountains are eminent natural monuments of the national space and place. Indeed, the place Slovenians occupy has much to do with alpine *topophilia* and mountainous perceptions, attitudes and values. Roughly, the centrality of mountainous landscape in Slovenia is strongly determined by naturalist ideology and topophilic identity. The role of mountains in human experience is centered on the elusive meaning of a home-place. Therefore, we could assert the pervasiveness of mountainous places in constructing Slovenian culture and national identity. Our case study is maybe not the most explicit one, but it can support the argument that the construction of alpine skiing TV broadcast in a pervasive way penetrates into the imaginary of Slovenized mountainous landscape.

As Šaver showed, the Triglav Mountain is first and foremost a construct of the predominant state ideology, which erupted from different national discourses of media, sport, tourism, folk culture, politics, and religion (Šaver 2005). Thus the Triglav can be understood as the cultural text and can confirm the link between the imaginary of mountainous landscape, skiing and the national imagination (Mal 1983). As Slovenian anthropologist Starc claims, the media, and particularly telecast directors and TV commentators (as the influential controllers of national sporting identifications and reproducers of popular symbolism) project national features into the sports because they automatically assume that the TV viewers perceive themselves in terms of national affiliation (Starc 2005).

Contests between Skiers as Competitions between Nations: Landscapes, Aesthetics, Shots

The 1992 Winter Olympics were the first at which the Slovenian skiers competed as a team of independent Slovenia (Klausen 1999). The presence of the Slovenian skiers at this highly recognizable international sporting event was,

in the Slovenian press as well as in TV sports broadcasts, exposed as Slovenia's journey from "the Balkans" into "Europe." Live participation of Slovenian audiences in this giant televised sporting event enabled national imagining to an enormous degree. After the overwhelmingly glorified skiing story in the 1980s, Urška Hrovat, Špela Pretnar, Alenka Dovžan, Jure Košir, Mitja Kunc, Katja Koren and many other professional skiers represented a new wave of "Slovenian hope and success" in the 1990s. Their achievements reminded crowds and audiences and individuals that they were all members of a particular nation-state. Television sports broadcasts enabled the transmission of sporting idols, spectacles, and sportsmen's "battles for homeland" into people's homes. In accordance with state ideology, the media did not only represent sport as a game between individuals or groups but also as a competition between nations. And this competition could be found even at the level of broadcasting. One of my informants, the director of ski telecasts on TVS 2 indicated yet another "tacit competition"; the one between different national TV services:

I can tell you from my own career as the director of ski telecasts that each and every national telecaster wants to present his own country in the best way. When the World Ski Cup races took place in Slovenia, our national television was responsible for covering this sport event. And of course, I wanted to present to domestic and foreign TV audiences not only the sporting competition between skiers on a ski polygon, but also, through this competition, promote our country, our nature, and our beauty spots. To do this, it is necessary to select and insert attractive shots presenting typical Slovenian natural monuments, such as the Triglav Mountain, or well framed shots of alpine valleys, and so on. Also, when I directed ski telecasts I always wanted to see what other directors, particularly from Austrian National Television [ÖRF] which

is still the leading one in the field of ski telecasting, do and therefore I also wanted to compare my visions and work with their achievements. When Austrian and German telecasters began inserting attractive and aesthetically interesting, almost picturesque shots onto alpine landscape symbolizing their country, we [Slovenian telecasters] immediately started following this model, as Slovenia has had a lot to offer, in terms of natural beauty, to the foreign TV audience.

So we can roughly establish that ski telecasts do not represent only a sporting competition between skiers, but also a symbolic competition between nations, between national telecasters, between national landscapes and their value, etc. If the skiers compete for podiums and medals, then the directors of the ski telecasts compete with each other by looking for aesthetic and visually attractive filling shots, as is shown in our comparative case, produced by Slovenian and German telecasters. Their common characteristic lies in extraordinarily distinctive shots (see below and page 30) representing typicality in national landscape: 1 the *kozolec*, Carniolian freestanding vertical drying racks as symbol of traditional Slovenian rural landscape; 2 the Slovenian Julian Alps as the symbol of Slovenian alpine landscape; 3 the splendid view of the Bavarian Alps, capturing a flying bird in the shot; 4 an idyllic German mountain village near the winter resort of Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

The technical and symbolic similarity of these shots produced by different national TV services (1–2 produced by Slovenian Television; 3–4 produced by Bavarian Television) indicate the assumption that there is a shared technical and even aesthetic codification according to which the screening is mutually negotiated among telecasters. As these shots do not show the action or stadium event but a filling spot (pre-planned prime positions, etc.), the following examples indicate that images of landscapes are not an arbitrary substitute for the absence of skiing action, but



1



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an intentionally inserted filling element which fulfils the function of aesthetic background. Furthermore, landscape frames are always culturally constructed, even if they are of pure physical nature (Hirsch & O'Hanlon 1995; Low & Zúñiga 2003). In addition, the TV rhetoric and technical production have the power to re-define and set up the representation of a particular sport through a specific ideology which transforms natural monuments into eminent cultural texts. We could say that television transforms landscape into teleescape. To sum up, ideology is not explained only on the verbal level (through the commentary) but also on the visual level of skiing telecasts (namely, in the selection of TV pictures, in the reduction of televised space and place, in the selection of the visual material by the director, in the way the TV picture is addressed by the commentator, in the visual representation of results etc).

When dealing with televised national landscape through a national sport, the key word is visibility. For TV sport everything turns around how to make something not only visible but also *televisible*, that means that the way of TV presenting is always culturally constructed and never neutral. Television has enormous power to re-create image of landscapes of sport and to transform them into a new reality called *mediascape*. My ethnography confirms that ski telecasters created the attachment of this sport to landscape on the basis of a complex set of evidences and descriptions which already existed in a community and were given by literary reproductions, geographical mappings, archaeological, historical, folkloristic and ethnological sources, etc. Because of this, TV presentation of the Slovenian national landscape through alpine skiing is an integral component of processes of constant re-creation and re-definition of Slovenian national identity.

The description and analysis of how TV landscape constructions function in telecasts of alpine skiing point to the fact that the relationship between landscape and skiing



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is predominantly perceived as an interactive social process between the people, including the ski telecasters, and the environment or national community in which they live. A wider overview of the process, which shapes popular alpine symbolism, related to the presence of natural-ist ideologies in skiing, signal that TV creation of alpine national landscape through ski telecasts is actually mostly concentrated on visual comprehension of alpine landscape as home, native country, domestic place, and homeland. When telecasters take concrete skiing competition into the field of the national spatial context in which the race takes place, they actually pay attention to emotional and symbolic modalities of national landscape and to the relations between TV audience and the place they inhabit.

National landscapes are *invented* as naturally given and collectively *imagined*. Natural objects and monuments (mountain, rock, cliff, steep, lake or waterfall) can also create and stimulate aesthetic landscape sensations, primarily because they are beautiful and not because they belong to certain people or nation. However, the notions such as "homeland," "motherland" and "homescape" create the feelings of a people's natural and fundamental attachment to their land (Buttimer 1980:166–187), and therefore perfectly serve a nationalistic rhetoric. In our case, it can be confirmed that the alpine skiing telecasts significantly implant the feelings of attachment in the Slovenian national TV audience to the televised skiing landscape by showing it as national. But the gist of the linkage between the landscape, skiing and the TV audience is related to specific values which are taken as entirely Slovenian. Among such values inspired by the strong national symbolism, the skill in alpine skiing (like mountaineering) takes a position of civic virtue in a nation. One of my informants, a regular consumer of sports television, illustrates the domestication of skiing in Slovenian landscape like this:

I could hardly imagine practicing skiing without its specific domestic spatial context. Alpine skiing and a specific rural landscape are deeply intertwined in the Slovenian collective memory. To my mind, this is the only sport whose attractiveness and authenticity—in its pure, traditional and non-competitive version—is importantly related to undamaged nature and virgin white slopes. Traditional alpine skiing was really about an idyllic winter life. However, modern competitive skiing is just a bad substitute entirely subordinated to the principles of media and ski industry.

Both, skiing (as national sport) and its alpine environment (as national landscape), serve as the most proper, indigenous, autochthonous, authentic and natural thing in Slovenian nation. Additionally, my informant stressed some exploited starting-points for identification of nationalistic populism prevailing in Slovenia and in its region (for example, “intact,” “virgin” or “undamaged” nature, mountains, winter landscape, idyllic life, soil, continuity, etc.) which are not very different from those of “romantic” cultural constitution that was implicated in all major conflicts and repressive acts of great extent in the region (from Hitler’s *Nationalsozialismus* in Germany of 1930s⁷ to Milošević’s national communism in Serbia of 1990s). From the point of view of nationalist ideologies, national sports appear as indigenous practices within the nation. From the point of view of naturalist ideologies, national landscapes appear as primordial representations of the image or the picture of the nation. The shift that could be made from the Slovenian skiing imaginary to the Nazi glorification of nature meaningfully supports the thesis of French ethnologist Anne-Marie Thiesse who wrote: “Rien de plus international que la formation des identités nationales” [Nothing is more international than the formation of national identities.] (Thiesse 2001:11).

Television Domestication of Space: National Places, Ski Polygons, Skills

The magic of televised skiing lies in the cultural transformation of the space where the alpine skiing competition takes place. Thus, the TV coverage of a sporting event represents a specific mutuality of action between television technology and ideology. On one hand, the ideology is pre-encoded into the usages of technology, on the other the TV screening of sporting event is always culturally standardized for appropriate decoding of televised images. The TV picture is far from being socially or ideologically neutral because it is constituted by a subject, namely by a director or national TV presenter, who is the main source of all kinds of ideological messages. As we could see previously in the Slovenian case, ski telecasters are keen to visualize and consequently promote alpine skiing as a

national sport and its scenes as places of national importance. Often mountains, white slopes, winter scenery, ski polygons, resorts of contests, and other natural monuments or spatial representations of ski races are represented as visualizations of national character or as parameters which indicate differences between “us” and “others.” For example: slalom trails are usually represented as lighter, more controllable, more televisable, while downhill trails are often shown as more difficult, more dangerous (some of them even deadly), more extensive and far more complex and problematic when transforming them into TV pictures. Slovenian TV presenters like to glorify difficult men’s downhill races such as those two “classical” and legendary examples from Swiss Wengen and Austrian Kitzbühl. However, as Slovenian telecasters are intensively involved in making a symbolic hierarchy of national ski polygons, they tend to compensate for “our ski disadvantages” concerning ski polygons by making quick comparisons between the slalom track in Slovenian Kranjska Gora with, for example, those in the prestigious Austrian Schladming or Italian Sestriere. They immediately stress the extreme difficulty of Kranjska Gora’s track by placing it among the steepest slopes in the entire World Ski Cup, while some other slopes abroad are perceived as gentle or even artificial. And telecasters like to visualize this by using extreme camera angles (the framing of many cameras set at different locations which produce presences and absences; the expansion of angle variation; the use of fascinating perspective achieved from a helicopter or side-moving camera; the fragmentation of shots in order to suggest the unity of skiing action and its environment; a selection of different takes and shots, particularly of mid-shots, close-ups and cuts which create the aesthetic and ideological effect of maximum action in minimum space) in order to illustrate the real difficulty and steepness of the domestic ski polygon.

By showing or commenting on the difference between “our ski polygon” and “other ski trails,” TV presenters tend to produce, implicitly or explicitly, positive self-images and negative representations of “others.” It can be argued that telecasters and commentators usually privilege the “authenticity” of the national lands they come from and put them above the foreign ones. Ski polygons are sometimes visualized as wide-open scenery and at other times as limited region or territory. In the case of alpine skiing telecasts, the space—in terms of *openfield*, natural scenery or landscape background—and the territory—represented as ski terrain or polygon—stay co-existent and undivided till the very moment when the television approaches them and makes the extraction of the territory from the space. Accordingly, the ski polygon is a new or reorganized and remodeled form of the space. TV technology splits or cuts the integral natural co-existence of the landscape and the polygon. In other words, the landscape and the polygon



Examples of slalom ski polygon and surroundings, broadcast by TVS (Kranjska Gora, Slovenia)

are one in nature but they inter-mingle coherently only in the perspective employed on the site of the ski event. When watching the same event on TV, the correlation between the landscape and the polygon becomes considerably changed and reorganized in favor of ski polygon and to the detriment of that what is beyond. In spite of the fact, that the TV image of the space in many cases remains extensible, flexible, ubiquitous, and made for signaling its continuity with the winter landscape, it is also an indisputable fact that certain territorialization is the constituent element and the inevitable by-product of cultural transformation of sporting event.

Commentators and telecasters create—on a visual as well as on a verbal level—many national characterizations of ski resorts, skiers and their skills and, by doing that, they not only set out the connection of national affiliation, popular symbolism, *Blut und Boden* ideology, and tourist propaganda in the broadcasting of sport performance, but also construct differences between “us” and “others.” When analyzing telecasts on the discursive level, I discovered a surprising number of references to positive signifiers of the Slovenian skiers, skills and nature as opposed to negative signifiers of others (table 1).

Table 1 Skiing “Our-ness” and “Other-ness” through Parameters of Landscape and Skills

Parameter	Skiing “Our-ness”	Skiing “Other-ness”
Reference to Landscape	Slovenian Snowy Mountains	Croatian Snowless Hills
Reference to Territory	Slovenian Sunny Side of the Alps	Austrian Shady Side of the Alps
Reference to Space	“Our” Skiing as Part of European One	“Southern Balkan Brothers Non-Skiers”
Reference to Dimension	Small Nation vs Great Ski Stories	Great Nations vs Negligible Ski Issues
Reference to Place	Engaging Organizer of Ski Races	Wan Organizer of Ski Races
Reference to Field	Slalom Field as One of the Steepest	Italian Slalom Field as Almost Flat
Reference to Terrain	Complex Ski Trail in Kranjska Gora	Unexacting Finnish Ski Polygon
Reference to Urbanity	Modern Slovenian Ski Slope	Underdeveloped Czech Winter Resort
Reference to Origin	Slovenian Autochthon Tradition	Croatian Skiing Hybridism
Reference to Culture	Slovenian Established Skiing School	“Exotic Countries” in Skiing Circus
Reference to Nature	Slovenian Innate Talent for Skiing	Forcibly Learned Skills of Croats
Reference to Blood/Ground	Skiing as Genetic Feature of Nation	Skiing by Training, not by Nature
Reference to Morality	Slovenian Sporting Fairness	Italian Sporting Opportunism
Reference to Character	Slovenian Warmth	German Coolness
Reference to Aesthetics	Refined Technique of Slovenian Skier	Robust Run of Swedish Skier
Reference to Maturity	“Our” Well-Experienced Matador	Unknown Young Japanese Contestant

Television already limits the spectator's view by the physical dimensions of the camera and the screen. A limited choice of views is down to the predominance of the director's perspective: the viewer sees only what he is allowed to see. Television manipulates the spectator's view. For the spectator, the reality of the picture is the result of the normative process of the internalization of the values and beliefs of the cultural system. As claimed by Dayan and Katz, the sporting TV broadcast is the end product of political, cultural, aesthetic, and financial bargaining between three partners: the organizers (organization of the sports event), the broadcasters (re-production of the event) and the TV audience (consumption of the event) (Dayan & Katz 1992:54–55). As the table presented above indicates, the landscape of skiing telecast is always a negotiated construction within a community or society.

Conclusions

This article has provided data that can be summarized in a few final thoughts. First, it concentrates on a post-socialist nation that is seldom featured in international anthropological literature, and is also under-represented in international academic debates. Second, alpine skiing as a national sport has become a vehicle for the creation of meaningful discourse about national identity, predominantly through the purist and naturalist ideologies which presented skiing as a most autochthonous and natural Slovenian sport and as the cultural extension of the Slovenian national landscape. Alpine skiing has played a distinctive role in the Slovenian nation-imagining process, all the more because it was strongly regulated by the denial of hybridism. Downhill skiing has tended to be perceived as pure, authentic, and indigenous Slovenian sporting practice. Third, direct telecasts have played a crucial role in transforming Slovenian traditional skiing through its modern competitive televised version into the national sport. Therefore, alpine skiing became perceived as distinctively TV sport. In telecasts, Slovenian skiers' successes have figured mostly around the national performative discourse about Slovenia as a "young, little and independent country" which has achieved success. As Ginsburg & Larkin (2002) point out, media worlds open up an extremely widespread place where anthropologists can find numerous new terrains. Fourth, televised skiing, imbued with enormous national symbolism, also played a kind of role in the processes of Slovenian separation from Yugoslavia. While perhaps not crucial—as, with all kinds of sports and cultural emissions, ski transmissions have a seasonal nature—it was not negligible. Certainly, it was a kind of identification point which helped in creating difference from others. Additionally, the successes of Slovenian skiers as points of collective identification were promptly incor-

porated into the national landscape iconography. Ski telecasts have confirmed the placement of skiing imaginary in the symbolism of national landscape and by tele-visualizing they have also re-created the spectators' identification with it. Furthermore, ski telecasters help the stylizing and idealizing of both skiing and its attachment to the natural setting in accordance with the predominant national ideology. Because of this, both televised sport and the televised landscape appear as socio-historical constructions and cultural processes between people (TV audience as national community) and place (point of national experience). If, in accordance with the Lévi-Straussian famous yet stereotypically antagonistic distinction, *cultura* vs *natura*, we see skiing on the side of culture, and landscape on the side of nature, then we can conclude that ski telecasts have shown a great potential, with their mechanisms of cultural transformation, to enable and build a symbolic correlation of this traditionally established distinction exactly at the point of national symbolization and identification. More precisely, ski telecasts are not only technically constructed products but also culturally standardized channels for mediating national identity. Maybe they are not a central element in the entire enterprise of Slovenian nation-building, but they contribute, in a visceral and penetrating way, to the idea of nationhood and to the broader story of a certain national identity.

Endnotes

1 This contribution has been made on the basis of my research project "Skiing as Slovenian National Sport: Socio-Historical Constructions and Contemporary Media Narrations" (2006-08), which is being carried out at the *Institute for Anthropological Research* in Ljubljana. For more about this project see the bilingual (Slovenian-English) publication *Outline of Anthropological Projects (Bulletin IAR 1)*, edited by Martin Žužek Kres.

2 On television as a particular technology, transmitter of ideology, cultural form and producer of nationwide audiences see Fiske & Hartley 1978; Williams 1990.

3 On the ideology of TV technology in the case of alpine skiing broadcasts see Kotnik 2001.

4 Here I prefer Daniel Dayan's and Elihu Katz's study on media events, particularly sections on sports events (1992, pages 66–68, 126–127, 130–133, 141–143, 206–207).

5 On the relationships between media, particularly television and sports see the following works: Goldlust 1987; Rowe 1999; Whannel 1992; Wenner 1989, 1998; Rader 1984.

6 For more about how the mountains are instrumentalized among people and create an important part of folk landscape in the mountainous region of Utah see Charles S. Peterson, *Look to the Mountains: Southeastern Utah and*

the La Sal National Forest (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975).

7 For the ideological overlap between Nazi ideas and environmental agendas, and particularly for the Nazis' glorification of nature see the landmark book *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich* (2005), edited by Bruggemeier & Cioc & Zeller.

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