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Travels from Winterfell to King's Landing: The imaginary geographies of Game of Thrones and the creation of new transnational heritage landscapes through pop-culture

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TRAVELS FROM WINTERFELL TO KING'S LANDING

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Christoph Doppelhofer

Abstract:

The fantasy series Game of Thrones (2011–2019) has become a global pop-cultural phenomenon with a reach far beyond the television screen. Through extensive on-location filming, the series has linked its diegetic world of Westeros and Essos to countless heritage sites across Northern Ireland, Croatia, Spain, Iceland, Malta and Morocco, overcoding them with their on-screen identities through narratives and special effects. Fictional locations such as 'Winterfell' or 'King's Landing' have since become popular tourist destinations, leading to an emergence of countless tours, experiences, products, and destination marketing intended to sell the 'authentic' fantasy to those who are seeking these imaginary geographies. However, Game of Thrones' manifestations across its filming locations go beyond tourist products but created a complex landscape of new spatial, visual, material, and performative signifiers. Re-framing and restaging scenes, dressing up and using fictional toponyms while documenting and sharing these performances through social media photography have territorialised the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones onto the filming locations. These practices have created liminal spaces that share aspects of pilgrimage, heritage- and nation-building processes, and established a new transnational heritage space with its own transnational imagined community, habitus and 'hyper-traditions'. Furthermore, these new diegetic heritage landscapes are affecting previously established global perceptions and local identities. The post-conflict contexts of Northern Ireland and Dubrovnik illustrate how asserting new narratives, even if they are entirely fictional, can both overcome and create dissonant heritage as well as resolve and evoke memory conflicts. A multi-sited visual ethnography has been undertaken across Game of Thrones' filming locations in Northern Ireland (UK), Dalmatia (Croatia) and Andalusia (Spain) to examine not only how Game of Thrones specifically has impacted the filming locations but how modern mass-media, social media and pop-culture is affecting how heritage is created, used and engaged with in the 21st century.

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To Leslie of House Doppel-Quade, First of Her Name,
my one true Queen, Lady of Glencoe and Mother of Kittens, the Patient, Bringer of
Motivational Drinks, Listener to Doctoral Rambling and the Protector of my Sanity.

I am yours and you are mine.

SPOILER WARNING

Even though Game of Thrones has celebrated its 'Iron (i.e. tenth) anniversary' in 2021 and many of its twists and turns have become (in)famous in their own right, I nevertheless want to place a warning for all those who have not seen Game of Thrones and still plan to do so. Throughout this dissertation crucial plot developments and twists will be mentioned or alluded to, either out of necessity to describe and analyse the phenomena encountered in the field or for my personal pleasure and enjoyment.

Thus, reader, be aware, this be thy last chance to catch up on any episodes not yet seen, for this dissertation is long and full of spoilers!

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Winter is coming to a place near you

Vignette 1.1: A Day in King's Landing[1]

When I caught my first glimpse of the magnificent walls in the distance, I could not help but quite audibly announce my arrival: *"King's Landing!", I said almost too loudly.* Although I have already visited Winterfell, Meereen and the Iron Islands before, to finally arrive here *felt like a dream come true. Fully prepared with screenshots and a list of must-see locations I found online*, I had donned the yellow shirt bearing the Crowned Stag of House Baratheon, so everyone could see why I was here! *For so long I had been envious, seeing countless people posting online about exploring these places. Now it was finally my turn!* It was still early in the morning, but the little harbour outside the walls was already packed with people (Fig. 1.1). Flanked by the imposing Red Keep on the right and the monumental city walls on the left, I immediately recognised the waters of Blackwater Bay. Short of some digitally inserted towers, *it looked exactly as I remembered it!* Several tour guides, each surrounded by a group of tourists, were holding up screenshots from iconic scenes while retelling what happened here. Pair after pair of tourists walked down the pier to have their photo taken while staring toward the horizon, posing as Sansa Stark and Petyr Baelish – some even wore costumes! In hindsight I was lucky that I didn't book a tour after all and chose to explore on my own—in the short time I spent taking photos, at least four more tour groups walked past, so I could overhear everything the guides had to say about this place and what happened here in Game of Thrones.

When I finally entered the city, *I felt like I was transported right into the series; I am almost embarrassed to say so, but it felt magical!* Every nook and cranny felt familiar, as if I had already been here before. Turning around each corner, *I was almost half expecting to*

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[1] This semi-autoethnographic vignette is based on onsite observations, interviews, and the author's own experiences as a fan visiting Game of Thrones filming locations. It aims to illustrate how Dubrovnik can be entirely experienced through a 'Game of Thrones'-lens, exemplify the extent to which the subject of this research has manifested itself within the affected heritage landscapes and set the tone of the ethnographic research conducted. Thereby, all places are referred to by their fictional counterpart. The italicised sections are direct and paraphrased quotes taken from interviews and overheard conversations.

run into Tyrion Lannister and Bronn strolling down the street. Discovering mannequins of show characters in front of several stores, it turns out that I was half-right. Almost every few meters there was a small shop or business offering some sort of *Game of Thrones* related items or experiences: Game of Thrones 'Officially Licensed' merchandise (everything conceivable from shirts to Monopoly), Game of Thrones tours, Game of Thrones inspired crafts, arts, and drinks, a 'Game of Cones' ice cream shop.
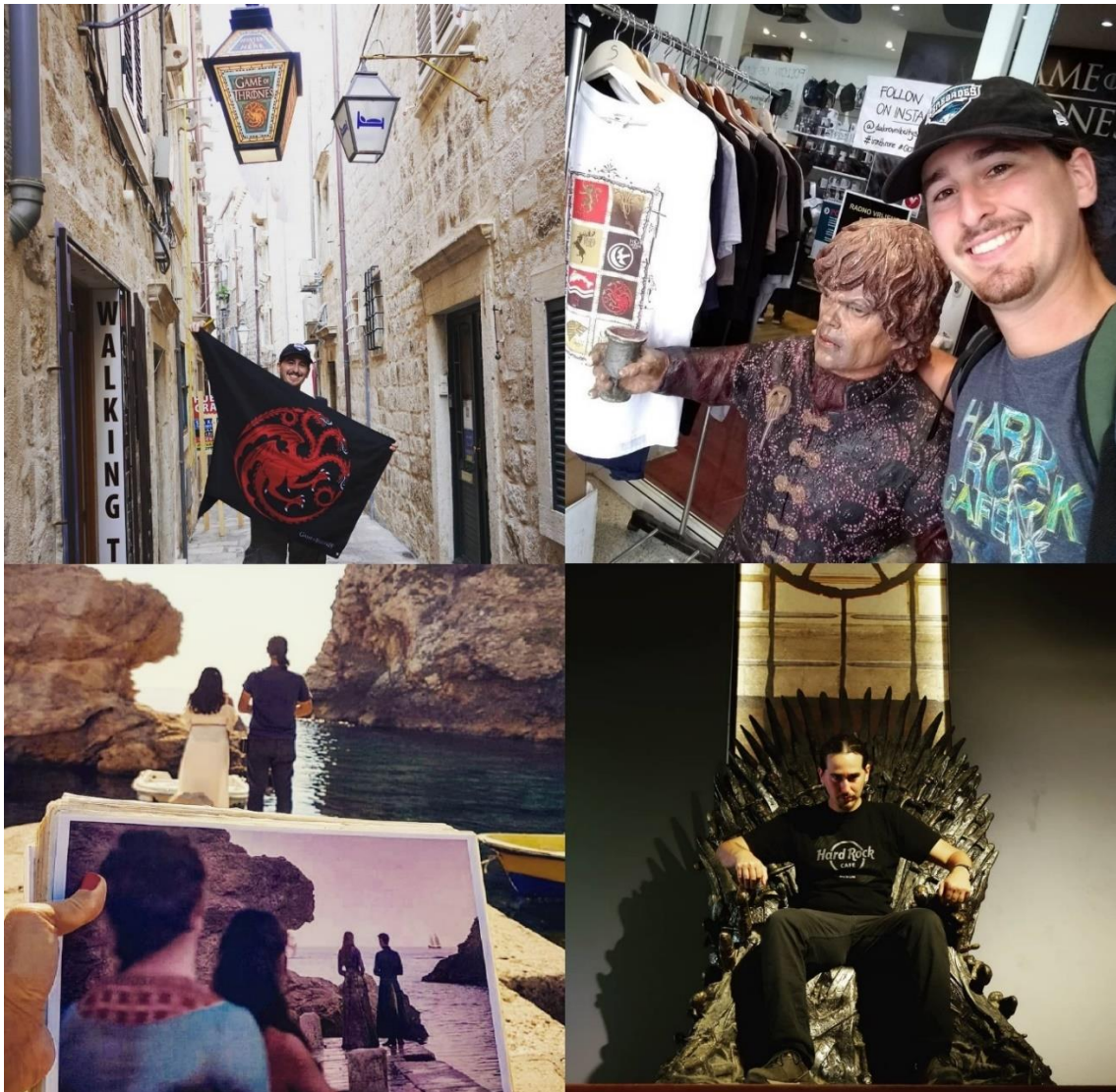
Figure 1.1: My Instagram snapshots from King's Landing. Posing with a Targaryen banner; meeting Tyrion Lannister; gazing at the horizon at Blackwater Bay; sitting on the Iron Throne.

While strolling through a quieter back alley, I could suddenly hear someone shout *"Shame! Shame! Shame!"*, followed by the sound of a bell and laughter. I had to be close! Turning around the corner, I beheld the stairs and knew I arrived at the most infamous site of King's Landing. I stood on the steps from which the Queen Mother Cersei Lannister undertook her Walk of Shame, a naked parade through the filthy streets undertaken to

atone for her 'acts of falsehood and fornication' while a bell-wielding Septa (a female clergy member) repeatedly shouted the word "Shame!". From the top of the stairs, I saw the source of the commotion. A group of tourists was taking turns playing Cersei and the Septa, while a third filmed their re-enactment. Some bystanders started to shout "Shame!" as well; I joined in, unable to resist. Moments after one group had finished recording their video, the next group in line took their place. I needed to have the same photo, so I approached someone, sheepishly asking: *"I know it sounds weird, but would you be able to take a photo of the back of my head on the top of the stairs?"*. To my relief, they knew exactly what I wanted. They had taken the same photo just a minute ago.

This experience became the norm: everywhere I went, I saw like-minded travellers. There were those who were easily recognisable, re-enacting the same scenes or wearing clothing that showcased their allegiance to some of the Great Houses of Westeros, like my own House Baratheon. Often, *I would hear someone humming the theme tune*, or I would overhear them make comments or remarks, naming familiar places, stories and characters, when I passed them in the streets. And some, I cannot explain how, but *you just could feel that they are here for the same purpose as you are*.

Figure 1.2: Blending reality with fantasy: Dubrovnik in the foreground, King's Landing in the background (photograph of Dubrovnik blended with screenshot of King's Landing from Season Four, Episode Two (episode numbers henceforth abbreviated as S##E##, e.g.: S04E02)

To escape the hustle and bustle of the crowded streets of King's Landing, I decided to hop on a ferry and cross the Narrow Sea to visit the little island of Lokrum – supposedly, there was an Iron Throne to sit on! Although I haven't seen any indication or advertisement for it

anywhere across the city, several people I knew and had visited before, told me about it. Strolling around the island, I found out, to my excitement, that there was indeed an entire Game of Thrones exhibition inside an abandoned monastery! And there it was: The Iron Throne! *Was this the one they used in the series?* Sitting on the throne in this large space, surrounded by banners and elevated on a podium, with a crowd of people queuing in front of me, I almost felt *like being the Lord of the Seven Kingdom*, granting audiences to my subjects in the throne room of the Red Keep. *I felt powerful. I cannot wait to brag about it to my friends at home later!*

Back on the mainland, I ended the day by climbing the walls to enjoy the marvellous panorama over King's Landing. While not physically present, it was almost as if the monumental buildings such as the Sept of Baelor and the Red Keep were right in front of me (fig. 1.2). As the sun disappeared behind the red roofs of the city, I swipe through the countless photos I took during the day. *I select the best ones, adding hashtags like #WalkofShame, #IronThrone, set the location as "King's Landing" and upload them to my Instagram.* It takes only a few seconds until the first 'likes' start pouring in from people all over the world.

1.1. *Game of Thrones* – The most successful television programme in history

> You're mad! It's too big. It's too complicated. It's too expensive. HBO doesn't do fantasy. – George R. R. Martin during first meeting with showrunners David Benioff and Dan Weiss (Cogman, 2012, p. 5)

Game of Thrones is an American fantasy television programme made by the broadcaster HBO and aired 73 episodes across eight seasons between 2011 and 2019. Based on the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin, Game of Thrones is set on the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos and follows several feuding noble families who are fighting over the Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros whilst the threat of the otherworldly White Walkers, icy spectres who want to eradicate humanity and cast an everlasting winter, the Long Night, over the world, is looming in the North beyond the Wall.

The success of Game of Thrones is attributed to the complex characters and plot lines full of political intrigue, gruesome violence, sex, and shocking plot twists, as well as the

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intricate world-building and high production value that features not only large-scale battles and ground-breaking special effects that had never been seen on a television programme before, especially in its later seasons, but also the fully realised, highly detailed and believable pseudo-medieval fantasy world of Westeros and Essos, which has been crafted through extensive on-location filming at countless cultural and natural heritage sites across Northern Ireland, Croatia, Spain, Malta, Iceland and Morocco and by visually enhancing them with stunning practical and digital effects. Game of Thrones changed the television landscape forever. Once unthinkable for television production, its boldness, scale and budget became the gold standard in the industry, with everyone wanting to create the 'next Game of Thrones' – so far with limited success.

During its eight-season run, Game of Thrones broke record after record. It won 59 Primetime Emmy Awards out of 160 nominations, thus becoming the most Emmy-awarded 'Scripted Television Series' in history, only surpassed in total number by the ongoing sketch-comedy classic Saturday Night Live (1975–now) (Television Academy, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Its viewership significantly grew every season and peaked with an estimated 44.2 million viewers per episode for its eighth and final season in the US alone (Pallotta, 2019), not factoring in any other of the 200 countries in which Game of Thrones has been broadcast or the fact that the series has been the most pirated television programme in history (Gluck, 2019; Van der Sar, 2019). The Season Eight premiere was illegally downloaded or streamed over 54 million times within 24 hours of its release while the seven episodes of Season Seven have allegedly accrued more than one billion pirated copies in total a week after the season's final episode aired (Clark, 2019; Rodriguez-Amat, 2019). While there are no official, publicly available statements by HBO itself, some industry commentators estimate that this series through selling subscriptions, distribution right and licensing fees might have accrued up to $2.28 billion in profits between 2011 and 2019 (Entertainment Strategy Guy, 2019; Thombare, 2019). Throughout its run, the series it built a large and committed global fanbase which discusses and theorises in dedicated online fora, social media, podcasts and YouTube-channels. A survey at the time of its final season came to the result that almost a third of the US population considered themselves as either 'avid' (17%) or 'casual' (15%) fan of Game of Thrones (Morning Consult & The Hollywood Reporter, 2019).

1.2. *Game of Thrones* – A global pop-culture phenomenon

'What do you mean, you haven't watched *Game of Thrones*?' – most people.

More than a critical and commercial success, Game of Thrones has become far more than 'just' a television programme but a global phenomenon with an impact reaching far beyond the screen, dominating the pop-cultural[2] landscape of the 2010s and has been inescapable even for those who have never seen a single episode. From colloquial expressions such as 'Winter is coming', citations in countless other pieces of media and pop-culture, to referencing its themes and imagery in social, political and academic debates, the series has been inescapable. Like Luke Skywalker's parentage or the condition of Bruce Willis' character in *The Sixth Sense* (1999), countless aspects, including its themes, characters, iconography, quotes, major plot points and, particularly relevant for this research, production details of Game of Thrones have seeped into the public cultural

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[2] The term 'pop-culture' will be used throughout this thesis to highlight the difference to 'popular culture'. Both 'popular culture' and 'pop-culture', usually in contrast to 'high' or 'elite' culture, have been used interchangeably for a myriad of different phenomena, in many publications even side by side without further clarification. Since the 19th century the term 'popular culture' has been used for local, regional and national traditions and fashion, sports, and folk culture which are often very restricted to a certain area, either linguistically, culturally, or geographically but also to describe mass entertainment media of the second half of the 20th and the current 21st centuries and includes everything from cinema and television, over comic books, anime, fantasy novels, to pop-music and videogames (cf, Storey 2009, 2018). While the former examples are usually regionally limited to craft a unique sense of identity and *longue durée*, the latter is a commodified mass-culture and rejects, by design, any territorial limitation as it is aimed to be sold indiscriminately to as many people as possible around the globe. It rarely attempts to establish a link with the past (apart from nostalgia fads which mainly reference previous short-lived pop-culture fads), as it only tries to stay relevant until the next big thing has been found, resulting in a rather *courte durée*. While some define that 'popular culture constitutes art from and for the people' (Lanier, 2002, p. 1261), although popular culture in form of invented traditions has often been created and fostered by the elite for nation-building (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), pop-culture constitutes art from media producers to media consumers and is intrinsically commercial. According to Danesi (Danesi, 2019, p. 3), 'pop culture stands out as atypical, since it is not tied to any particular folk or artistic tradition' but 'often rejects, ignores, or adapts' and 'arises from new trends and needs, constantly revising itself according to mass opinions and tastes'.

knowledge through pop-cultural osmosis. It became part of the global collective experience of media consumers.

Figure 1.3: Game of Thrones across media. Recreation of the Game of Thrones intro in the Couch Gag of *The Simpsons* (S23E15); Ben Wyatt receives an Iron Throne as an anniversary present in *Parks & Recreations* (S06E14); Game of Thrones inspired round of Jeopardy (E7146); 'Game of Chairs' with muppets of Tyrion and Cersei Lannister, King Joffrey Baratheon, Eddard and Robb Stark, and Daenerys Targaryen in *Sesame Street* (S45E4522); SodaStream advertisement recreating the 'Walk of Shame' for someone who chose to buy water in plastic bottles (SodaStream 2016); Side-mission 'Winter is a Bloody Business' in *Borderlands 2 – Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon Keep* referencing locations, characters and plot points of Game of Thrones (Gearbox 2013) (from top left to bottom right).

Due to its popularity, Game of Thrones has been referenced in countless works of media, such as films, television shows, advertisements, and videogames, including pop-cultural staples such as *The Simpsons* and *Sesame Street* (fig. 1.3).[3] The animated adult sitcom

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[3] Extensive yet still incomplete lists of references in other media can be found online, e.g.
https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/ReferencedBy/GameOfThrones;
https://gameofthrones.fandom.com/wiki/Game_of_Thrones_references_in_other_media; (accessed 03.05.2022).

South Park has modelled an entire trilogy of episodes after Game of Thrones (S17E07–09), and one of the most prominent traits of Ben Wyatt's character in the popular sitcom *Parks & Recreations* is his obsessive Game of Thrones fandom.

While Game of Thrones' manifestations beyond the series itself have become too numerous to list, the following examples illustrate some of the more surprising expressions of the popularity of the series. The language learning app Duolingo now offers courses in the fictional High Valyrian. The American Red Cross called for blood donations in their 'Bleed for the Throne' campaign (fig. 1.4). Newly discovered species such as the sea slug *Tritonia Khaleesi* (de Vasconcelos Silva et al., 2014), the beetles *Gymnetis drogoni*, *Gymnetis rhaegali* and *Gymnetis viserioni* (Ratcliffe, 2018), and the *Targaryendraco* genus of pterosaurs (Pêgas et al., 2021), have all been named after Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion, eternalising these characters within palaeontological and zoological classifications.

Figure 1.4: Poster showing the campaign for the 2019 American Red Cross blood drive in official partnership with HBO, photographed in April 2019 in Belfast.

Figure 1.5: Advertisement for 'Game of Thrones inspired weddings' at Langley Castle, photographed in March 2018 at Newcastle upon Tyne Railway Station.

However, not only newly discovered fossils, slugs and insects receive the honour to carry such names, but there has also been a surge of new-borns being named after the 'Mother of

Dragons' and other characters from the series. In 2018 alone, 4,500 US children were reportedly named after Game of Thrones characters, over 560 of which were Khaleesi (the royal Dothraki title of Daenerys Targaryen) – a choice some parents apparently regretted after the character in a (badly received) twist turned into a mad mass-murderer in the final episodes of the programme (Murphy, 2019; Shepherd, 2019). Theming other important life events like weddings after Game of Thrones to celebrate both relationship and shared fandom has also become popular at the height of the series' popularity – although, given the violent track record of how weddings usually conclude in the show, this might be one of the more questionable choices (fig. 1.5). Even the text processing program this dissertation has been written with is familiar with the more prominent fictional names such as 'Meereen', 'Daenerys Targaryen' or 'Dothraki' and will highlight and correct misspellings of these words. Not only has Game of Thrones become omnipresent on various screens and media, used for referential humour and to sell and brand countless licensed or inspired products and services, and for fans to learn fictional languages and leave a lasting mark on both their scientific discoveries and offspring, but it has also entered everyday life and become an integral part of understanding and communicating past and present culture, politics, science, and society. Expressions such as the previously mentioned 'Winter is coming', the motto of House Stark, has become a way to describe an impending, inevitable and potentially dreaded event, or calling somebody a 'sweet summer child' when they voice innocent or

Figure 1.6: Image tweeted by Donald Trump on 02.11.2018 on his (now suspended) Twitter-Account @realDonaldTrump, posted 02.11.2018; https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/10583887006 17498625; pic.twitter.com/nk2vKvHuaL; (accessed and downloaded 15.11.2018)

naïve views, has since been added to the repertoire of pop-culture inspired idioms and vernacular such as referring somebody's weakness as their 'kryptonite', or frustratingly repeating events as 'Groundhog Day'. Most infamously, former US-President Donald Trump used a variation of the quote 'Winter is coming', even in Game of Thrones' iconic font, to announce via Twitter sanctions against Iran, illustrating how much the series, its themes and iconography have gained cultural, social and even (geo)political relevance (fig. 1.6).

'Being like Game of Thrones' became an easily understandable metaphor for modern day political turmoil, treachery and intrigue, as well as for explaining and communicating many aspects of cultural and social history. Even though Game of Thrones itself draws from many historic events and cultural references across the world, it became common to refer back to those inspirations as 'being like Game of Thrones'. This has been acknowledged by countless authors, scholars and universities who seized the opportunity not only to start researching Game of Thrones and its source material itself but utilising its fantasy as a lens through which to explore, explain and debate various subjects for both academic and general audiences. This includes medieval and ancient history (Larrington, 2016; Lushkov, 2017), feminism and gender studies (Frankel, 2014; Gjelsvik & Schubart, 2016), philosophy (Irwin, 2012), climate change (Milkoreit, 2019), theology (Brake, 2022), law (Weber, 2018), or international relations (Young et al., 2018), to name just a few. Some universities started offering courses and workshops that utilise Game of Thrones as a vehicle to convey various subjects, most notably Harvard University which runs the course 'The Real "Game of Thrones": Culture, Society, and Religion in the Middle Ages' since 2017 (Aggarwal-Schifellite, 2019), while I personally attended a workshop at Durham University that explored war crimes in Game of Thrones, as well as two interdisciplinary conferences at the University of Seville and University Pablo de Olavide (2019), and the University of Innsbruck (2021) that explored a myriad of different aspects of the fantasy series. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that also the vast and complex topic of heritage, a subject that is relevant not only within the imaginary world of Game of Thrones but indeed for its production and reception, can be examined from a Game of Thrones perspective.

1.3. *Game of Thrones* – A new diegetic heritage

Figure 1.7: Map of 'The Known World': The continents of Westeros and Essos; https://wallpaperaccess.com/game-of-thrones-map-desktop (accessed 04.05.2022).

Game of Thrones is such an all-encompassing phenomenon, it had and still has a significant impact on how we see, experience, and engage with our surroundings. This extends to its filming locations and the heritage sites utilised to portray its imaginary world of Westeros and Essos (fig. 1.7). Watching Game of Thrones is more than just following a story and its characters. Viewers are taken on an imaginary journey across numerous fantastic vistas, monumental architecture, and picturesque landscapes. Over the course of its 73-episode run, Game of Thrones has continuously built an intricate and complex world, creating a vast, rich and ever-expanding imaginary realm with a distinct and memorable culture, history, and geography. This has been achieved by montaging countless heritage sites across six different countries in Europe and Northern Africa into one imaginary world by infusing them with new meanings and identities through practical and digital effects and putting them into new creative contexts to fit the fictional narratives and geographies presented in the series. The Roman amphitheatre of Italica and the Moorish Alcazar Palace in Spain, the medieval harbour town of Dubrovnik and the Fortress of Klis in Croatia, Castle Ward and Inch Abbey in Northern Ireland, Fort Manoel in Malta, the reconstructed Stöng Viking settlement in Iceland and the Berber village Ait-

Ben Haddou in Morocco; all those sites could not be more diverse. However, while being set in different environments, vary significantly in age and context, and have different cultures, identities, traditions, and histories attached to them, Game of Thrones acts as connective tissue and created a link between these very disparate sites regionally, nationally and transnationally.

For many viewers, including myself, most of these reimagined, recontextualised representations of these heritage sites were the first visual and narrative contact and thus leaving a lasting impression – with significant consequences for the previously existing heritage landscapes. Soon Game of Thrones fans would start flocking to those distant lands to see 'Winterfell', 'King's Landing' and all the other fantastical places and breath-taking vistas they had seen on screen, and shortly thereafter, countless businesses, destination marketing organisations and the heritage sites themselves would start catering to this new demand by selling the heritage Westeros and Essos, a heritage that would soon become synonymous with the real-life geographies and heritages of the filming locations (fig. 1.8). The imaginary realm of Game of Thrones has not only been transposed from the screen onto its filming locations, but it has created its very own spatial heritage entity now stretching from Iceland in the north to Morocco in the south, from Northern Ireland in the west to Croatia in the East, ruled by the imagination of the 'diegetic heritage' of Westeros and Essos.

Figure 1.8: 2017 marketing campaign by London Stansted Airport;
https://mediacentre.stanstedairport.com/six-game-of-thrones-locations-you-can-visit-from-stansted/
(accessed 02.05.2022)

The term 'diegetic' refers to the spatiotemporal world in which a story takes place and is directly experienced and encountered by its characters (Bunia, 2010; Fuxjäger, 2007). While still predominantly used in film music and videogame theory when examining 'diegetic music' or 'diegetic sound', the music and sound heard by the characters (in contrast to the score or soundtrack that is typically only audible to the audience) (e. g. Bordwell & Thompson, 2008, p. 478; Jørgensen, 2011; Winters, 2010), other features of the internal world of a story can be deemed 'diegetic'. These include the physical spaces and geographies in which the narrative takes place (e. g. Issacharoff, 1981; Lefèvre, 2009), or, like in the case of Game of Thrones, the heritage that acts as a societal and cultural frame of the characters' lived experiences. The world of Game of Thrones, with its architecture and art, history and tales, religious beliefs and mysticism, customs and costumes, heraldry and iconography, inform the characters' understanding of the world as well as their actions and motivations. However, given that this heritage has been projected onto real-world heritage landscapes through extensive on-location filming, it transcends the internal imaginary world of Game of Thrones and can now also be found, experienced and, most importantly, performed at its filming locations. Thus, I am referring to the heritage that is created, experienced, and performed within this imaginary world of Game of Thrones and other heritages coming from narrative fiction as 'diegetic heritage'. Although it might appear self-evident to refer to this kind of heritage as 'imaginary', 'fictional' or 'fictitious', these designations would inadvertently imply a factual accuracy and veracity of other supposedly 'real' heritages. However, all heritages are a fictionalised and imagined version of some past and thus always to varying degrees fictitious (Harvey, 2001; see Chapter 2; Lowenthal, 1998; cf. Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Therefore, the term 'diegetic heritage' more accurately reflects the media and narrative fiction origin of the kind of heritage and heritage performances that are examined in this dissertation.

Unlike previous studies on the impact of film and television on its filming locations, which are predominantly concerned about realising economic potential, destination management and marketing, authenticity, or immediate visitor experiences (see Chapter 2), the following research will examine the effect of fantasy fiction and pop-culture in general on filming locations from a heritage perspective. The case of Game of Thrones raises several questions about the relationship between fiction, reality, heritage and space in the context of modern visual mass-media and pop-culture. Thereby, Game of Thrones and its

imaginary world of Westeros and Essos will be utilised as a vehicle to examine and answer the following questions:

(1) How can the diegetic heritage of imaginary worlds, created through mass-media and pop-culture, manifest itself tangibly and intangibly within the landscapes it has been projected onto? How are these fictional places, spaces and narratives promoted and sold to audiences and fans, and to what extent are these diegetic heritages adopted?

(2) What impact does modern mass-media and pop-culture have on the way heritage is used, experienced and engaged with in a globalised, digitised world? What are the continuities and discontinuities in the creation and performance of heritage?

(3) What role do modern tourist practices and visual culture, such as digital smartphone photography and social media, play in creating and performing heritage?

(4) How are diegetic heritages, like those created through Game of Thrones, transforming the meaning, identity, and spatial relations of real-life heritage landscapes on a trans-national scale?

(5) What are the consequences of reinterpreting established heritage landscapes with new imaginary narratives and identities for the perception of both international visitors and local communities?

All these questions and their examination have significant implications for established concepts and understandings of the character and relevance of heritage in the 21st century. To answer these questions a multi-sited immersive ethnography is used. Fieldwork has been conducted across three regions used for filming Game of Thrones, Northern Ireland, Dalmatia, and Andalusia, between June 2018 and September 2019, where I have observed, documented and analysed the myriad of different ways the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones has not only expressed itself within the heritage landscapes but also has become an intrinsic part of them.

After providing an overview of existing research, debates and discussions surrounding the impact of works of fiction and imaginary geographies on heritage landscapes (Chapter 2), I will describe the theoretical and methodological approach of a multi-sited immersive ethnography that has been conducted for this research (Chapter 3). This is followed by a description of the fieldwork locations and the physical manifestations of Game of Thrones

within its cultural heritage landscape (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 examines the impact of guided tours that present and sell an 'authentic' fantasy landscape to fans of the series and how even an imaginary landscape can appear real in hyper-reality. Subsequently, there will be a focus on fans performing Game of Thrones within the landscapes through on-site and online practices. It will be analysed how these practices territorialise the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones onto the filming locations through staging and re-framing scenes, using fictional toponyms and utilising social media photography (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 illustrates how many of these practices have created liminal spaces that share aspects of pilgrimage, heritage- and nation-building processes, and how Game of Thrones established a new transnational heritage space with its own imagined community, transnational 'hyper-traditions' and 'spatial memes'. The final chapter showcases how these new diegetic heritage landscapes are affecting previously established global perceptions and local identities of the post-conflict contexts of Northern Ireland and Dubrovnik. These two case studies will illustrate how asserting new narratives, even if entirely fictional, can both overcome existing and create new dissonant heritage as well as resolve and evoke memory conflicts (Chapter 8).

This research, like Game of Thrones itself, also wants to take the reader on an imaginative journey through the world of Westeros and Essos, explore its rich culture and heritage and the community that inhabits it. It aims to inspire to think creatively about how we engage with our world, heritage and media. And lastly, although not initially planned as such, it aims to evoke some pleasant memories and reminisce about a time before the winter of global crises came upon us, when we were but 'sweet summer children' ourselves and the biggest issue seemed to be the disappointing final episodes of the world's biggest and most successful television programme.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STORY SO FAR
From Fiction to Heritage

Since the early 1990s, it has been suggested that non-tourist activities, including consuming various forms of media, could increase visitor numbers, create tourist expectations and influence the image of a destination (Butler, 1990; Pocock, 1992; Urry, 1990). Soon thereafter, the first significant studies to determine how films raise awareness of destinations, how they influence the decision-making process to travel and the impact on tourism were conducted (R. Riley et al., 1998; R. Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Tooke & Baker, 1996). Some of the most famous and often cited examples are *The Sound of Music* (1965) in Austria, *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) in New Zealand (Beeton, 2005; Graml, 2004; R. Peaslee, 2010; Roesch, 2009), and recently, of course, *Game of Thrones* in Northern Ireland, Croatia, Spain, Malta, Morocco, and Iceland.

Being still considered a 'niche industry promoting locations used in films, an academic niche discussing the phenomena and indeed a small industry promoting the use of places as a place marketing strategy to local strategic elites' in the early 2010s (Crang, 2011, p. 212), these industries and cohort of academics are neither niche nor small anymore. Like 'product placement' through which companies promote their brands – most famously James Bond, who is known to drive Aston Martins and more recently exclusively using Sony devices – there are now many places that are hoping that 'destination placement' would stimulate expenditure and employment associated with the production as well as for knock-on effects such as further film productions and more recently tourism. Often, they compete about the favour of production companies by offering incentives such as waiving taxes and even granting additional financial support (Hudson & Wing Sun Tung, 2010; Owens & Rennhoff, 2020; Ramsey et al., 2019). For example, the dark comedy *In Bruges* (2008), vulgar and violent as it may be, was a love-letter to the romantic city in Flanders and became a feature-length location destination advertisement, inspiring many, including myself, to go and visit 'fucking Bruges'.

2.1. Reel Research: From film-induced tourism to diegetic heritage

The phenomenon of increasing numbers of people visiting destinations portrayed in films and television, sparked the interest of academics in the last three decades (cf. Connell 2012; Domínguez-Azcue et al. 2021; Nakayama 2021). Termed 'film tourism' (Buchmann, 2010; Roesch, 2009), 'movie-induced tourism' (Busby & Klug, 2001; R. Riley et al., 1998), 'film-induced tourism' (Beeton, 2005), 'cinematic tourism' (Tzanelli, 2007), or, to also include the growing relevance of television productions, the increasingly popular 'screen tourism' (Connell, 2012a; Kim et al., 2009), this field describes, identifies and discusses various tourist activities related to film and television. However, these terms as well as the associated research exclude and subsequently largely disregard the effects of other narrative media, most notably literature, which has produced a large body of research on the impact of literary tourism parallel to the above-mentioned research on film and television (Squire 1994; Herbert 2001; Robinson and Andersen 2002; Crang 2003; Light 2012; for an overview see Çevik 2020). Although the accessibility, visuality and the mass-dissemination of film and television have changed the scale, or, as Beeton (2005, p. 53) puts it, 'film is to literary tourism what the Boeing 747 was to mainstream tourism – a major booster for mass tourism', the mechanisms remain the same. From Homer's *Iliad*, over Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code,* literature has led to surges in tourist movements for centuries and remains popular (cf. Rose 1998; Badone 2008; Light 2012). Given that 'the 21st century has seen the rise of innovative narrative extensions grouped under the term transmedia storytelling, significantly expanding the scope of a television series into an array of other media, from books to blogs, videogames to jigsaw puzzles' (Mittell, 2015, p. 180), there have been some attempts to introduce more inclusive terminology to bridge the gap between tourism associated with film, television, literature and other forms of narrative media, such as 'media tourism' (Reijnders, 2011a) or 'adaptation-induced tourism' (R. M. Peaslee & Vasquez, 2021; Pennacchia, 2015), both of which casting their conceptual nets either too wide or too narrow, as 'adaptation-induced tourism' only considers film and television adaptations from literature, while 'media tourism' in a highly mediated world could be interpreted as including almost anything, even non-narrative forms of media. Therefore, like the case of heritage created from narrative fiction, it would be more accurate to speak of 'diegetic tourism'. This term not only reflects the specificity of this type of tourism that is inspired by spaces and

heritages created through narrative fiction, but also acknowledges that this practice is not limited to just one form of media (Jenkins, 2006; see Chapter 1; cf. Rajewsky, 2002).

Despite being a prolific field of research with countless studies published each year on diegetic tourism, most studies remain very limited in their approaches. Often, research questions are still not going beyond questions of how many tourists have been 'induced' through film or television (Abd Rahman et al., 2019; Beeton, 2005; Tkalec et al., 2017; Tooke & Baker, 1996), site management and marketing (Bolan & Kearney, 2017; Croy & Heitmann, 2011; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006a; R. Riley & Van Doren, 1992), and questions on tourist motivations (Araújo Vila et al., 2021; Busby & Klug, 2001; Macionis, 2004; R. Riley et al., 1998), repeatedly reiterating the same points and coming to similar conclusions with only the name of the film or television programme changing, something the field has been criticised for in the past (Connell, 2012a; Reijnders, 2016a). Studies that are less concerned about the visitor numbers of economic aspects usually focus on tourist experiences, mainly in the context of guided tours (e.g. Couldry 2005; Roesch 2009; Reijnders 2011), thereby, not only leaving out individual travellers but also often not acknowledging what consequences these experiences have upon the destinations as transnational contact zones and how they are transformative not just for travellers but for the travel destinations (M. Robinson & Picard, 2016; H. Silverman, 2015). First studies published on Game of Thrones tourism very much remain in the above-described tradition (Bolan & Kearney, 2017; Depken et al., 2020; Gómez-Morales et al., 2022; A. Mitev et al., 2017; Tkalec et al., 2017; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017). Only few studies are concerned with the impact diegetic tourism has on the places and spaces themselves but are often limited in describing the dissonance and irritation within local populations that are caused by tourists (Light, 2012; Mordue, 2009; Pratt, 2015). Although there has been an increasing amount of literature on the impact of media on the perception and representation of landscapes and heritage through film and television (M. Beattie, 2016; Crang & Travlou, 2009; Lukinbeal & Zimmermann, 2006; Tzanelli, 2007; Tzanelli & Yar, 2016), it has been mainly research on literary tourism that embraced its intersections with heritage (Crang, 2003; Herbert, 2001; Light, 2012; Orr, 2018; M. Robinson, 2005; M. Robinson & Andersen, 2002). However, particularly with literary tourism, there has been a certain attitude and perception of elitism present, as those who engage in those heritage practices have been described as 'well educated tourists, versed in the classics and with the cultural capital to appreciate and understand this form of heritage' (Herbert, 2001, p. 312).

Furthermore, these rely on the existence of these places in the real world and their reiteration of established imaginaries and identities that are associated with the heritage. So-called 'fantasy lands', completely fictional worlds that are 'physically non-existent' in the real world as often portrayed in fantasy and sci-fi novels (M. Robinson, 2002, p. 51) can usually only be realised and territorialised in visual media such as television and cinema. While there are many cultural and geographical references embedded in the texts of *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, before their adaptations on screen, nobody would have been able to pinpoint 'Hobbiton' and 'Edoras' or 'Winterfell' and 'King's Landing' on a non-fictional map. This has changed with those diegetic spaces being placed over their filming locations. However, thus far, no comprehensive research has been conducted on how the diegetic heritage of such imaginary worlds have not only become part of the heritage they have been projected onto, but heritage in their own right.

2.2. Diegetic heritage and place-myths

Diegetic heritage becoming part of the real-life heritage landscape is not a new phenomenon. Although the case study of Game of Thrones stands out due to its recent cultural reception and its spatial extent, works of fiction using heritage to convey narrative and subsequently impacting the narrative of heritage sites is not a novelty and has always influenced how they are perceived in society, from antiquity to the present day. Places have myths, historical events and figures attached to them, forming an integral part not only of the identity of the places themselves but also the surrounding communities (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Imagination, created through ancient myth, literature or more recently visual media such as film and television, projected on heritage sites and landscapes inscribe new 'place-myths', a set of place-images that hold 'various discrete meanings associated with real places or regions regardless of their character in reality' that might be 'partial and often either exaggerated or understated, may be accurate or inaccurate. They result from stereotyping […] or from prejudices towards places or their inhabitants' (Shields, 1991, pp. 60–61). Arguing that landscapes are always constructs of the imagination projected onto them, Schama claims that 'once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery' (Schama, 1995, p. 61). This can be extended to the process of tourism, as Rojek argues that 'myth and fantasy play an unusually large role in the social construction

of all travel and tourist sights' to be 'extraordinary' places (Edensor, 2001; 1997, p. 53; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Whether these place-myths, imaginaries and ideas attached to the heritage landscapes have historical veracity or are modern works of entertainment is of little to no importance, as heritage and history 'serve quite different purposes' (Lowenthal, 1998, p. 104). However, more than a debased version of history for cultural dupes (cf. Hewison, 1987), heritage is an important vehicle for popular memory and identity formation (Harvey, 2001; N. Johnson, 1999; Nora, 1989). While conceptions of heritage have become far more nuanced in the last decades, there was, and in many cases still is, a cult of authenticity that is obsessed with historical, cultural and material veracity and accuracy of heritage (Crang, 1996b; Holtorf, 2005, pp. 112–114, 2013; Lowenthal, 1998, pp. 37–40). Terms such as 'Disneyfication' or 'commodification' as derogatory descriptors remain popular when dealing with heritage in the context of mass-tourism and its representation in pop-culture to this day (Hewison, 1987; Kennedy & Kingcome, 1998; Scarbrough, 2021; Waitt, 2000). Particularly pop-cultural engagement with heritage is easily dismissed as 'Disneyfication' of heritage, a term that often acts as 'accusation of insufficient authenticity and a cultural battle cry' (Frank, 2016, p. 200). Therefore, if even supposedly 'real' history and heritage is easily 'Disneyfied', giving entirely 'fictional' histories and heritages any credence has long been unacceptable in the so-called 'Authorized Heritage Discourse' (AHD), a concept coined by the pivotal work of Laurajane Smith (2006) that describes the power-relations between those who can and cannot declare what is and, almost more importantly, what is not heritage. This discourse is usually in favour of national and elite authorities as well as validation through expert knowledge. However, these discourses have become increasingly challenged by 'the popular' (M. D. Robinson, 2011). Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, pp. 8-9. 11) argue, that given that heritage is always selected by the present from an imagined past for current use 'there is an almost infinite variety of possible heritages, each shaped for the requirements of specific consumer groups', thus making heritage 'what and where we say it is: it is the "we" in these contexts, not the object itself that determines the authenticity'. Smith (2006, p. 44. 47) correctly assessed that '"heritage" is not a "thing", it is not a "site", building or other material object', heritage is a cultural process and performance that 'had to be experienced for it to be heritage' (cf. Haldrup & Bærenholdt, 2015). Therefore, the focus of this research, although there being countless tangible manifestation that will be presented particularly in Chapter 4 to give a sense of the spaces that can be encountered, lies on the cultural processes and performances that surround these things, sites and places

and give them meaning. Still, physical places and spaces remain important physical anchors for these performances and play a significant part in the heritage-making process (Crang, 2013, Chapter 7). Figlio (2003) observes that connecting narratives and memories to objects and places gives them a tangible reality and makes them more convincing. Orley (2012, p. 37) states that 'even if it is set in motion by the people in those places […] places retain the traces of what has happened here within their physical make-up', they remember events and performances that *took place* there. Given that the past is always imagined, and the fantasy of Game of Thrones has been happening in the frame of its filming locations, it is not far-fetched to assume that imaginations held in popular memory through pop-culture can be perceived in the same way. As generations have now developed their understanding of the world, of history, heritage, society, through the cinema, television, and more recently, the smartphone screen (cf. De Groot, 2016), it should not come as a surprise that visitors might treat the 'imaginary' world of Game of Thrones as well as its imaginary history and heritage not any differently as the 'real' world with its own imaginary past. Even more so, the 'liminality between fiction and reality' might be precisely what makes such locations and narratives stand out in the first place and makes their newly created heritage particularly attractive and 'extraordinary' (M. Beattie, 2016; Reijnders, 2009, p. 174). Like Baudrillard (1994, pp. 47–48) described, history was 'the last great myth', however, its visualisation through cinema and photography led to both its secularisation and subsequent disappearance.

Therefore, fictions can become as much part of a place's heritage as historic events, showing the palimpsestic nature of place, space and heritage by constantly adding new realities and imaginations. While most literature on the impact of fiction and fantasy attached to physical heritage spaces reduces these imaginations to tourist consumption and their experiences while doing so, they have significantly larger societal and cultural implications for the wider perceptions and receptions of the sites and their surroundings as the following examples aim to illustrate. Throughout history, works of fiction have not only become part of the narrative and cultural significance of many places, but sometimes locations have also been physically altered to fit the fiction. And in a few select cases, the fiction was the sole reason for a site's existence. The diegetic heritage of the fiction has become the actual heritage of the filming location.

2.3. The heritagisation of fiction and fantasy

2.3.1. From Troy to Hobbiton

The myths and historic imagination of Homer's and Vergil's epics have been of significance in both the search for and interpretation of Troy since ancient times. These works of literature have not only inspired Heinrich Schliemann and many others since antiquity to find the fabled city of Troy, but their descriptions have been used to identify, interpret and ultimately name the archaeological remains at Hisarlık in modern Turkey. Even though both the historicity of the epics and the location of ancient Troy is debateable, their fiction is now inseparably linked with the materiality of the modern archaeological site (Sherratt & Bennet, 2017; Uslu, 2018). Those who visit the archaeological remains are also visiting the place where the fabled heroes Achilles and Hector fought for the fate of Troy. It became an intrinsic part of the site's narrative, heritage and contributed to the collective memory and identity of countless people from antiquity to modernity (C. B. Rose, 1998). This is reflected by the site's inscription into the UNESCO World Heritage List under criterion (vi)[4], which states that 'the Archaeological Site of Troy is of exceptional cultural importance because of the profound influence it had on significant literary works such as Homer's *Illiad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, and on the arts in general, over more than two millennia' (UNESCO, 1998) – even though it should be pointed out that it was those literary works that gave Troy this exceptional cultural importance in the first place, rather than the other way around (cf. Witcher & van Helden, 2021).

Other notable instances where legends, myths and fiction have become attached to archaeological and historic sites and have become engrained in popular culture are for example Tintagel Castle in Cornwall as one of the imagined locations of Camelot (Robb, 1998), Kronborg Castle in Denmark as Hamlet's Elsinore (M. Robinson & Andersen, 2002; UNESCO, 2000), Bran Castle in Romania, which, although not even hinted at in Bram Stoker's Dracula, has been 'identified' as Dracula's castle in the eponymous novel and has since become a place of vampire pilgrimage (Light, 2012). Although only written comparatively recently, the latter had a significant transformative effect on not only this individual site of Bran Castle but its entire surrounding cultural landscape. To this day

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[4] Criterion (iv) is 'to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.'; https://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/ (accessed 03.05.2022).

Transylvania, at least from a Western perspective, has become synonymous with the diegetic heritage created through 19th c. horror fiction, a strange remote area on the edge of Europe, uncanny, uncivilised and dangerous (see Chapter 8).

Figure 2.1: Doune Castle, Scotland, uses a Monty Python and the Holy Grail reference to communicate COVID-19 safety regulations in November 2020. The site interpretation is mainly concerned with its many roles in film and television, the shop stocks mainly Monty Python and the Holy Grail (incl. coconut-halves), Game of Thrones and Outlander merchandise.

Doune Castle in Scotland, also used in the unaired pilot of Game of Thrones as Winterfell as well as the popular time-travel television series *Outlander* (2014–2022), is still profiting from its role in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), employing the iconography of this comedy classic to this day, including encouraging the implementation of Covid-19 hygiene rules (fig. 2.1). Through all these representations in pop-culture, Doune Castle has been redefined and infused with significance that surpasses its role as a local historic monument, but became a monument to pop-culture worldwide, exceeding its role as 'just another Scottish castle' – this additional layer makes it not only stand out but it transcends cultural and national boundaries, something that has also been observed within the context of Game of Thrones filming locations (see Chapter 7).

THE MONUMENT, BETWEEN REALITY AND LEGEND

WHEN LEGEND BECOMES REALITY

At the time of the publication of the novel, the Château d'If became famous despite the fact that most readers were unaware of its exact location.

Alexandre Dumas returned to the place in 1858 and realised how famous he had made it. The concierge, unaware of his visitor's identity, told him of Dantès's imprisonment without omitting a single detail. He left out nothing: not the death of Faria, nor the prisoner's escape, nor even the tunnel dug from one dungeon to another. An opening has also been created between two dungeons on the ground floor to lend a touch of reality to the legend.

A few years later, the architect Henri-Jacques Espérandieu, author of a monograph on the castle, was greeted by a guard who mentioned other legendary prisoners such as the Man in the Iron Mask. This guard was so convincing that the first signs attributed to each cell the name of a famous prisoner, thus forming a gallery of portraits still in place. Legend thus prevailed over history. In the minds of visitors, the imaginary prisoners have stolen a march on the real prisoners.

Meanwhile, thanks to Dumas, the people of Marseille have appropriated the Chateau d'If for themselves, setting to one side the mistrust they long harboured towards the place.

Figure 2.2: The tunnel in the 'Cachot dit d'Edmond Dantès Comte de Monte-Cristo' [Dungeon said to be of Edmond Dantès Count of Monte Cristo] created between 1844 and 1858, Château d'If, Marseille, France (Photo: Leslie Quade).

These new place-myths and perceptions can also have quite tangible consequences. There are numerous instances in which the physical appearance of heritage sites has been adjusted to fit the fiction. The infamous Chateau d'If, the prison island off the coast of Marseille, has become inseparably linked with Alexandre Dumas' novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* mere years after its publication in 1844. During a visit in 1858, according to the onsite interpretation, the author himself reported that the then-custodians of the fortress have not only fully incorporated Edmond Dantès' imprisonment and escape into the story of the monument, but even created a tunnel between two dungeons on the ground floor to 'lend a touch of reality to the legend' (fig. 2.2). Until this day, the dungeon carries a plaque commemorating its most famous inmate for posterity. Thus, the novel's fiction has become the monument's reality not only symbolically but physically. While modern heritage conservators would cry out in terror witnessing such a blatant assault on the integrity and authenticity of this monument, there is no denial that the diegetic heritage of Dumas' novel has become a quintessential part of Chateau d'If's fabric.

Figure 2.3: 221b Baker Street, London, Sherlock Holmes' fictional address, commemorated with a museum and blue plaque

A similar heritagisation of a fictional person has taken place in 221b Baker Street, London, an address that officially does not exist (as it is actually 239 Baker Street) where a blue plaque, usually reserved for historic figures (S. Cohen et al., 2014; cf. Guha, 2010), commemorates the famous resident that never existed, and museum tells the story as if this person actually lived there. We are, of course, talking about Sherlock Holmes, the world-famous detective invented by Conan Arthur Doyle (fig. 2.3).

Also in London, although more recently, half a luggage trolley has been installed against the wall of the waiting hall in London's Kings Cross railway station. At any time of the day, droves of people can be observed lining up to pretend to push the trolley through an invisible wall towards the hidden *Platform 9 ¾* and boarding the Hogwarts Express to the magical Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, just as Harry Potter and his friends have done in the famous novel and film series. Employees of the adjacent Harry Potter merchandise shop provide the wannabe wizards and witches with scarfs in the colours of their favourite house and take their photograph – the scarves are, of course, available for purchase in the store (fig. 2.4). Similar to Chateau d'If, this installation has become a physical part of the railway station's heritage, however, this time for a global mass-media consuming audience.

Figure 2.4: Harry Potter fans on their way to Hogwarts at Kings Cross Station. A member of staff of the adjacent Harry Potter shop hands out scarves in the colour of the four Hogwarts houses and helps staging the photograph.

Sometimes, heritage sites are not only modified but created entirely anew, something that has a long tradition in Hollywood. The wreckage of the locomotive that was driven over a collapsing, burning bridge in Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926) remained in situ in a riverbed in Oregon and became a tourist attraction until it was salvaged by both fans who took parts as souvenirs and the war effort for scrap metal (Meade, 1997, p. 166; Tuhkunen, 2016). The film set of Cecil B. Demille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923) was buried in the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes in California after filming was completed and has recently gained attention when it was archaeologically excavated (Hamilton & Nixon, 2016). More recently and of higher pop-cultural significance are the cases of Tatooine and Middle-earth which created full scale buildings to realise fantasy lands. Built for the original *Star Wars* (1977), Luke Skywalker's homestead on Tatooine can still be found and visited in the Tunisian desert (Roesch, 2009). In Matamata on the North Island of New Zealand, Tolkien's Hobbiton has been created for Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003) and has since then become the region's most successful attraction. More than just a film set, Hobbiton became an assemblage of monuments permanently inserted into the landscape of Matamata. According to the owner of the location, the Hobbit village 'went from 25,000 visitors per year and 17 staff, to […] 600,000 visitors per year and a staff of nearly 300 across the whole business', leading not only to a major source of local wealth and income but a complete rebranding of this rural community (Hope, 2019; R.

Peaslee, 2010). Adopting the identity of Tolkien's imaginary town, Matamata's prominently placed green town sign now greets visitors with 'Welcome to Hobbiton' (R. Peaslee, 2010, p. 66).

2.3.2. Looking Beyond the Wall: What is new in Westeros?

The imaginary world of Game of Thrones and its diegetic heritage resemble the above-described examples in many ways. However, the case of Game of Thrones stands out in five specific ways. Firstly, most case studies of diegetic tourism take place in the 'real' world in which fictional narratives are inserted. Even though Bram Stoker's Transylvania has little resemblance to the actual region, Transylvania still exists as a geographical and historical region. Secondly, entire fabricated fantasy worlds are often created entirely in studios or on the computer. *The Lord of the Rings* exclusively used newly built sets or models that have been inserted into previously unbuilt landscapes of New Zealand either practically or through digital effects. Thirdly, most of the above mentioned, and indeed most published case studies on diegetic tourism, are dealing with geographically very limited case studies usually confined to a single place, region or country. Fourthly, most case studies on filming locations, are limited to a single film or at most a series of films (e.g. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*; *Harry Potter*), giving each imaginary space only a limited number of hours to be present on the screens compared to a serialised production. Lastly, and probably the most important factor, most studies and indeed most films and television programmes that became significant examples of diegetic tourism have been produced and released pre-2008 and therefore before the rise of so-called 'genuine digital capitalism' that brought the rise of large social media and streaming platforms, tech companies as well as the smartphone as an online, mobile gadget that has changed how society interacts with each other and the world (Nymoen & Schmitt, 2021; Staab, 2019, p. 150; cf. Zuboff, 2019). Particularly online photography and social media has been attributed a significant role in the shaping and dissemination of pop-culture (Ohiagu & Okorie, 2014). Therefore, all pre-2008 studies regarding the impact of pop-culture, travel, photography and media consumption in general have taken place in a completely different environment of engagement, experience and dissemination. Thus, the phenomenon of Game of Thrones, despite all its continuations from its precursors, is significantly different than anything that came before.

The world of Game of Thrones is entirely imaginary yet has almost exclusively been built on the foundations of previously existing structures, often with hundreds, if not thousands of years of history attached to them. In Game of Thrones, these places are often significantly enhanced through set design and digital effects, reinterpreted and renamed, reassembled and put into previously non-existing geographical relations. Additionally, rather than being contained in one site or one culturally and historically cohesive region, the filming of Game of Thrones took place in six very distinct countries. Furthermore, Game of Thrones, through its serialised format, has utilised its environments for over 70 hours over the course of nine years, giving them a much larger, continuous presence and exposure than any other imaginary world of modern pop-culture and thus cementing those images even further into the viewers' mind. Finally, Game of Thrones, as illustrated in the introduction chapter, has created a never-before-seen dynamic of referencing, reiteration and complete take-over of the cultural landscape which can also be attributed to the rise of the above-mentioned 'genuine digital capitalism' that creates a constant feedback loop of consuming, producing, liking, and sharing media content (see Chapter 6).

2.4. 'Growing strong'? Challenges of assessing the impacts of Game of Thrones Tourism[5]

Over the last decade, numerous Game of Thrones filming locations have reported remarkable growth in tourist numbers, which is often directly attributed to the series. Once Game of Thrones gained wider popularity, not only have countless press releases by tourist boards, news media, blogs and even academic articles been written about the emerging trend of Game of Thrones tourism and its economic impact (Bolan & Kearney, 2017; Tkalec et al., 2017), but also an increasing number of features on individual destinations and how to best spend Game of Thrones holidays have appeared online (e.g. Dodd, 2017; Egner, 2019). Indeed, reporting anecdotal evidence of increased tourism as a direct result of Game of Thrones became so frequent that one could ask whether it was the series itself that 'induced' Game of Thrones tourism or if it became a socially constructed truth and ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the additional exposure of the imagery might spike interest and raise awareness even in those not familiar with the series (Beeton, 2006, p. 183). Furthermore, even though there have been and still are many attempts in quantifying

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[5] Data discussed will exclude annual numbers beyond 2019 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sites mentioned in this section will be introduced more thoroughly in Chapter 4.

diegetic tourism, some scholars rightly critique that the impact of film and television on tourism can be 'vastly overstated' and subsequently over-hyped by both academics and media alike (Croy & Heitmann, 2011, p. 190) while simultaneously being 'more diffuse yet undeniably present' (Crang & Travlou, 2009, p. 18). While none of the phenomena and practices that will be discussed in this thesis could have existed without the fantasy of Game of Thrones having been situated there, it remains difficult, if not impossible, to determine how many visitors Westeros and Essos have welcomed over the years. The records are often fragmented, unavailable, anecdotal, not comparable and sometimes outright guesswork, as data used from online publications, data inquiries from filming locations and interviews with various stakeholders have revealed.

For example, the online travel platform TripAdvisor announced that search traffic for countless Game of Thrones locations increased significantly following their first on-screen appearance; the Fortress of Klis (Croatia) and Castillo de Zafra (Spain), up to 579% and 488% respectively within only one year (TripAdvisor, 2016). For Northern Ireland, TripAdvisor further calculated that between 2012 and 2017 the interest in County Antrim, the coastal area where not only the Giant's Causeway but also countless iconic Game of Thrones filming locations can be found, increased by 229% (TripAdvisor, 2017). These numbers, though data and methodology were not accessible, have been reproduced in online media countless times. Similarly, an estimated average increase of 125% for Spanish sites, was also used by the Spain Film Commissions as evidence for the impact of their work (pers. comm. Andalusia Film Commission 2019). However, one must stress that TripAdvisor might not be the most reliable source given the incident where 'The Shed at Dulwich' became London's most popular restaurant in 2017, even though it did not exist (Rosenberg, 2017). Indeed, some places listed as Game of Thrones locations in the above-mentioned TripAdvisor report have not been used for filming. Meanwhile, in their 2019 Annual Review, Tourism Northern Ireland published that more than 350,000 visitors, or one sixth of their leisure travellers, are visiting Northern Ireland solely for Game of Thrones every year, generating '£50m+ economic benefit', however, they do not detail how they estimated those numbers and where this benefit was accrued (Tourism NI, 2020). The Department of Culture and Heritage of Dubrovnik uses tour participants to estimate the number of Game of Thrones visitors, which they source from local tour operators, resulting in approximately 55,000 annual participants that partake in up to 40 daily Game of Thrones-themed tours in and around Dubrovnik (pers. comm. Ana Hilje, Head of

Department of Culture and Heritage Dubrovnik, 2018). This, of course, is not particularly precise, as it excludes some local and all external tour providers as well as those who explore Dubrovnik independently.

Likewise, examining visitor numbers of specific heritage attractions to determine how places have been impacted by being featured in Game of Thrones might serve as an indicator yet still can be misleading. While useful for isolated sites, locations that are part of a larger heritage assemblage are harder to interpret. For example, the cases of Klis and Castillo de Almodóvar seem to be quite clear. After being featured as the city of Meereen in the series' fourth season (2014), the Fortress of Klis increased its visitor annual numbers from 10,691 in 2011 to over 100,000 in 2019 (Klis Municipality, 2014; pers. comm. Fortress of Klis 2020; Vuković, 2020), reflecting the aforementioned increase in interest reported by TripAdvisor. Similarly, Castillo de Almodóvar del Río, featured in 2017 as Highgarden, increased its visitor numbers from 55,994 in 2016 to 87,349 in 2019 (pers. comm. Castillo de Almodóvar del Río 2020). However, it becomes infinitely more complicated when looking at the visitor numbers at sites such as Dubrovnik. Ticket sales for Dubrovnik's city walls, which featured very prominently in numerous iconic scenes, skyrocketed after 2012. While being already the most popular attraction before Dubrovnik became King's Landing, visits increased from 775,636 (2012) to 1,251,182 in 2019 (73.01%), peaking in 2018 with 1,305,994 tickets sold (pers. comm. Dubrovnik City Walls 2020). This astonishing boom stands in stark contrast to stalling or even decreasing museum visits that can be recorded during the same timeframe. Dubrovnik's four historical and archaeological museums and the Homeland War Museum have not followed the upward trend of visitor numbers that Dubrovnik and the city walls have experienced (fig. 2.5). However, whether these trends indicate that Dubrovnik has become a Game of Thrones site above all other parts of its heritage and history, or if this development is mainly due to the rise of short trips and selecting heritage experiences by their 'instagrammability', cannot conclusively be determined.
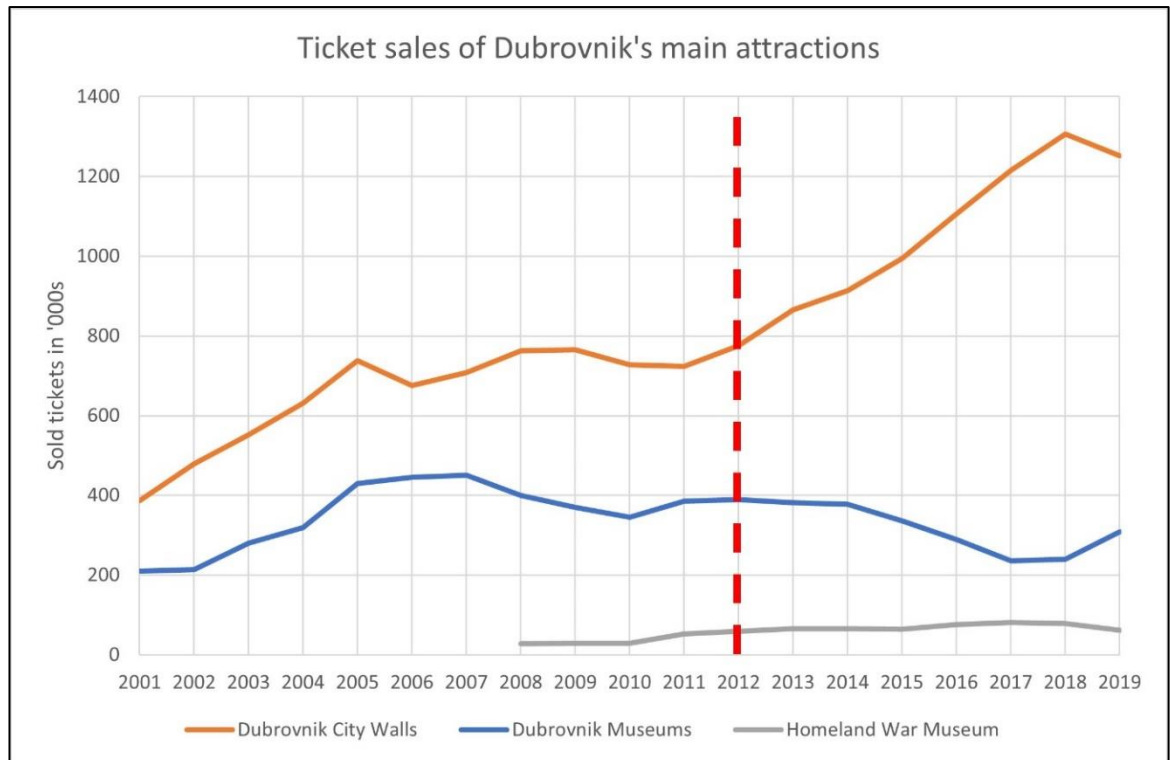
Figure 2.5: Ticket sales Dubrovnik City Walls, Dubrovnik City Museums (includes Archaeological Museum, Maritime Museum, Ethnographic Museum, Cultural History Museum), and Homeland War Museum between 2001–2019. (Data: Dubrovnik City Walls 2020, pers. comm.; Dubrovnik City Museum 2020, pers. comm.)

The case of Castle Ward further exemplifies that looking at visitor numbers alone can be very misleading. As one of the few heritage sites encountered during fieldwork that started to analyse the direct impact of Game of Thrones very early on, Castle Ward experienced a shift within the different visitor segments while the overall visitor number remained stable. According to an internal strategic paper, the number of paying visitors, that means non-National Trust members, rose significantly from 2014, while other demographics, particularly young children, diminished at the same time (fig. 2.6) (National Trust Castle Ward, 2018). This change also correlated with a significant increase of international visitors which rose from 5,600 visitors from 12 countries in 2014 to almost 20,000 visitors from 64 countries in 2016,[6] while Game of Thrones group visitors increased from 11,000 in 2016 to 18,500 in 2019 (pers. comm. Castle Ward 2020). Surveys among international visitors in the same period of time estimated that more than 85% of them indeed came to Castle Ward due to its role as Winterfell. However, as with the previous examples, the data sets available are incomplete, only cover brief periods of time, specify neither sample size nor method, and thus are not reliable enough to draw further conclusions.

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[6] No data available past 2016 as person responsible for conducting these data collections left Castle Ward.

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Payers	22300	34750	44100
Members	62600	63700	63500
Others	45400	37600	31500

% Growth in Visitor Nos.

	2015-2016	2016-2017
Payers	56%	30%
Members	2%	0.5%
Others	4%	4%
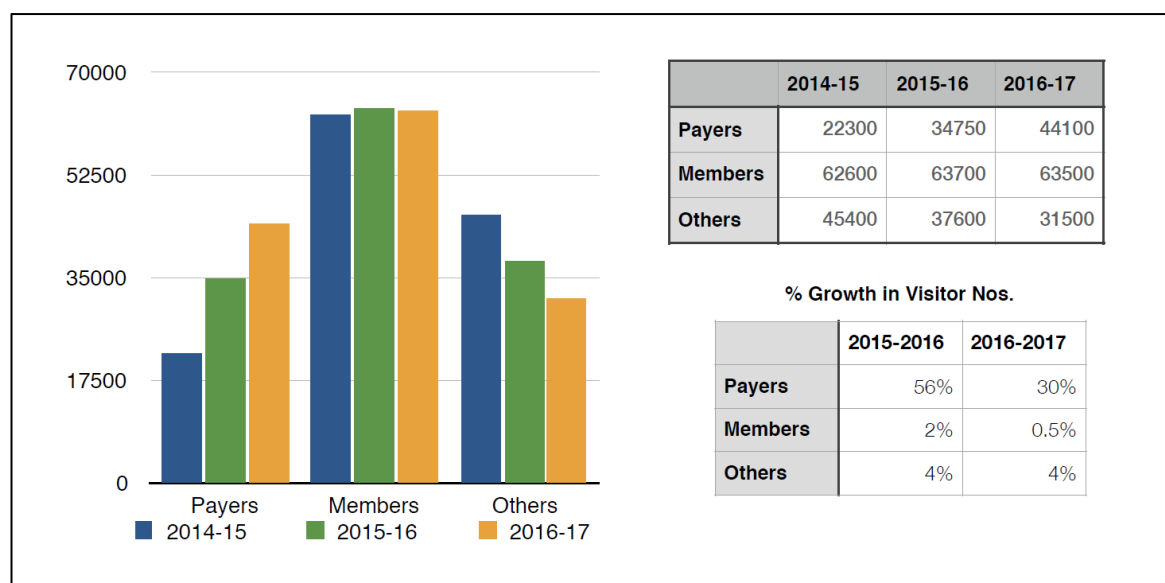
Figure 2.6: Development of visitors between 2014 and 2017 at Castle Ward. (National Trust Castle Ward 2018).

Although it is undeniable that there has been a tremendous effect on many of the series' filming locations through the presence of numerous new Game of Thrones-related phenomena, the visitor data above illustrate the difficulty to assess the impact of Game of Thrones on filming locations when taken purely from a tourism perspective. Emerging work on the impact of Game of Thrones on its filming locations remains in the tradition of previous scholarship that is mainly concerned with quantifying the number of Game of Thrones-induced tourism and economic impact (Bolan & Kearney, 2017; Depken et al., 2020; Tkalec et al., 2017) and assessing visitor experiences on guided tours (A. Mitev et al., 2017; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017). Even if the data regarding visitor numbers and their motivations would be readily available and standardised across the different sites, a quantitative assessment of this phenomenon reduced to visitor numbers would ultimately be futile, as it cannot provide a deeper understanding of the complexities and the workings of the re-imagination of the Game of Thrones filming locations. The motivation to visit a destination is multifaceted and cannot be pinned down (at least for the majority of cases) on one particular aspect. However, what can be observed, recorded and meaningfully analysed are the resulting performances and material culture that could not have existed without the fantasy taking place there. While it cannot be conclusively determined whether all featured heritage spaces are used significantly more because of Game of Thrones, as the fragmented data sets illustrate, the plethora of Game of Thrones related phenomena that is observable across all examined sites suggests that those spaces are most certainly used in new and different ways, thus making qualitative rather than quantitative research a

necessity. Similarly, focussing on highly curated experiences of guided tours is only a fragment of what happens at the sites and fails to adequately describe and address the surrounding phenomena that impact the heritage space as a whole. Several individual tourists encountered during fieldwork specifically refused to partake in guided tours as they preferred exploring those spaces on their own and in much more depth.

2.5. Conclusion

This thesis expands on previous research, pulling together threads from various academic fields, and aims to further the debate how heritage is created and performed in a highly mobile, permanently online world that is dominated by and understood through mass- and social media. Unlike previous research, this research will not simply reiterate the proven but simple approach of 'filming happens, tourist numbers increase' that dominates the field of diegetic tourism but will also examine the larger implications of how mass-media and pop-culture are reconfiguring cultural landscapes and our engagement and perceptions of them on a transnational scale. Game of Thrones is thereby examined first and foremost in its role as a transnational heritage phenomenon that exemplifies how we, in a globalised, digitised society, create, engage and perceive heritage in the 21st century. This thesis employs an immersive, multi-sited ethnography to fully capture the extent to which Game of Thrones' new diegetic heritage is manifesting itself tangibly and intangibly in many and various ways, how tourists and locals perform the imagination, how it is used to present the landscape and to what degree this new heritage is embraced or even rejected. The presence of new cultural offerings, new performances by groups and individuals at specific sites, the omnipresence of a material culture bearing the series' iconography that even becomes enshrined in museum settings and as public monuments, established a complex, multi-faceted landscape of signifiers that is interpreted, engaged with and reproduced by visitors and locals alike. The intersection between all those phenomena and stakeholders led to the creation of not only a new diegetic heritage space spanning several regions and countries, but also new communities with their own material culture and traditions re-interpreting and significantly re-contextualising the meaning and identity of the filming locations. However, this is neither quantifiable, nor can be meaningfully understood by focussing on an isolated aspect. Rather, it is necessary to holistically observe, describe and analyse an array of cultural practices and artefacts that have established themselves across numerous filming locations and beyond to understand how heritage landscapes can be impacted by

pop-cultural phenomena such as Game of Thrones. Thus, to adequately determine how and to what extent heritage landscapes surrounding the filming locations have been transformed not only locally but across different countries, it is necessary to examine these phenomena in a holistic fashion, using the qualitative approach of a multi-sited ethnography.

CHAPTER THREE

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ICE AND FIRE
Multi-sited ethnography and researching Game of Thrones as a fan

3.1. Introduction

One of the defining features of Game of Thrones is its inherent multi-sitedness. Already in the first episode the viewers are introduced to the black-cloaked men of the Night's Watch and their encounters with both Wildlings and the dreaded White Walkers in the snowy forests beyond the Wall; the honourable Starks who receive the royal family at Winterfell in the North; the Lannisters scheming in King's Landing; and the last of the Targaryens eking out their existence in exile across the Narrow Sea while trying to form an alliance with the Dothraki horse lords to reclaim the Iron Throne. Over the course of the series, most characters do not remain stationary but are constantly traversing the landscape, finding themselves in strange and unfamiliar places and encountering new people, friends and foes alike. Almost every episode jumps back and forth between several increasingly fragmented narrative threads spread across numerous places of 'The Known World', often hundreds, if not thousands of kilometres apart. Yet all of them remain deeply connected from the very beginning to the very end, often thematically mirroring or contrasting the experiences of the characters' journeys. On these journeys, the protagonists and their companions are facing many perils, grow with each new encounter by taking different approaches or choose another path than they had initially planned or anticipated. And those who failed to do so almost certainly have found their untimely (and most likely violent) demise, prominently illustrated by the fate of the first season's protagonist who discovers that in the 'game of thrones' there is no middle ground – you win, or, like Lord Stark, you die.

3.1.1. Finding the field

This multi-sitedness of Game of Thrones' imaginary world and its narrative is echoed in its impact as a heritage phenomenon that spans across many sites, regions and even countries. The present research therefore demands, unlike many other studies on diegetic tourism before, an approach that reflects the spatiality, scale and diversity of the impact that Game

of Thrones' diegetic world and in a wider sense modern globalised mass-media and pop-culture have on heritage sites. Therefore, the chosen approach is that of the immersive multi-sited ethnography (Crang & Cook, 2007; cf. Marcus, 1998). While the 'game of ethnography' might not have quite such dire consequences for the researcher as the 'game of thrones', it is full of twists and turns, unexpected encounters and challenges that require a constant necessity to improvise, adapt, expand, and grow depending on what is encountered in the field. Although always aiming to go beyond the single-site approach of most other studies on the impact of film and television on filming locations, this research was initially conceptualised to focus on only a few main filming locations in Northern Ireland and Croatia to evaluate how the individual sites have been reshaped through Game of Thrones. However, it became increasingly difficult to regard the individual filming locations as isolated enclaves of imagination, but rather as being embedded within their surrounding landscapes. Encounters with various stakeholders, discovering ever-increasing and diverse manifestations of Game of Thrones' imagination in the landscape and realising how moving between and beyond the clearly defined sites is equally important to obtain a deeper understanding of its far-reaching impact. Game of Thrones' impact is not limited to where it 'took place', it goes far beyond the individual filming locations and significantly changes the fabric of their surrounding landscapes, creating an entirely new transnational heritage with its own distinct culture and community. Furthermore, this has also made it increasingly difficult to define what qualifies as 'the field' in which this research takes place and what methods to use to extract the most meaningful data; there is no homogenous qualifier that can be applied easily with sites so numerous, diverse, fractured and constantly expanding, yet all relevant and necessary to comprehend Game of Thrones as a heritage phenomenon. To some extent, I entered the field already from the comforts of my living room, where I was first introduced to many places I would later visit.

The 'field', once clearly defined as the filming locations, expanded rapidly and soon included a diverse set of places and spaces, ranging from filming locations to museums, buses and cars, merchandise shops and crafts workshops, offices of governmental and non-governmental organisations, pubs and jewellers, fan festivals and Game of Thrones themed academic conferences (fig. 3.1). I have dressed up at medieval ruins and on rocky shores, had discussions with weavers and basket makers about the role of traditional crafts in Game of Thrones, listened to stories about the role of coastal raves in resolving the

Northern Ireland conflict, driven hundreds of kilometres and climbed across rocks and through shrubberies only to find *that one location.*

Figure 3.1: Snapshots from the 'field'. The 'Game of Thrones Museum' in Split, Croatia; Guided tour with props in Dubrovnik, Croatia; re-enactors at Winterfell Festival at Castle Ward, Northern Ireland; 'Game of Thrones: Views from the Humanities' in Seville, Spain (15th-18th May 2019)

I would meet King Robert Baratheon himself at Winterfell and stare for days on end at people walking up and down a Baroque staircase, listen to the same anecdote told by passing guides for the twentieth time every day and help shoot promo-videos for a tour guide. I followed the phenomenon wherever and to whomever it led me. Thus, the 'field' can be defined as anything that happens within the physical landscape of the filming locations and the territories they are connected to after being introduced on the television screen. Other fields, such as spaces in which the programme has been consumed (e.g., living rooms, public screenings) or the purely digital sphere (e.g. YouTube, fan-forums, travel blogs) or will not be included in this study. As the field unfolded itself in front of me and my ideas, understanding and immersion changed, so did my approaches. This also meant that theories and methodologies would have to evolve, adapt, and change constantly and was further complicated by working transnationally, making it necessary to adjust to

local circumstances. There were not just 'the diegetic tourists', there was an entire landscape of epiphenomena, such as accompanying material, visual and performative signifiers, that created its very own 'Game of Thrones culture' (cf. Klinger, 1989; Chapter 4). Starting and ending my research at diegetic tourism and calling it a day would have been easy, but it has been overdone and would ultimately not lead to any new epistemological insights. If I had limited myself to the previously agreed, conceptualised sites, the research might have been much more straightforward, but also would have missed some of the most fascinating aspects – not to mention the people I met along the way. Therefore, attempting to describe and analyse the extent and the far-reaching impact of this rich 'Game of Thrones culture', this research has adopted a multi-sited visual ethnography in the tradition of Marcus' 'ethnography through thick and thin' (1998).

3.1.2. Introducing the field

Due to this considerable geographical and thematic extent, only a select number of sites could be considered for closer examination. Thus, three regions in which extensive filming has taken place for several seasons and in which related phenomena could be identified in advance have been chosen for conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Those regions are Northern Ireland (UK; S01-S08), Dalmatia (Croatia; S02-S06, S08) and Andalusia (Spain; S04-S08), which have been visited for fieldwork campaigns of varying durations between 2018 and 2019 (individual sites will be introduced and discussed in Chapter 4). Using an array of ethnographic tools across a range of different sites, various tangible and intangible manifestations were experienced first-hand, documented, and analysed. These included methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, surveying the filming locations and the surrounding landscapes for tangible and intangible signifiers of Game of Thrones, collecting and documenting material culture in writing and photography (see below). Following the hypothesis that the diegetic realm created through Game of Thrones is indeed its own transnational entity and heritage landscape, the individual sites and regions will be treated as if they were within the same territory. Instead of pursuing a comparative approach by individually presenting and juxtaposing Northern Irish, Croatian and Spanish sites, the aim is to describe and analyse the overarching phenomena thematically rather than geographically in order to emphasise the newly established link between those spaces. Nevertheless, at the same time, special attention will be paid to variations in local responses to the impact of Game of Thrones that

occur due to different historical and cultural differences, which are particularly pronounced between the two post-conflict contexts of Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland (see Chapter 8).

The fieldwork conducted in Northern Ireland occurred between June 2018 and May 2019 in three campaigns. The first one-month-long campaign took place in June 2018 in which the main body of fieldwork has been conducted; a short, half-week research stay took place in September 2018 to attend the 'Winterfell Festival' at Castle Ward and interview important stakeholders; final fieldwork was conducted parallel to a three month work placement at the National Museums of Northern Ireland in Spring 2019, which granted access to stakeholders and data related to collaborations between the museum and the Game of Thrones tourism marketing campaigns. Fieldwork was mainly focused on the sites mentioned below, however, every publicly accessible and promoted filming location and newly created Game of Thrones attractions have been visited at least once.

Fieldwork in Croatia took place in two instalments. The first and more substantive one-month-long campaign took place in Dubrovnik between September and October 2018, while a shorter two-week campaign has been undertaken in in Split and Klis in September 2019 to gather supplementary data and to contrast this less prominent site with Dubrovnik. The location of Dubrovnik has been emphasised in both fieldwork effort and data analysis due to its prominence within the series, the extent of the site as well as the scope of the impact and the public discourses surrounding it. Split and Klis acted as secondary sites that had been visited on prior occasions before and during the conceptualising of this doctoral research and acted as an initial inspiration. Secondary locations Šibenik and Kaštel Gomilica as well as other more peripheral filming locations have been visited but due to a lack of access and playing too minor roles within the series and the subsequent phenomena, have been excluded from further analysis.

While not being initially considered to be included due to scale, time and cost, an additional two-week research stay in Andalusia has been added because I presented at the Seville-based international conference 'Game of Thrones: Views from the Humanities' (15th–18th May 2019). Given that Game of Thrones tourism was at an earlier stage due to many places being featured only in later seasons as well as the focus on Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland within most previously published literature (Bolan & Kearney, 2017; Depken et al., 2020; Tkalec et al., 2017; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017), examining this region provided a unique opportunity to include previously overlooked sites and visit the

Salón de Hielo y Fuego, a permanent Game of Thrones exhibition in Osuna. However, due to the limited focus, time and resources, the data and additional aspects for analyses can only be regarded as supplementary.

3.2.A Multi-sited Ethnography across the Seven Kingdoms and Beyond

Ethnographic research aims to locate cultures in their spatial and temporal contexts, to 'understand parts of the world more or less as they are experienced and understood in everyday lives of people who "live them out"' and is 'rich in implicit theories of culture, society and the individual' (Crang & Cook, 2007, pp. 1, 7). Thereby, ethnographers, rather than taking an outside view, ought to immerse themselves into the communities they are investigating, interact and participate with the community members and translate those experiences into a meaningful text to 'study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture' (C. Ellis et al., 2011, pp. 275–276). Ethnographies utilise a range of qualitative methods to acquire data during fieldwork. This can be broadly described as 'participant observation *plus'*, meaning 'participant observation plus any other appropriate methods/techniques/etc.', such as interviews, audio-visual work or archival research (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 35). While the synonymous use of the terms 'ethnography', 'participant observation', and 'fieldwork' remains passionately debated (cf. Delamont, 2004; Hockey & Forsey, 2012; Ingold, 2014), the present research considers ethnography as the overarching approach of creating a meaningful story by using an array of different theoretical and methodological tools, 'fieldwork' as the spatial and temporal setting of the data collection, and 'participant observation' as the methodological and conceptual core of the ethnography to systematically describe 'events, behaviors, interactions, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting' through fieldnotes, photography and video (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p. 143). Aiming to create a 'thick description' of the cultures researched (Geertz, 1973, Chapter 1), it is important to note, that qualitative research such as ethnographies do not provide a definitive and 'correct' account, but only a 'partial truth' (Clifford 1992). Ethnographies can only make claims on the observed and how it was interpreted by the researchers according to their own positionalities and knowledge. It also must be emphasised that while specific themes kept emerging from various sources of data, qualitative research such as participant observation and interviews are not reproducible and can only exist in

the time-space they occurred. Still, ethnographies provide a unique insight in the workings of cultural phenomena that cannot be achieved by any other means of research.

However, immersive multi-sited ethnographies on transnationally connected (sub-)cultures are rarely undertaken due to various constraints. It is often tempting to forfeit this approach in favour of interview-based methods in single site settings, as it is often the case within the contexts of heritage, tourism, geography as well as the previously mentioned studies on places of literary and cinematic connotation (cf. Crang, 2002, p. 650). Trying to immerse oneself fully into a culture is a long and arduous process even when remaining in one location. Trying to do so several times, seems counterproductive at first, as it might go against the immersive nature of participatory observation and the 'thick description' gold standard of ethnographic fieldwork, which has long been seen as only achievable by remaining in one specific site for a relatively long time and regard it as isolated 'container of a particular set of social relations' (Falzon, 2009, p. 1). There was a paradigm shift in the 1990s, when it was increasingly recognised that the progressing mobility of society and culture fundamentally changed not only how society and culture worked but how they needed to be described within ethnographic research (Clifford, 1992; Marcus, 1995). Marcus (1998) argued that in unsettled, highly mobile and spatially dispersed contexts, these conventional single-site 'thick descriptions' would ultimately fail to describe the lived reality of increasingly deterritorialised cultures and had to be replaced by multi-sited ethnographies 'through thick and thin'. Contemporary people and places do not exist (if they have ever) as 'isolated, pure cultures [..] out there' but are 'bound to be "made up" of bits and bobs from here, there and maybe everywhere, and/or have senses of belonging with more than one "people" or place as members of travelling or diasporic cultures' (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 178). The mobility described by Clifford (1992) and Marcus (1995) in their seminal pieces has since become even more topical and indeed accurate due to a highly accelerated global mobility and omnipresence of digital devices, as it is the case with the present Game of Thrones phenomenon. To be able to 'examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space', a multi-sited ethnography needs to follow the phenomena researched (Marcus, 1995, p. 96). One needs to 'follow the people', 'follow the thing', 'follow the metaphor', 'follow the plot, story or allegory', 'follow the life or biography', 'follow the conflict' and their connections across space rather than staying stationary (ibid. 106–110). Applying this framework to the multi-sited

imaginary realm of Game of Thrones filming locations, numerous ways of how to investigate across and between multiple sites become apparent:

- *Follow the people*: One has to join the people who move within and across these spaces. These might be fans visiting sites individually or in groups, tour guides and related businesses who interpret and commodify the imaginary geographies, as well as bystanders who observe those performances. Who are those people, what places are they visiting and what are they doing there?

- *Follow the thing*: A myriad of 'things' bearing the iconography of Game of Thrones has spawned across those spaces, including souvenirs, merchandise, flyers, maps, newly created artefacts, monuments and exhibitions. How are those objects used to tell a story about the people engaging with them and their identity?

- *Follow the Metaphor*: The filming locations are both a metaphorical and a physical space. In what relationship are the 'imagined' realm and its 'real' counterpart? How are discrepancies between CGI-enhanced representations seen on screen and the experiences encountered at the site negotiated by those who visit? Can Westeros become more than a fantasy but a real place in its own right in which fans can see a homecoming space? How would that affect the identity of the places and spaces?

- *Follow the plot, story or allegory*: Travelling is a narrative process. What stories are being told by the people encountered within these spaces, how do they describe their journey in both words and through photographic practice? Is it a vacation, a pilgrimage, a personal quest? How is the tourism industry using the narratives created through Game of Thrones? How are the landscapes and sites of various regions now narratively linked?

- *Follow the life or biography*: Engaging with stories and heritage can have meaningful impacts in the lives of people. How are journeys to these places affecting the self-identity and social identity of those who visit them? In what way is the biography of the local population who lives around this new phenomenon affected?

- *Follow the conflict*: Heritage is an inherently dissonant process. How do those new practices and identities fit into previously established heritage discourses? Is Game of Thrones challenging previous notions of heritage identities? Is it seen as a (un-)welcome addition in how the landscape is perceived?

By adopting the multi-sited approach and following these often crossing and intersecting paths, it is possible to transcend site-specific interpretations and analyse this phenomenon in a more persuasive manner. Within a multi-sited ethnography of the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones, the 'routine' of the community one ought to become a participant of is that of the jet-setting mobility of modern tourism and the fast-moving pace of pop-culture and digital media. For the people who pass through, these spaces are not characterised by their long-lived, deeply embedded, immovable state, but being a permeable, transitional space, full of short-lived yet extraordinary experiences and a constant flow of new people who spend limited time, having only momentary yet memorable encounters. Therefore, to become a participant observer of the Game of Thrones heritage phenomenon, this would also require to be embedded within the inherent mobility of this culture. In many ways, the numerous shorter fieldwork campaigns in four different contexts (Northern Ireland, Dubrovnik, Split, Andalusia) and the movement between sites are reflective of this phenomenon itself. Rather than staying at a few select fieldwork sites, I was, as Marcus suggested, *following* the phenomenon wherever it led me. Being partial to archaeological analogies, I would, in reference to previous ideas of 'scavenger ethnography' (cf. Rella, 2021), describe my approach as a 'hunter-gatherer ethnography'. Although the location of the data I was set out to *hunt* down was quite clear, on the path to get there, I would find useful things on the side that I could *gather* on the way. I often got side-tracked, lost myself in the world of Westeros by driving across the landscape, often to very unexpected places and unanticipated encounters, which would often not qualify as an in-depth, thick description, but would reveal crucial information to better understand this culture. The mobility between sites became my primary mode of research, emulating how site visitors and tour operators experience the landscape. My own positionality as a fan would encourage this mode of research (see below). While Clifford (1992, p. 111) described 'fieldwork as a form of travel', it also seems that in turn travel can be seen as a form of fieldwork. However, while the present research describes many sites spread out across multiple regions and countries, they are all closely tied together by the same geographical phenomenon. Northern Ireland, Croatia and Spain do not share the same space, Winterfell, King's Landing and Dorne, however, do. In almost a paradoxical way, while I am continuously moving across borders between countries, languages and cultures, I remained firmly situated within the boundaries of a closed spatial entity with its own coherent (visual) language and culture, the territorialised imaginary space of Game of Thrones. The research is thus both transnational and part of a single realm.

Throughout this chapter and indeed the entire thesis it will be abundantly clear, that this research has not only been conducted as a researcher but also as a Game of Thrones fan and as a tourist, making this as much an account of my own immersive journey into this imaginary world as it is of my research participants. Given that my own stakes as a fan of Game of Thrones have impacted this research from the initial idea to submission of this thesis (and most likely beyond), it is crucial to address the implications of my insider-position for conducting participatory research.

3.3. Being a fan, becoming an ethnographer

> **Vignette 3.1: Fan vs. Researcher vs. Tourist**
>
> I deliberately chose to first experience Northern Ireland the way many of my later participants would: Going on two Game of Thrones bus tours with guides that worked as extras on the show and dressing up at filming locations. First, the Winterfell Trek to County Down, two days later the Iron Island Tour along the Antrim Coast. When I arrived at 7:30am in central Belfast to wait for the tour bus on the first day, I felt both nervous and awkward. Nervous, because it was not only my first time in Northern Ireland, but my very first day in the field. Awkward, because I felt my multiple personas already clashing: the researcher and the participant observer wanting to collect data, the fan who has lived and breathed pop-culture all his life and in particular Game of Thrones for the past seven years, and the tourist who would never normally think of going on a bus tour. The fan asked, should I just enjoy the ride like anyone else and immerse myself into the experience, rather than scribbling down everything I would see on the tour? Would behaving like a fan compromise the integrity of this research, feared the academic, who wondered whether he was here as part of the group of fans or an outsider by studying them. And the 'cultural tourist' in me yelled from the side: Aren't those bus tours a little bit silly?

One of the questions frequently asked by interview respondents was whether I was a big fan of Game of Thrones myself, to which I always, without a moment's hesitation, replied that it would be near impossible to conduct research like this and not being strongly invested in the programme. While this 'confession' was always conveyed in a light-hearted and humorous fashion, later reflecting on my response, I truly believe that being a fan is indeed essential to observe, examine and analyse a phenomenon so profoundly rooted in fan performances and expresses itself through a rich audio-visual iconography. These

signifiers can often only be read, understood and interpreted by someone who has not only a deep understanding and knowledge of the series, but also an emotional investment.

Figure 3.2: Re-discovering Split as Meereen in 2016. Papier mâché dragon in small Game of Thrones exhibition at the Fortress of Klis, unfortunately burnt down in 2018 (left); taking a photograph in the street where the slave riots of Meereen took place (centre); advertisements for Game of Thrones shops and tours (right).

Game of Thrones and its imaginary world accompanied me long before this research was even conceived, ever since I was first introduced to it by co-workers on an archaeological excavation in Egypt in early 2012. I remember vividly how I was so captivated by the narrative, the locations, the intrigue that I spent my only day off binging the entire first season during a sandstorm. After that, I immediately devoured all five published books, became engrossed within this world, started to frequent online fora to read on other people's opinions, theories, and predictions, and join into the discussions. To some extent, the initial spark for this research came from my own interest in visiting the locations I have seen on screen and my experiences while re-visiting Split in 2016 after Game of Thrones had been filmed there. Having visited Split before and having studied its history and heritage extensively during my archaeology degree, I noticed the profound impact the filming had on it. It was not just the walking tours and merchandise shops that have appeared from one year to the next. Split now felt differently. Certain locations, such as the substructures of Diocletian's Palace, a monument I already had much appreciation for, felt even more extraordinary than in the past. Now it was not 'just' the basement of my favourite Roman Emperor, this is now also the place where Daenerys kept her dragons!

Other sites I previously just strolled through without paying particular attention, were now charged with meaning. And some, like Klis, I have not even known about but was now determined to actively seek out (fig. 3.2).

One of the earliest, yet most important lessons learnt during fieldwork has been that it was impossible to make clear distinctions about where research ended, and fandom started. I entered and traversed the field not only as a researcher but also as a tourist, and more importantly, as a fan. Thus, given that this research is conducted as a fan who himself had transcending experiences while travelling the imaginary realms of Westeros and Essos, it is impossible to take this part of myself out of the ethnographic equation, too high are the personal stakes in this phenomenon. In ethnographic research, particularly within tourism contexts, many are still struggling to accept that 'that homo academicus might be uncomfortably closely related to that embarrassing relative turistas vulgaris' (Crang, 2011, p. 206). However, becoming aware that my stakes as researcher, tourist and additionally fan could not, and more importantly, should not be clearly separated was crucial in my ethnographic process, as it would not only have been intellectually limiting but ultimately futile. Being initially concerned that these personas might clash, it turned out that they actually complemented and informed each other, striking a fine balance between 'writing about what you know' and creating new knowledge.

Ethnography is a participatory methodological concept of immersing oneself into a community through entering and participating in their communal space. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994, p. 249) suggested that 'we cannot study the social world without being part of it', thus, being part of said community should not be seen as compromising scholarly rigour and jeopardising academic standards but a requirement to gain deeper insight. Furthermore, the inherently participatory nature of tourism and fandom must be taken into consideration when conducting *participatory research* of these communities. In particular, fans are considered to be active participants that create a complex *participatory* culture (Jenkins, 2012, 2018; Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995). Rather than paying lip-service to research being 'participatory', by being a fan, I was able to become fully embedded and immersed within the Game of Thrones phenomena encountered in the field. I was not participating in the performances at the filming locations because my research required me to do so, I was participating because I genuinely wanted to perform them. I sincerely wanted to visit the sites, many of which I already located by obsessively consuming

behind-the-scenes material, even long before considering this research. When I was there, I felt the urge to recreate shots, to capture the exact angles seen in the series, post and brag about my experiences on social media and feel part of a larger fan-community, something I would hear and observe time and time again from other fans who I encountered. This emotional investment and making myself known to be a fan also acted as a gateway for connecting with interview respondents. Some of the most engaging interactions with research participants only happened once there was a mutual recognition of our shared fandom. Using these shared experiences subconsciously advanced our reciprocity and facilitated the perfect space to elicit more in-depth stories and information during interviews. There was a real connection through our shared fandom and a sense of community. Additionally, this fandom also revealed itself to be particularly useful as a recruitment strategy to overcome anxiety and awkwardness in approaching strangers during their holidays (Doppelhofer & Todd, 2021).

Rather than being sceptical and anxious of how this bias might impact the academic integrity of my research, it soon became clear that embracing my own emotional investment and almost obsessive following of everything Game of Thrones was not detrimental but integral in detecting the many nuances in which its imaginary world has manifested itself within the heritage landscape. By being researcher, tourist, and fan at the same time, I became almost over-zealous in my quest to see everything related to Game of Thrones and find every single place, even if it only appeared for a few seconds on the screen and it was arduous to get there. Driving across Northern Ireland, Dalmatia and Andalusia in my rental car, walking through every little alley of Dubrovnik, moving from site to site, searching, anticipating and discovering sites, seeing them in the distance coming closer, following the maps that I have studied intensely – I was on a pilgrimage not unlike some other people I encountered (see Chapter 5). Although one could argue that this closeness caused me to over-interpret certain aspects due to my own investment, it granted me heightened sensibility in capturing any little reference, picking up on subtleties non-fans would not notice. I would notice off-hand comments, quotes and variants of them, even keywords in languages that I do not speak. The substantial knowledge of the series and behind the scenes information would also help to critically assess the accuracy of certain claims that circulate through the internet or during guided tours which are then reiterated and reproduced. Far from trying to test the veracity of the fantasy imposed onto the landscape, this is meant to illustrate how Game of Thrones creates new associations

and place-myths beyond the source material and even in spaces physically untouched by the production but are made reality by being reproduced by tourists' online performances (see Chapters 6 and 7) or even some academic literature (e.g. Šegota, 2018, p. 435).

However, being fully embedded not only as a fan but a researcher alike also meant that both personas would impact the space and how the people interacted with it and even contribute to the perpetuation and reinforcement of the very phenomenon I was aiming to observe. My investigation would inevitably impact how my respondents would perceive and engage with the heritage environment. On countless occasions, I was asked where filming locations could be found, a request I always felt obliged to answer to my fullest knowledge. One group of visitors was thrilled to see me a day or two after our interview to show me photos of them re-enacting scenes — something they knew was part of my research and thus became aware of their own performances. Some wanted to take a photo together with me on the 'Iron Throne' on Lokrum Island when we met there again, making me part of their visual documentation of their trip (fig. 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Response photo-questionnaire #1 (see below): 'We had met Christoph (you) the day before and he recommended us the island and then we saw him there and we saw also the Iron Throne (and I am a big Game of Thrones fan). We did not expect any of it so we had to capture the moment'. (Photo and comment: Andreia Aballe Riobé)

Others, I ran into again at a different site where we continued our conversations we had a few days earlier. In several instances, local guides who I became well-acquainted with would introduce me and my research to their tour participants, calling me the 'Game of Thrones expert' and sending them to me to be interviewed. In return, I was 'recruited' by said guides for their purposes. At one point, a guide spotted me at one of my usual fieldwork sites and deployed me as a 'living prop' for her guests to re-enact a scene from Game of Thrones with them (fig. 3.4). One time, I was asked to help to shoot a promotional video for one guide's website and point out some minor locations on the city map he knew I was aware of, and he wanted to incorporate into his tours.
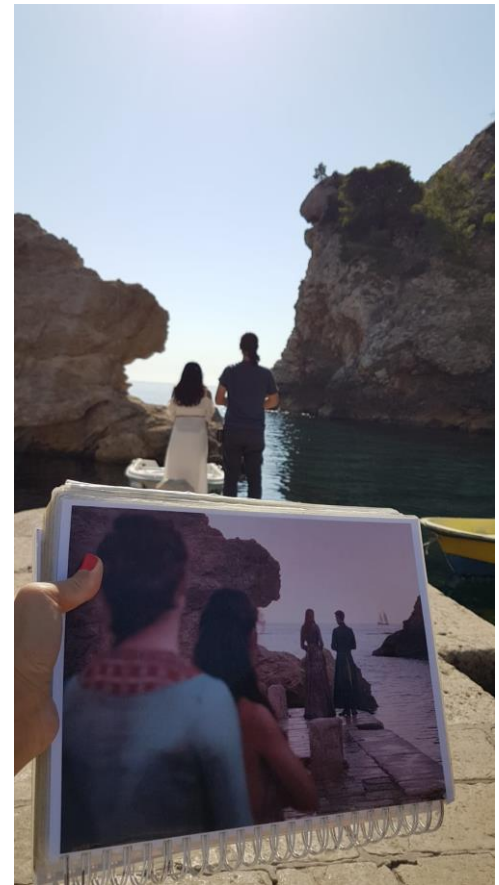
Figure 3.4: Researcher Christoph as living prop for Marija's King's Landing tour, Dubrovnik (Photo: Marija).

As established through various vignettes throughout this thesis as well as the above section on my positionality as a fan, this research is to some extent an autoethnographic account. While not explicitly written as such, this research uses my own experiences, 'extreme insiderness' and membership of the community studied to describe and analyse (own) cultural practices observed throughout this research (C. Ellis et al., 2011; Rambo & Ellis, 2020). Autoethnographies are still comparatively uncommon within tourism research, however, it seems to be an appropriate approach for the present study as both heritage, travelling and fandom are highly affective modes of experience (Light & Watson, 2017; L. Smith et al., 2018). Travelling across this imaginary realm has been an exciting and emotional journey for me, full of discoveries and experiences, unexpected encounters with fellow travellers, fans and other researchers, forming bonds and friendships on the way that are lasting long after I had left 'the field' – though it remains to be seen to what degree one can truly ever leave this field (cf. Kwong, 2021). In a way, Westeros became a real space for me over the course of this research, with its own unique people, traditions, and monuments, with this thesis being an in-depth story of this realm and the many encounters in it. Even more so, the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones became my home for more

than four years both as a physical and a mental space and will probably remain a significant part of myself for a long time (fig. 3.5).

Figure 3.5: Research participants Tourist 18 and Tourist 19 a.k.a. Malte and Saskia (right), with their ethnographer and fellow fan Christoph and his partner Leslie (left) in Dresden, August 2021, three years after they met in 'the field'.

3.4. Hunting and Gathering Visual Data in Westeros

The present research focusses particularly on the visuality of the phenomena occurring across Game of Thrones filming locations (G. Rose, 2016; cf. Urry & Larsen, 2011). This approach has been chosen due to the intrinsically visual nature of almost every aspect of the fields of heritage, tourism and pop-culture which are combined in this phenomenon: Game of Thrones created the imaginary geographies of the series by fusing heritage landscapes with visual effects, and then disseminated these images through the visual medium of television. This motivated many travellers to see those places 'with their own eyes' and engage in publicly visible individual and group performances and re-enactments within those heritage spaces. These practices are seen by both surrounding people as well as those at home through their photographic documentation. Furthermore, the omnipresence of the series' iconography through branded experiences, products and

advertisements, the representations of the imaginary spaces through maps, destination marketing as well as creating new monuments and artefacts exhibited in museums create a landscape of visual signifiers. Finally, the visual and spatial reproduction of all the above through digital geo-tagged photography shared on social media as integral part of contemporary daily life and travel experience. This also impacted the methodological approach which, in addition to interview data, is utilising primarily visual data through photography, video, and materials gathered across the sites.

Therefore, as are many ethnographies, this research is fundamentally based in a mixed-method approach. In this research, three main sources of data have been obtained: *observational* data, gathered from participant observation of individuals, groups and myself engaging in Game of Thrones related performances; *interview* data, obtained from various local and international stakeholders encountered during fieldwork; and *visual and material* data, by documenting and collecting material culture from walking tour flyers, maps and souvenirs to museum exhibitions and newly created monuments, and acquiring holiday photographs from informants as part of a reflective questionnaire after their visit. This methodological triangulation is further used as a validation strategy for the findings during fieldwork and subsequent examination and analysis of the data (Carter et al., 2014; Flick, 2004). Bringing together extensive observational, interview, visual, and autoethnographic data has provided a richness, cohesiveness, and thus 'trustworthiness' to the presented arguments, analyses, and conclusions of this research. Each set of data could not only provide validation and confirmation of what has been observed within another set of data, but would ultimately inform each other, revealing new aspects and adding new perspectives. Furthermore, using a mixed method approach was not simply chosen to 'just' improve the reliability through methodological triangulation and thus hope for a magical reveal of 'the whole picture' (Mason, 2002, p. 190; D. Silverman, 2013, p. 50), but to be able to adequately investigate the complex research contexts encountered during fieldwork and the myriad of different tangible and intangible expressions of the phenomenon at hand. While I have to wholeheartedly agree with D. Silverman (2015, p. 46) that choosing the path of mixed methods will 'seriously complicate your life', the research context in question is too complex to stick to one particular method and fully grasp and represent its nuances. Different sites in different regions mean different structures, stakeholders and site configurations. Some approaches that worked in certain fieldwork sites have been found impractical in others due to the differences in spatial and cultural configurations between

sites. Each set of data required different approaches depending not only on the kind of data but also the location where they have been encountered and collected. Documenting the experiences of tourist participating in guided tours and individual travellers' performances will require different approaches than visiting exhibitions and monuments created in honour of Game of Thrones. Information from policy makers, heritage and tourism authorities can usually only be accessed through interviews and archival research, while visitor performances can sometimes be even more enlightening than the words of those engaging in them could ever express.

The sample sizes of each set of data were not pre-determined due to the ever-expanding nature of phenomena encountered. However, by the end of the second and third field campaign, it seemed that a natural saturation point had been reached in which recurring patterns led to fewer and more abbreviated fieldnotes. Other than increasing the already copious amount of digital recording, new revelations about the processes at my research sites became rare. At this stage, a noticeable increase of boredom would occur, a feeling that, according to Rapley (2011, pp. 284–285), 'can be your friend' as it might signal that one is on the right track in identifying patterns.

3.4.1   Participant Observation

The main source of data stems from participant observation at Game of Thrones filming locations, associated attractions and their surroundings. These data were collected visually and in writing. Photos and videos were taken using a digital camera, a camcorder, and a mobile phone to record tangible and intangible manifestations of Game of Thrones in the landscape. Additionally, I would carry a fieldnote book with me in which I would record observations, comments, thoughts, and reflections throughout the day. Particularly interesting and insightful interviews and visual documentation would be highlighted and annotated in my fieldnotes for later analysis. When time permitted, I reviewed and summarised new findings at the end of the day more coherently. Fieldnotes and visual documentation complemented each other as writing could not sufficiently capture and illustrate the intricacy and overabundance of the visual and performative data, while photographs and videos could not document the larger context, theories, and reflections on the observed phenomena.

However, rather than 'just' being a set of particular research techniques to document the observed, participant observation is a 'mode of being-in-the-world characteristic of researchers' (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 249; D. Silverman, 2015, p. 233). Therefore, ethnographers do not only practise participant observation, but they *become* participant observers within the context of their research. As mentioned above, I would not be just a mere bystander, watching from the (out)side, I was in the centre of it by participating in the same practices. Not only did I participate in the tours, but I also took photos of myself at the filming locations and posted them on social media, I attended the Winterfell Festival where I took part in the interactive narrative hike 'Beyond the Wall'. I used the same sources of information to identify filming locations – granted, more excessively and thorough than most people I would encounter – such as blogs, fan wikis and social media posts and bonus features on the Game of Thrones Blu-rays and on YouTube. At the beginning of each fieldwork campaign, I participated at least in one guided filming location tour to familiarise myself with the structure of such tours, what are deemed to be the 'main' locations, see how the heritage landscape is interpreted from a Game of Thrones perspective, identify local tour guides who would become helpful informants and access points, and, of course, to live out my own fandom among peers and immerse myself in the fantasy.

In total, I took part in eight guided filming location tours of varying length and content, from short walking tours to elaborate, day-long immersive bus tours. This included two fully immersive bus tours in Northern Ireland that included costumes and meeting the direwolves, three one-and-a-half to three-hour long walking tours in Dubrovnik, a two-hour long tour through the Real Alcázar in Seville as part of a Game of Thrones themed academic conference, a half day tour through Split, Klis and other surrounding sites, and one (unanticipated) day-long tour through south-west Iceland – a surprise birthday present. After participating in those tours, I would spend several days at each of the main locations visited at tours and observe the Game of Thrones inspired performances of individual visitors as well as the (sometimes dozens of) filming location tour groups that would frequent these sites every day. A particular focus was how visitors engaged with the heritage environments and Game of Thrones related attractions and objects present during their visit, what they were saying, wearing (e.g. costumes or Game of Thrones branded clothes) and doing while being within these spaces. In case of guided tours, the interactions between tour guides and tour participants would be noted as well as the way the tour guide

would present and interpret the sites. All observations will be described from a 2018–2019 point of view as the pandemic-induced disruptions of these practices cannot be considered. However, with travel restrictions easing and global tourism restarting in 2022, it appears that this forced hiatus might not have been as destructive to the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones as some, including myself, might have anticipated (see Chapter 9).

There are several benefits of observations over interviews. Observing performances, unlike interviews, transcend linguistic barriers which are highly prevalent in an international tourist destination. At Game of Thrones sites, a visual 'common tongue' is used, constituting from performances, iconography, fashion and often clearly identifiable quotes and place names that can be easily documented. Furthermore, especially when asked on the spot, participants often struggle to verbally express their own behaviour. D. Silverman (2015, p. 172) also notes that interviews neither provide 'facts' nor do they tell us directly about people's 'experiences' but instead 'representations'. However, given that this research aims to illuminate how heritage landscapes are not naturally occurring but how they are constructed, reproduced, represented, and used through performance and perception, this limitation rather adds to the understanding of these processes than being detrimental.

3.4.2   Interviews

The second source of data gathered for this research was through interviews, which can be separated into two distinct categories. The first category involved in-depth expert interviews with an array of different local stakeholders across the spaces that have been affected by Game of Thrones, consisting mostly of local stakeholders, while the second category constituted interviews with domestic and international site visitors recruited on an *ad hoc* basis at various locations throughout the studied landscapes. The interviews followed a script with several predetermined open-ended questions that was adapted depending on stakeholder, location, and the direction of the conversation. The participants would be recorded with a Dictaphone and a voice recording app on my phone, in particularly noisy surroundings, an additional lavalier (clip-on) microphone has been utilised. Where appropriate or necessary, additional notes were taken. Recordings have been checked directly after ending the interview and in case of recording issues, main points and quotes have been written down from memory after the interview and later added into the interview notes. In addition to the officially conducted interviews, there have been

countless informal conversations with various stakeholders, both locals and tourists, which have been documented within my fieldnotes.

The set of expert interviews consists of 48 interview participants, falling into the following categories: tour guides and tour operators (12), heritage and museums (16), tourism marketing and policymakers (6), Game of Thrones related businesses (10), filming location management (1), and fan-community representatives (3) (see Appendix 1). Thereby, particularly their utilisation of Game of Thrones, how the places and spaces have changed and information on the development of certain experiences, such as tours, museum exhibits, etc. has been inquired from those directly involved.

Semi-structured interviews with international and domestic site visitors have been conducted across Northern Ireland (62 individuals), Dubrovnik (65 individuals), Andalusia (2 individuals) and Split (16 individuals). Due to the constraints of the tourism context in which research participants could not be recruited in advance but had to be approached on an *ad hoc* basis and required a flexible approach. Many respondents could only spare five to fifteen minutes at the most to answer questions, others developed into lengthy, in-depth conversations and discussions. Through those interviews, I hoped to gain insight into how the participants' experiences and engagement with the heritage sites is influenced by being exposed to the fictional world as well as the new installations, activities and attractions that have emerged on-site. Interviewing participants while they are physically present on the site is thereby considered crucial, so they can point out areas of interest, discuss how reality is 'holding up' to the fiction they have been introduced to through the screen beforehand and talk about how they feel standing where their favourite stories literally took place. Although considering a variety of different site visitors to capture the experiences and opinions of non-Game of Thrones fans or local regular visitors who are exposed to all those new tangible markers such as signs, souvenir shops and costumed tours, those who openly and recognisably engaged in Game of Thrones inspired performances or participated in guided tours would be strongly favoured in the recruitment process. This might be thought to constitute a sampling bias, however, it must be emphasised that it is these overt performances in public spaces (as well as the surrounding reactions) that are the core of the cultural phenomenon researched, not those who do not engage in them.

Most visitor interviews were conducted in pairs due to the simple fact that most people encountered travel with either friends, partner or family. While this mode of interviewing has come from a reality of the field, it opened up unexpected opportunities that would not only lead to more in-depth stories but also additional observational data (cf. Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014). Interview participants appeared to be more comfortable when having someone around they already knew and often complemented and expanded on each other's responses. Sometimes, interviews turned into discussions between interview participants in which they agreed, disagreed and came to new conclusions they would not have drawn otherwise, if their counterpart had not mentioned something that would have triggered a certain train of thought. Conducting interviews in pairs also gave a unique insight into the social dynamics otherwise invisible. For example, this would capture attitudes and experiences of non-fans that would still (have to) participate in Game of Thrones activities because of their fellow traveller.

Interviews can be helpful in supplementing and confirming observational data but also access individual's attitudes and values as well as social interactions, emotional and affective spheres of site visitors that are invisible to participant observation (B. Byrne, 2016; Hockey, 2002). Additionally, interviews are a crucial tool for examining local attitudes and private and unpublished information about epiphenomena, marketing and management of sites by accessing information from various local stakeholders who contribute and shape the Game of Thrones phenomenon. However, it has to be noted that interviews provide spaces in which respondents can present themselves and, in case of political and economic stakeholders, their organizations and businesses in a certain way (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011, p. 299). Many interviews with official stakeholders, such as policymakers and businesses, would steer conversations into particular directions to present their interests, some trying to use the interview as a way of advertisement for their work, others to reinforce certain heritage narratives (see Chapter 8).

Furthermore, often, the experiences had been too fresh, or the participants just arrived at the site, limiting their abilities to giving in-depth responses. Other respondents have been caught off-guard, being unsure what the research was actually about. It is of value to see how visitors reflect on their visit and how they contribute to reaffirm the fictional landscape. One way of gaining access to this kind of data might be travel photography, which was obtained through follow-up questionnaires.

3.4.3 Photo-elicitation

For the interview process aspects of photo-elicitation have been adopted. Photo-elicitation is 'based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview' using them as a visual stimulus (Harper, 2002, p. 13). Often, research participants are asked to bring old or take new photographs, which are then discussed in an interview with the researcher, generating not only interview but also visual data (G. Rose, 2016, p. 308). In other studies, researchers themselves introduce already existing images and photographs that have relevance to the community researched (Warren, 2018). This can be seen as a more collaborative approach, giving the research participant greater agency (G. Rose, 2016, pp. 315–316). The key strengths of this approach are that the interview is supported by discussing images and can be used as a gateway for further questions as well as triggering different sentiments than an ordinary interview (Tinkler, 2014, Chapter 9). Due to the aforementioned time-constraints, adopting a photo-elicitation approach in which visitors are asked to talk about their own photographs remained impractical. While some interviewees happily shared their favourite snapshots of the day – many chose proactively to show what they have been up to – most would not have time to look through their photographs or if they were would not be able to either pick specific photographs or find the right words to talk about them. However, utilising my own photographs of filming locations and asking whether the research participants were familiar with the sites and could name them at the start of each interview turned out to be a helpful tool. Not only would it serve as an 'ice-breaker' for the conversation, but it would also set the stage for the questions asked during the interview and thus, prompted more elaborate responses.

Additionally, questionnaires have been sent to all interviewees who provided contact details and agreed to be contacted after our conversations at least six months after their travels. These questionnaires asked them to pick and describe five photographs they had taken that would best represent their travels and then reflect on their experiences. The reasoning behind this approach was to access the often-overlooked post-travel reflection and to give respondents an opportunity to provide answers in their own time rather than being caught off-guard by the modalities of the impromptu interviews. Although only twelve of 54 participants contacted responded, both visual and reflective data was complementing the interviews and confirming several conclusions drawn across this research.

3.4.4 Material and visual data

Westeros is full of things that can be collected, bought and gazed upon. Additionally, to the above-mentioned participant observation and interview-based methodology that document intangible and momentary performances and perceptions, material manifestations of Game of Thrones have been documented through photographs, fieldnotes and physical collection (e. g. collecting advertising material, filming locations maps, purchasing souvenirs). While material epiphenomena within similar studies are merely treated as a by-product and at best as 'supplementary' data because they often only consist of brochures and maps, the material culture spawned by Game of Thrones is considered here as equally valuable to the data collected from participant observation and interviews, not least due to its quantity. Entire walls are plastered with Game of Thrones leaflets and maps for tourists to take, merchandise shops can be found on every corner and even new museums and monuments have been created in the vicinity of filming locations to pay tribute to this fantasy series. Therefore, I collected anything bearing the iconography of Game of Thrones, bought many items myself as souvenirs and took photographs of many more, and visited every museum, exhibition, and newly created monument at least once, to illuminate how the material culture generated by Game of Thrones grounds the fantasy even more strongly within the heritage landscape.

3.4.5 Data Analysis

Vignette 3.2: Unmaking a mess

Ultimately, going into the field was not half as terrifying as dealing with what I brought back from it. It was not the lack of meaningful data as I initially feared but the overabundance of it: Dozens of audio files with recordings of even more interviewees that needed to be transcribed, read, re-read, and analysed for their content. Deciphering page after page of fieldnotes, some of them reflectively summarised by the end of the day, many more hectic scribbles of every observation and encounter that seemed important at the time. Zealously I bagged everything I would find, resulting in a smorgasbord of bits and bobs of material, such as brochures, advertisements, business cards, post cards, souvenirs, maps and whatever else caught my eye – just to be certain I was not missing anything. And most of all: thousands of photos and hours of video recordings that are since cluttering the hard drive of my computer. All this, I thought, would create a rich

and full image, an intricate and complex narrative, an outstanding dissertation – what it mainly created is stress, anxiety and a strong motivation to procrastinate. Sorting through all this material has more than once made me lose my focus, so overwhelming was the sheer amount of 'stuff'. Finding ways of incorporating all the different types of data, observations, contexts in a meaningful, non-convoluted way seemed almost impossible.

Crang and Cook (2007, p. 133) noted that ethnographic research is 'about translating a messy process into a neat product'. In a realm this vast, it is easy to compile data but particularly hard to organise and analyse it in a comprehensive and meaningful way, best illustrated by the overabundance of ephemera and epiphenomena that was recorded over the course of this research (see Chapters 4–6). To further complicate matters, the data used were never 'raw' but have already undergone several stages of analysis by being constantly reviewed and reflected on during fieldwork, meaning data analysis was an integral part of the fieldwork and thus data collection itself. However, although writing an ethnographic account is a highly creative and reflective practice in which data collection and data analysis cannot be clearly separated, formal stages of data analysis are required to be able to investigate the research subject in depth as well as lending it rigour, credibility and trustworthiness (Crang & Cook, 2007, Chapter 8).

In a first step, the data were processed, standardised, sorted, and organised to be used for a more structured and in-depth analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, curated for grammatical and syntax errors, repetitions, and filler words, and formatted into a standardised transcripts with all corresponding information of the respondents, location, time, and duration of interview as well as additional comments from my fieldnotes. Similarly, I transcribed the fieldnotes of each fieldwork campaign and added missing information or expanded on certain points. These standardised transcripts were then uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 (see below) and categorised by location and stakeholder status. Visual data, such as photographs, videos, and scans of collected material, were labelled by type of data, and organised by location in separate folders on my computer. While being functional in its intent, this was also an important step in the analysis, as it not only provided an overview of 'all the stuff' I have had collected but would also require me to deeply engage with my data, such as repeatedly listening to my respondents and reading my fieldnotes, and thus already revealing

important themes and relationships that would inform and build the foundation of the subsequent analysis. This analysis has been formalised through coding the data.

Coding is the analytical practice of labelling, organising and identifying patterns and relationships between qualitative data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; MacLure, 2013; Stuckey, 2015). Within this research, data has been coded both manually and with the aid of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 (Maher et al., 2018). Although many patterns and themes would already emerge through the research questions and observations in the field, it was only through rigorous coding that these themes could be formalised, nuances found and connections between sites, respondents and numerous forms of data drawn. Comments, ideas, and observations found within interview and fieldnote transcripts were given one or more codes in NVivo 12 to identify common themes and sub-themes across data sets and fieldwork sites. Visual data, due to the large file size, had to be coded manually through annotation and reorganising them into specific sub-folders that could then be cross-referenced and aligned with codes and cases from NVivo 12. These sources of data not only complement but inform and give new meaning to each other, as it will be illustrated throughout this thesis. This process has been repeated several times to refine the codes, as more general codes could be broken down into more specific codes, set into hierarchical relationships with each other or linked to newly emerging themes and theoretical frameworks (MacLure, 2013). In a final step, codes would be clustered into specific themes, further annotated, and put into a relationship with corresponding literature and theories to contextualise them within the larger field of research and this thesis.

3.4.6   Ethics in Westeros

Although researching a rather ludic, fast-paced tourist space and dealing with only the most basic demographic data, it was crucial to still provide the proper ethical conduct throughout this research. Each interview respondent would be handed a consent form and an information sheet at the beginning of the interview (see Appendix 2). This would not only ensure that all ethical and legal requirements have been upheld but provide details regarding the subject of the research they would participate in, contact details in case they had any enquiries or would want to withdraw from the study after being interviewed, or follow the progress of the research. Although I gave all respondents ample opportunity through personal assurance as well as providing the option on the consent form to opt-out of any personal data being used, only few would rather stay anonymous. Most of them

were excited about the prospect of their opinion, experiences and fandom being part of a research project. They were not just consenting to their names being used, but rather eager and happy to be explicitly mentioned by name, as they, like me, are embedded within the Game of Thrones fandom and have high personal stakes in it. Therefore, additionally to the more standard ethical questions that must be addressed when dealing with research participants, I felt that there was also an ethical obligation to tell their part of this story and their experiences as accurately and faithfully as possible.

However, there were participants – mainly those having economic and professional stakes – for whom publishing certain quotes under their names or organizations would not be in their best interest. While some explicitly asked for certain statements to be 'off the record', most stakeholders did consent that everything they said could be published. These participants included for example public servants or representatives of organisations and businesses who expressed certain opinions about other stakeholders, or guides who talked about licensing issues surrounding copyrighted materials used in promoting and conducting tours. Even when given consent to reproduce anything said during an interview, I chose to anonymise certain statements and sentiments, as they might lead to repercussions for the individual or organisations (cf. Doppelhofer & Todd, 2021).

3.5. Limitations of Multi-sited Ethnographies

For all the advantages a multi-sited ethnography brings to the general understanding of modern, highly mobile society, challenges arise more frequently when conducting research spanning multiple sites and regions. While Game of Thrones has created a connected imaginary realm across national borders, such as Winterfell, King's Landing and Dorne in the series, there are cultural differences between Northern Ireland, Dalmatia and Andalusia, and thus region-specific ideas, approaches and oddities that affect the fieldwork. Though the myriad of different phenomena encountered during fieldwork are strikingly similar across the sites, these different places with different traditions, cultures, languages, stakeholders and spatial configurations required different approaches. Conducting ethnographic research across these contexts would not allow a one-size-fits-all approach.

First, there are different spatial configurations. In the case of Northern Ireland, there are more than 30 advertised and publicly accessible filming locations scattered all across the

country, mostly in County Down and along the Antrim Coast which require either a private vehicle or organised tours to access. Similarly, Andalusia is home to several sites that necessitate long drives in between each other. On the other hand, in locations such as Dubrovnik and Split most filming locations – with some exceptions – are within walking distance of their medieval cityscape, with iconic spots often only a street apart. Nearby sites such as Klis, Trsteno Arboretum and Lokrum are well connected via bus and ferry from Split and Dubrovnik. These different spatial configurations change significantly how visitors and local people experience and interact with the sites, who I would encounter and how I had to approach potential informants and the presence of the phenomenon, as well as how I would (be able to) embed myself within those spaces.

In Northern Ireland, for example, the Game of Thrones phenomenon is spread all across the landscape, and so are those who engage with it. One has to drive many kilometres between sites, to often remote locations, making the Game of Thrones experiences a country-wide, highly mobile phenomenon. This would also lead to encounters with highly invested Game of Thrones fans in rather remote places who were, like me, on a personal quest to actively seek out as many Game of Thrones sites as possible. Most sites are out in the open countryside, thus making it easy to take site visitors to the side and have a more relaxed and less stressed atmosphere than in the crowded, narrow streets of Dubrovnik. While the Northern Irish sites generally had a lower volume of visitors, the proportion of local and domestic visitors, who would be crucial in understanding the local reception of the impacts of Game of Thrones' diegetic heritage, was significantly higher.

On the other hand, the filming locations at sites such as Split and especially Dubrovnik are concentrated in a small, confined space, where all associated Game of Thrones activity is concentrated in a comparatively small area, thus having a much higher density of observable phenomena. Rather than a handful of location tours that would frequent the sites in Northern Ireland, location tours are not a daylong commitment and start almost every hour, leading to a continuous flow and presence of Game of Thrones tours at any given moment across the city. The medieval harbour towns have high volumes of international visitors pushing through narrow streets, making it significantly harder to approach and talk to potential participants, even though it was far easier to identify people who engaged in Game of Thrones related activities due to the way the heritage spaces have been used by both the series and visitors alike. Croatia's high volume of international

tourists also led to the situation that almost no local people apart from those with financial or political stake in tourism have been encountered. Either they would vanish among the tens of thousands of foreign visitors, or, according to some local informants, Croatians would 'flee' the old towns of their homes during tourist season.

Secondly, access to data from various stakeholders or the stakeholders themselves varied significantly between regions, often reflecting local attitudes towards Game of Thrones. While official spokespersons for tourism agencies and heritage sites in Northern Ireland have been very responsive and enthusiastic to talk about their work and the impact of Game of Thrones, many Croatian stakeholders were, at best, indifferent about the topic (see Chapter 8). It was difficult to get in touch with any official stakeholder unless you would already know someone local, thus, it was crucial to network on the spot during fieldwork, rather than being able to set up meetings in advance like in Northern Ireland. In Croatia, Dubrovnik's Tourism Board would only send some press releases, claiming that this would be all the information they had and after a follow-up would state that as civil servants, they are not authorised to provide information or comments on the subject of my research. Split City Museum, even though custodian of the Diocletian's Palace, refused my request for an interview or to answer questions via email on the grounds that 'they don't engage with the film industry'. This also extended to questions about established attractions such as the Game of Thrones visitor centre in Lokrum, which nobody felt responsible for as it was established by the previous, apparently disliked government (see Chapter 4).

Thirdly, operating on a transnational level would inevitably encounter linguistic problems. Interviews could only be conducted in English or German, while those who would struggle with those languages were excluded from this research. This limitation was both present in international visitors as well as official stakeholders. For the latter, this was not an issue in Northern Ireland and in the main locations of Croatia, as both Split and Dubrovnik are both highly popular international travel destinations. In places which only recently became recognised as tourist destinations, it was significantly harder to communicate. In Klis information was often only available in Croatian, and in Osuna, conversations with the creator and curator of the local Game of Thrones Museum had to be translated by a third person. These linguistic challenges would likely also favour certain narratives over others,

particularly the views of local populations who are proportionally better represented in Northern Ireland where English was the native language of most informants.

3.6. Conclusion

Given that the diegetic world of Game of Thrones is a montage of countless previously unconnected heritage sites across six different countries, infused with narratives that took inspiration from various cultures across history and realised through visual and practical effects, this research is pursuing a similar approach. Following Mike Crang's 'montage' approach (who in turn was inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin), who used different methodologies to address different heritage practices of different groups of people in a multi-sited context (Crang & Cook, 2007, pp. 179–180), each of the following chapters will shine a light on a specific heritage practice associated with Game of Thrones filming locations by using different combinations of case studies, sets of data, methods and theoretical approaches. Each theme is multi-sited to illustrate that regardless of geographical location, the manifestation of these phenomena is consistent, and more importantly, all-encompassing within the confines of this imaginary realm, ranging from on-site performances of new heritage communities, the development of a unique material culture, visual and digital representations of the spaces and subsequent re-territorialisation, the (re)negotiation of the heritage landscape the local communities who are now confronted with this new cultural heritage. Thereby, Game of Thrones will be the 'red thread' that links the individual themes into a new, intricate ethnographic tapestry spanning multiple sites, regions and heritages, elucidating how pop-culture and mass-media in general is impacting, reinterpreting and indeed transforming cultural heritage landscapes on a transnational level and thus our experienced world in the mediated 21st century.

As a first step, we will delve deeper into the imaginary realms of Westeros and Essos. Thereby, we will see how concepts and ideas of heritage have been used to first imagine and then realise its imaginary world on screen and how it subsequently manifested itself tangibly in the landscape of the filming locations.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HERITAGE OF WESTEROS
Building an imaginary realm in the real world

4.1. Introduction

> What [the filming locations] have is the aesthetic of Game of Thrones, of Westeros and Essos. They already have an antiquity, an ancient authenticity built in. Those places were built by people, if not centuries ago, millennia ago. […] Even if it's a physical landscape, like Pyke – or Ballintoy – with an old harbour and naturally weathered beautiful coastline. It just speaks of time having passed. And because those places have that build-in correct authenticity, it's a close fit for what we're doing. Because they're old places that feel old. For example, Cairncastle [was] historically inhabited thousands of years ago by people in wooden cairns who would look down that valley towards Larne, Glenarm. […] There's a reason why people have put themselves there. And then actually, it lends credibility too. You start to think, I thought this looked right and actually people a very long time ago were here for similar reasons. So, I'm onto something. And then you explore in more detail, you start to become a bit more specific: Okay, where would you chop someone's head off? (Robbie Boake, Location Scout and Supervising Locations Manager for Game of Thrones in Northern Ireland, Belfast 14.09.2018)

The use of heritage in Game of Thrones is omnipresent. This highly detailed medieval inspired fantasy world took inspiration from various cultural and historical references across time and space and has been crafted through creating easily recognisable visual and spatial signifiers that imply pastness and extensive on-location filming across Croatia, Northern Ireland, Spain, Malta, Iceland and Morocco. Countless, otherwise completely unconnected heritage sites have been used to portray the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos, overcoding them with new on-screen identities by adding narratives, place names and visually enhancing them with practical and digital effects, providing the series with a spatial frame. Now, landscapes as far North as Iceland's Svinafellsjokull Glacier and places as far South as Aït Benhaddou in Morocco are sharing the same imaginary space.

Like the identity-building function of heritage in real life, Game of Thrones' usage of heritage is not incidental but a deliberately chosen tool to craft this imaginary world in such detail that it could be mistaken for a real place. Heritage is utilised to lend authenticity, historicity and realism to Game of Thrones' fantasy world and to simulate a deep past. This elaborate worldbuilding, the process of creating 'imaginary worlds with coherent geographic, social, cultural, and other features' (von Stackelberg & McDowell, 2015, p. 25) has been a significant part of Game of Thrones' success. Already Tolkien described how what he called 'Secondary Worlds' created by the author must be presented as 'true' and absolutely 'real' for the narrative to be believable for the reader, something he would meticulously pursue himself when writing *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1947). Subsequently, the increasing absence of geographical cohesion, the disregard of the internal rules set out within this imaginary world, and the lack of attention to detail, best exemplified by disregarding the spaces and thus travel-time between locations and immersion-breaking onscreen appearances of anachronistic items such as disposable coffee mugs and plastic water bottles have been one of the most common sources of criticisms and indeed ridicule of the later seasons.

This chapter will illustrate how the imaginary world of Game of Thrones has been geographically grounded by using real-life locations and transposing their diegetic heritage onto them. Thereby, a particular focus will lie on how the production utilises mechanisms of heritage and how it relies on peripheral and liminal spaces as a spatial anchor for these newly created 'place-myths' (cf. Shields 1991). This will be followed by a description of how the imaginary world of Game of Thrones has manifested itself within the landscapes of the fieldwork sites, as well as giving an overview of the filming locations that have been included within this research. Thereby, a particular focus will lie on how Game of Thrones has not only become an important promotional tool to capitalise from diegetic tourism, but in several cases became part of the heritage narratives and place identities themselves.

4.2. The Diegetic Heritage of Game of Thrones

The fictional continents of Westeros and Essos are filled with awe-inspiring, ancient monuments, castles and cities that tell thousands of years of history and mythology, most of which have used real-life heritage landscapes as foundations. Those filming locations are not mere aesthetic backdrops but play a crucial factor in both the series' narrative and its critical reception. Many of Game of Thrones' most iconic and memorable scenes are set

in vast open spaces with breath-taking built environments framing the events. The shocking beheading of the first season's protagonist, Eddard Stark, took place on the large piazza of Fort Manoel in Malta, marking the point when audiences realised that no one in the world of Game of Thrones was truly safe. Robb Stark, rebelling against the crown, was proclaimed 'King in the North' within the ruins of Inch Abbey in Northern Ireland, emphasising the destruction of war. Daenerys Targaryen unleashed her revenge on the cruel slave masters of Meereen by crucifying dozens of them on the ramparts of the Fortress of Klis after conquering their city. The medieval streets of Dubrovnik bear witness to the Walk of Atonement, in which Queen Cersei Lannister is paraded naked before the eyes of gods, men and the viewers at home for having committed acts of falsehood and fornication. And after seven seasons of build-up, the arena of Italica's colossal Roman amphitheatre became the place where all notable characters held war council ahead of the impending Long Night and the Great War against the White Walkers, the primordial enemies of the realm of men (fig. 4.1). Heritage sites thus act as authoritative and epic framing, emphasising the gravitas of crucial narrative developments, and, most importantly, emulating authenticity, historicity and realism in Game of Thrones' fantasy world.
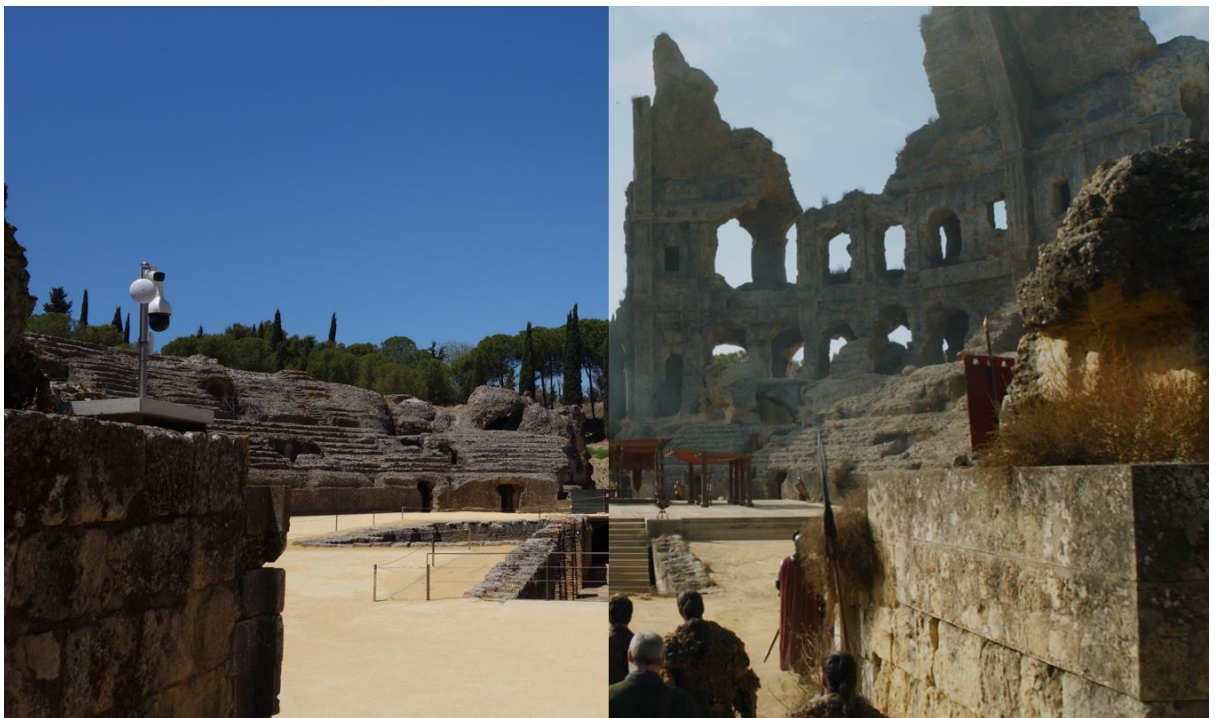
Figure 4.1: The Amphitheatre of Italica and the Dragon Pit of King's Landing (S07E07) side by side.

Even more so, to emphasise on the perceived antiquity of the imaginary world, the production often tries to eclipse the filming locations and their heritage landscapes by adding architectural features through practical and digital effects to make ancient sites appear even older and more historic than the 'real thing', creating something that could be called 'hyper-heritage' (Baudrillard, 1994; cf. "hyper-reality" in Chapter 5; Eco, 1986). For example, a stone circle was added to the above-mentioned Cairncastle, even though the surrounding Bronze Age monuments that inspired the selection of this location never had this feature; the ruins of Italica's amphitheatre have been made simultaneously grander and more 'ruinous' in post-production; the fortresses and walls of Dubrovnik were all decorated with countless parapets, towers and arrow slits, in accordance with how medieval structures 'ought to look like'.

To further deepen the immersion and historicising the fantasy, the use of heritage is not limited to choosing historic sites as filming locations and enhancing them with additional features to fit the narrative. The diegetic heritage of the different peoples that inhabit these imaginary realms is fully fleshed out and omnipresent within every single frame of the series. Each of the noble houses has their own iconography and founding myths, historic and mythical events and folklore are often topic of conversation and characters' motivations. Countless distinct cultural identities expressed through architecture, *tracht*/fashion, iconography, language, customs and religious and mythical beliefs and practices. These are not just superficial window-dressing but have a rich lore and visual and verbal vocabulary attached to them. Although being a fantasy world, the characters exist within a well-researched, historically informed, living, breathing environment, that is full of ancient and medieval inspired material culture, historic breeds of animals and in which the peasantry, smallfolk and nobility goes about their daily routine in the background. 'Authenticity is key' (Robbie Boake 14.09.2018) when creating this world, and the locations have been chosen to reflect the perceived characteristics of the peoples who inhabit them in their fictional counterpart.

Figure 4.2: Screenshots of Game of Thrones' opening credits that showcases the geography, places, and monuments of its imaginary world

Furthermore, heritage landscapes also act as geographical grounding. Like countless other television series, each of Game of Thrones' 73 episodes begins with an opening credit sequence. However, unlike other programmes, Game of Thrones utilises these 93 seconds to convey highly complex geographical and narrative information. During Game of Thrones' opening credits, the viewers are not only introduced to the names of actors and the leading production team, but the world of Game of Thrones itself by being taken on a journey across a three-dimensional map of Westeros and Essos (fig. 4.2). Without any prior knowledge whatsoever familiarity with the main locations, their structure and their relative distance to each other is subconsciously built with every episode. Different architectural styles and layout of settlements visualise the different cultural traditions of each location, each monument bears a sigil that informs us about the ruler of each place. By 'flying' across the landscapes, not only the spatial relations but the shifting environments with their unique climate zones and topographies are playfully introduced. Thus, the viewer gains a holistic overview of the general cultural and natural geography of the Seven Kingdoms and beyond. This opening is not static but an ever-changing journey.

As soon as new locations come into play over the course of the series, they will not only appear on the map but will be included in the opening sequence as well, showing shifts of narrative, movement of characters as well as destruction and change of ownership like in the case of Winterfell, visualized by rising smoke and the replacement of the 'Direwolf' sigil of House Stark with the 'Flayed Man' of House Bolton. Thus, the opening is constantly evolving with the progression of the show and therefore an essential part of the narrative itself. Through visuals alone, this opening sequence informs the audience of the scale of this world, creating an imaginary landscape that viewers can immerse themselves in. It gives a much-needed geographical grounding and a sense of space, helping the viewers to understand this imaginary world full of places they did not know before. Again, the outlines of the maps themselves take inspiration from real-life geographical references, with the European medieval Westeros resembling Britain and an upside-down island of Ireland being stacked on each other, while Essos, the oriental and antiquity-inspired eastern continent, is reminiscent of Asia Minor.

Through these above-described visual, spatial and narrative signifiers, the series emulated a deep past and its very own diegetic heritage, resulting in an immersive, believable and instantly recognisable world. Within this world, Dubrovnik, a small Adriatic harbour town, has been turned into King's Landing, the centre of political power of the continent of Westeros, while a relatively small late-medieval tower house in Northern Ireland became the ancient stronghold of Winterfell, the capital of the North. And as illustrated by Robbie Boake's comments (see below), the seamless blend of physical additions, digital effects and the fabric of the real place would make even those who are closely familiar with the filming locations struggle to see where reality ended, and fantasy began. This is, from own experience, even more pronounced for those who had their first introduction into the filming locations through Game of Thrones. Indeed, by tying the diegetic heritage of this imaginary world to the heritage spaces of its filming locations, they have become part of each other's identity, in some cases – as we will see – even synonymous. This has numerous tangible and intangible ways of manifesting itself within the landscape and forms the basis of the present thesis.

4.3. At the peripheries of the 'Known World'

> You almost have to ask yourself in the story, who are these people? What is Winterfell? Well, it's a northern outpost, it's a place in the middle of nowhere. It's a kingdom, with the Starks representing it. And you know, it's one of the lands within Westeros. But it's defensive, these guys are hard people looking after themselves. […] Cairncastle has a defensive position. And it has big rolling topography, full of sheep, it has livestock and that just felt like what you could expect for a peaceful people in the far north […] It's trying to understand 'what is it in the story that you're trying to portray? […] King's Landing is grand, it's a hot place, a bit more decadent. Lannisters are a different kind of family to the northern, hard Starks. So, it's more ornate, you know. […] King's Landing is red, it's decadent, it's fun, it's bit more wine drinking, a bit of incest [laughs]. (Robbie Boake, Belfast 14.09.2018)

Similarly, to the case studies mentioned in Chapter 2, Game of Thrones' filming locations are almost exclusively situated in liminal spaces and utilise the mystical, exotic perception and the lack of prior (visual) knowledge of its audience to craft its fantasy world and show something that has never been seen on television before. Being located in mainly peripheral regions and thus often not being part of the global tourist gaze (yet), was a major contributing factor in choosing numerous sites to represent the imaginary world of Game of Thrones. The showrunners emphasised that some locations, such as Doune Castle in Scotland, famous for being featured in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, were abandoned in early stages or never even considered in the first place, as they are instantly recognisable and look too familiar to (American) audiences to suspend their disbelief (Cogman, 2012). According to showrunner D.B. Weiss, places like Winterfell 'needed to be unique and not just pulled into the orbit of "standard twelfth-century Scottish castle." […] We wanted to introduce different elements and influences to keep Winterfell looking like a real place yet unlike any real place we'd ever been' (ibid. 2012, p. 40). The unknown and exotic perception of the fringes of Europe and Northern Africa provided a perfect blank canvas onto which these new imaginaries could be projected onto and convincingly transformed into the fantasy world of Westeros and Essos. This urge for exoticism is clearly stated by the creators, such as Daniel Minahan, director of several episodes of the show's first season, who commented on Malta being 'so exotic and mysterious and ancient. I think it really lends itself to the stories and gives it a lot of flavor' (Making of Game of Thrones Season 1). Similarly, *The Lord of the*

Rings films tremendously profited from New Zealand's perception as the 'exotic other', later utilised by the country's tourism industry to cater to tourists who have longed for these 'meaningful and authentic experiences' (Buchmann et al., 2010, p. 239).

Using seemingly exotic or 'oriental' heritage for film and television productions to project imaginary geographies onto and to stir the imagination of Western audiences has a long tradition (cf. Said, 1978). For example, even before portraying the fictional city of Yunkai in Game of Thrones, the Moroccan Berber village and World Heritage Site Aït-Ben-Haddou has been the 'oriental archetype' for Hollywood productions and stood in for many 'oriental' locations and cultures (Lukinbeal & Zimmermann, 2006, p. 320; Rosenblatt, 2009). Similarly, although Game of Thrones is known for deconstructing certain tropes, the series is often still reproducing them. In Game of Thrones, southern and eastern locations such as Morocco, Andalusia, and to some extent Malta and Croatia have been utilised to portray treacherous, cruel and decadent societies, while northern locations such as Northern Ireland and Iceland would be chosen to depict noble and honourable peoples (see below). Likewise, Western-created fictional narratives and territories have been asserted onto Eastern Europe and the Balkans as the perceived 'Other within Europe' and in-betweenness of being neither 'Oriental' nor 'Occidental' for centuries (Goldsworthy, 2013; cf. M. N. Todorova, 2009): Anthony Hope's Ruritania, Bram Stoker's Transylvania and more recently Marvel's Sokovia all used (and subsequently reinforced) Western perceptions of a backwards and impoverished Balkans and Eastern Europe (see Chapter 8). Due to the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, the 'savage' and 'war-torn' image of the Balkans prevails to this day (Bellamy, 2003, p. 126). Game of Thrones, in a way, broke with this tradition, as it contradicts the predominant gritty and undesirable perception of the Balkans by utilising its lesser-known beautiful Mediterranean landscapes and architecture that have been 'untainted' from the global tourist gaze until recently and thus could be easily inserted into the fantasy world for the viewers, offering breath-taking vistas while retaining their 'Otherness'.

Located on the opposite peripheries, the North Atlantic islands of Iceland and Ireland might not be perceived as 'Oriental' but have nevertheless a mystical perception full of ancient tales and legends (Mallory, 2016; e.g. Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2011). During the 19th century formation of Irish Nationalism, Ireland's 'Atlantic West' became an idealised landscape unspoiled by modernity that is 'populated by idealised people who invoked the

representative exclusive essence of the nation through their Otherness from Britain' (B. Graham et al., 2000, p. 61). Similarly, Iceland, due to its arctic and volcanic nature literally a land of ice and fire, always had a supernatural and wild image because of its historical and geographical isolation (Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2011). These perceptions have also been replicated within Game of Thrones. In contrast to the southern filming locations, which have been predominantly used for their built environments, both Northern Ireland and particularly Iceland is primarily featuring picturesque, unspoiled landscapes, rather than the 'civilised' yet 'decadent' and treacherous places of the South and East (both in the world of Game of Thrones and in reality). Furthermore, Northern Ireland is most notably remembered for being associated with the North of Westeros and thus the idealised, honourable Northerners, whose ancestors are the indigenous 'First Men', who pray to faced trees and worship the 'Old Gods', and fight for independence from the royal oppression from the decadent South, while Iceland became the home of the savage yet noble Wildlings from beyond the Wall (fig. 4.3), who above all cherish their freedom and bend their knees to no one.

Figure 4.3: The Wall. 300 miles long and 700 feet high sea-to-sea land-barrier made from ice and magic, separating the Seven Kingdoms from the icy lands of the Wildings and White Walkers (S01E02)

These stereo- and archetypes are as old as Tacitus' description of the noble savages in the Barbaricum beyond the Roman Empire, further emphasised by 'the Wall', a less than subtle (confirmed by the author George R. R. Martin) reference to Hadrian's Wall which

has been regarded as the border of 'civilised world' from antiquity until today (cf. Malamud, 2009; Stroh, 2009).

The use of such 'Othering' and 'Oriental' tropes by both the book series and its TV adaptation has been noted and critiqued on several occasions (Hardy, 2015, 2019). However, utilising the liminalities and otherness of the filming locations as well as the fact that most viewers first laid their eyes onto those locations through a Game of Thrones lens, made many of those places synonymous with their fictional counterparts. Places such as Winterfell and King's Landing have been made real by territorialising their diegetic heritage onto already liminal spaces and even more so, by being built from *pars pro toto* use of various heritage sites across several countries the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones created a new transnational, territorial entity that reimagines space and heritage across national borders. These newly established heritage spaces and how they are utilised by various stakeholders are the primary focus of this thesis. The following section will introduce the fieldwork sites, their roles within the world of Game of Thrones and an overview how the fantasy has manifested itself in those spaces.

4.4. Becoming Westeros

> It doesn't take much for us to transpose our story onto [the filming locations]. There might be a little bit of set decoration, nestling in with an old structure, like Castle Ward for example, the Winterfell film set inside a few hundred years old farm setting. The match, aesthetically, is good. […] That was about imagining a build space of an antique castle within a set of walls. And when we did build there, it was interesting how many National Trust people [would] come and tap our wall and tap their wall. And they wouldn't know! The seamless fabric of Game of Thrones was nestling against their own place that they wouldn't even recognize it. And they'd be like, 'Is this us? Or is this Game of Thrones?' And they be literally trying to feel the reality, like, 'Where do we begin, and where does Game of Thrones end?' (Robbie Boake, Belfast 14.09.2018)

In the following section, each region that has been visited for fieldwork will be introduced, before briefly presenting the individual sites and the roles they are playing on- and off-screen more closely to provide the spatial framework and environments in which this research was conducted. Depending on what can be observed at individual sites, these introductions will vary in length and focus. Many aspects mentioned within these

introductions will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters where they will be put into a wider context and analysed in depth. Given that this thesis operates within the conceptual framework that the diegetic space created through Game of Thrones has become its own geographical and cultural entity, the historical and cultural contexts in which those sites are located in real life will only be expanded upon where central for the analysis of particular research findings. These include especially local responses directly related to the selection and re-interpretation of the sites and the subsequent consequences for their surrounding heritage landscapes and the communities that are affected by them. This will be, for example, particularly relevant in Chapter 8 when the impact of Game of Thrones on the changing (self-)perceptions of the post-conflict societies of Northern Ireland and Dubrovnik from stakeholders both in- and outside the respective region will be examined.

Locations, that are described below, have been chosen as they feature prominently in Game of Thrones location tours, have experienced unprecedented popularity in the years after Game of Thrones' initial release through increased media coverage, and show clearly identifiable tangible and intangible phenomena related to Game of Thrones.

4.4.1. Northern Ireland: 'Game of Thrones Territory'

Figure 4.4: Main fieldwork locations Northern Ireland (adapted from d-maps.com)

Northern Ireland has a special place in the filming and legacy of Game of Thrones and has, in many ways, become synonymous with its fictional world (fig. 4.4). Not only have Belfast's Titanic Studios been the headquarters for the entire eight seasons of the production of the series, but no other region has also been more thoroughly exploited for its rich resource of vistas than Northern Ireland. According to Robbie Boake (pers. comm., 14.09.2018) they have shot scenes in 63 different places scattered all across Northern Ireland's six counties. According to one of the show's producers, the decision on shooting in Northern Ireland was predicated due to wide variety of landscapes within close proximity to the film studio in Belfast (Frank Doelger, Making Game of Thrones Season 1 Blu-ray bonus feature 2011) such as lush green fields and sandy beaches, rocky coasts and steep cliffs, misty mountains and vast forests. Thus, Northern Ireland, while mostly associated with the 'medieval' parts of the world of Game of Thrones, stood in for countless locations of Westeros and Essos, from Dorne in the south to the lands beyond the Wall in the north, as well as the Dothraki Sea across the Narrow Sea to the east. The circumstance that the local screen agency Northern Ireland Screen provided £3.2 million in production funding for the first season (totalling in £15.96 million by S08) as well as the successful lobbying efforts for tax reliefs for large-scale 'cinematic television' productions, were probably another beneficial factor in making Northern Ireland an attractive choice for HBO (NI Screen, 2018).

However, not only the production und subsequent portrayal of the locations themselves cemented Game of Thrones' presence into the local landscape, but also substantial marketing efforts have been made by both Northern Ireland Screen and Tourism Ireland (and its subdivision Tourism Northern Ireland) from 2014 onwards in cooperation with HBO who granted permission to use the official Game of Thrones license and imagery for destination marketing (pers. comm. Moyra Lock, Northern Ireland Screen, Belfast 19.06.2018; pers. comm. Judith Webb, Tourism NI, Belfast 14.09.2018). This occurred at a time when, according to numerous interviewees both international media and visitors became increasingly interested in visiting the locations they had seen on the screen. The location marketing started with simple, though successful, social media campaigns (2014, 2015) that ran parallel with the release of the series' fourth and fifth season, but became more elaborate with every successive year, culminating in an entire rebranding of Northern Ireland by declaring itself 'Game of Thrones Territory' in an attempt to make both real and imaginary landscapes synonymous.

For the final three seasons of the series, Tourism Ireland commissioned objects that are either made in, or at least pay tribute to, traditional, historic crafts such as wood carving, weaving and stained-glass making while utilising the iconography of Game of Thrones, the 'Doors of Thrones' (2016), the 'Game of Thrones Tapestry' (2017–2019) and the 'Glass of Thrones' (2019) (see below). Additionally, maps in both physical and digital form have been created and distributed across tourism offices, while interpretation boards have been erected at 26 publicly accessible filming locations across Northern Ireland (fig. 4.5–4.6). After the release of the final season, Northern Ireland and HBO cooperated in the development of an official Game of Thrones Studio Tour in Banbridge, which was intended to be opened in 2020 as a legacy project, however, its launch has been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic until Spring 2022.
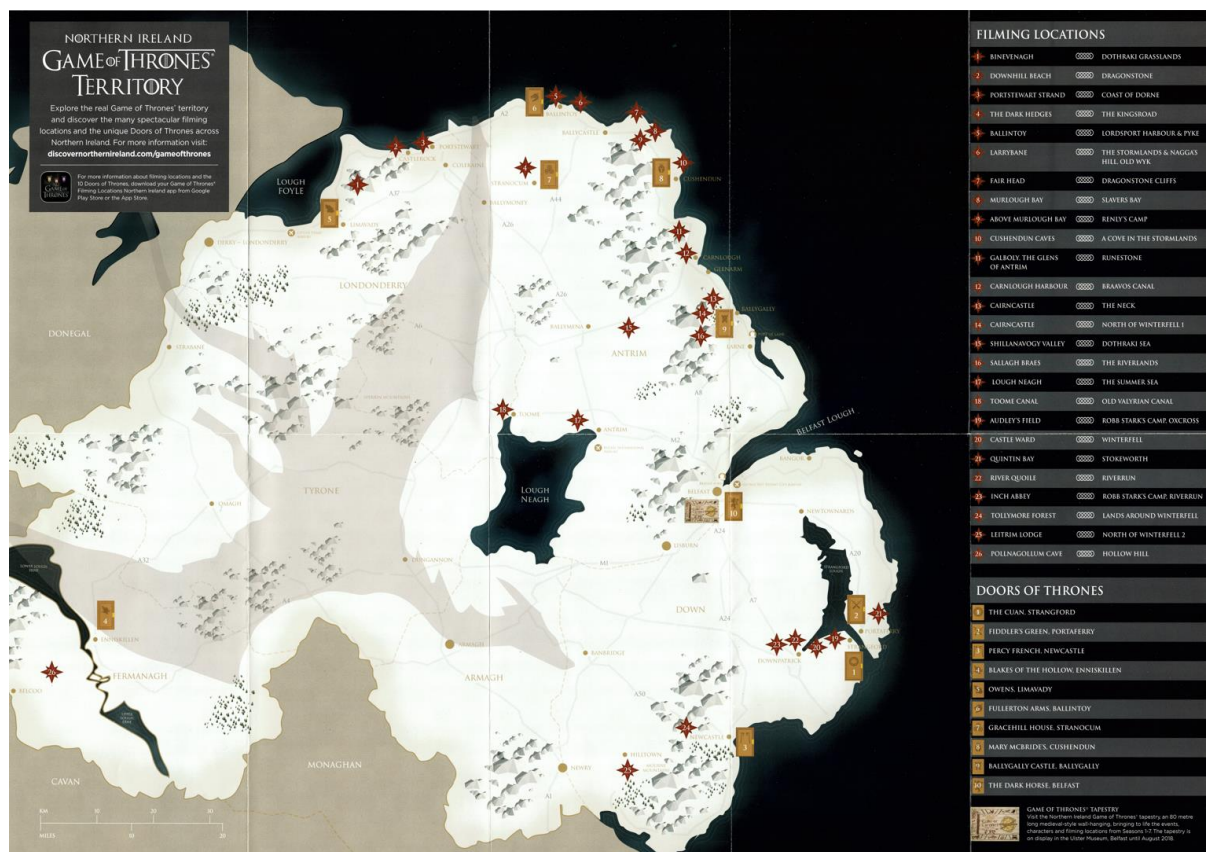
Figure 4.5: Official 'Game of Thrones Territory' filming location map created and distributed by Tourism Ireland. Additionally to filming locations, it shows where the ten 'Doors of Thrones' and the 'Game of Thrones Tapestry' can be found.

Figure 4.6: Game of Thrones interpretation boards located at publicly accessible filming locations (see fig. 4.5). They show and retell scenes that have been filmed at these locations. Portstewart as Dorne (left); Murlough Bay as Slaver's Bay (top right); Ballintoy Harbour as Lordsport (centre right); and Cairncastle as lands north of Winterfell (bottom right).

Figure 4.7: Various local Game of Thrones inspired souvenirs. 'Lannister Gold Mead' and 'Hodoor' beer'; 'A Game of Drones' honey; filming locations postcards and magnets.

Apart from the official national re-branding, private companies and individuals have significantly capitalised from the hype surrounding Game of Thrones. Numerous filming location tours started to emerge from 2014 onwards, some of them offering unique selling points such as immersive, day-long multi-site tours guided by former extras on which participant will be provided costumes and props to dress up as 'Stark bannermen' or 'Ironbron' or be able to meet the dogs that played the 'direwolves' in the show (see Chapter 5). Additionally, many local shops have started to sell either officially licensed merchandise or locally crafted Game of Thrones inspired products with illustrious names such as 'Lannister Gold Mead' or 'Game of Drones Honey', while pubs and restaurants serve food and drinks that bare reference to the series (fig. 4.7).

4.4.1.1. Old Castle Ward: Winterfell

Winterfell, the ancestral home of House Stark, capital of the North of Westeros and one of the main settings of Game of Thrones, is a vast ancient castle complex with an imposing central keep, colossal round-towers and surrounded by massive granite walls. Here, the Kings of Winter and the Wardens of the North ruled for thousands of years, it was conquered and reconquered during the War of The Five Kings and became the last bastion against the primordial enemy of the realm of men, the White Walkers. It was also one of the first places that introduced the viewers to the vast fictional universe and the numerous characters of Game of Thrones. Old Castle Ward, on the other hand, is a modest, late 16th c. tower house with a small historic farmyard on the shores of Strangford Lough and remained relatively hidden on the grounds of the previously rather low-profile 18th century's Castle Ward Estate in County Down. However, over the last decade Winterfell and Old Castle Ward have become synonymous, as the lone tower of Old Castle Ward has been used to portray Winterfell under aid of green screens and elaborate special effects (fig. 4.8). Those who travel to see the magnificent fortress of Winterfell will see it reduced to a ruinous state, not by the ravages of time, but the absence of pixels and computer-generated imagery (CGI). However, even though everything but half a castle gate has been stripped away, Winterfell can be seen, and indeed felt, all around, something that will be a reoccurring theme throughout subsequent filming locations.

Figure 4.8: Winterfell (S01E01) and Old Castle Ward.

While Castle Ward's grounds have since been used for several low-key scenes over the course of the first three seasons – which, if not pointed out by markers attached to trees, tour guides or a locally distributed filming location map, would only be recognised by the most knowledgeable of viewers – the production mostly abandoned Old Castle Ward after S01 due to the National Trust's concern over accessibility for their visitors (pers. comm. Sarah Sharp, Visitor Experience Manager, Castle Ward 14.06.2018) and built a new Winterfell set on a private estate in Moneyglass (County Antrim). However, in the eyes of

the site management and fans alike, Old Castle Ward has remained the place of the 'real' Winterfell 'where it all began' (General Manager Winterfell Tours, Castle Ward 30.06.2018) and a gathering point for fans. Sarah Sharp proclaimed proudly:

> We are Winterfell! We need to own that and say, 'This is actually us!' (Sarah Sharp from England, Visitor Experience Manager, Castle Ward 14.06.2018)

Figure 4.9: Game of Thrones at Old Castle Ward. Old Castle Ward with the Direwolf Banner of House Stark; a family enjoying the offer by 'Winterfell Tours'; the 'Slaughterhouse' merchandise shop; 'Thrones and Tower Tours' to tell the 'real' story through the fantasy.

Not only is Castle Ward one of the main attractions in any filming location tour and raised this National Trust property's profile, but there are also many new ways how one is now able to engage with this heritage site. The resident outdoor activity company ClearSky Adventures seized the opportunity and rebranded themselves as 'Winterfell Tours', offering costumed archery, self-guided bicycle tours to additional nine filming locations within the demesne, and excursions to other nearby locations. The management of Castle

Ward itself released a filming locations map, opened the 'Slaughterhouse Shop' – a Game of Thrones merchandise shop – in one of their historic farmyard buildings and offers 'Thrones and Tower Tours' to tell Castle Ward's story through Game of Thrones (fig. 4.9).

Figure 4.10: Opening ceremony of the 2018 Winterfell Festival at Castle Ward in attendance of Mark Addy (King Robert Baratheon I) and Ian McElhinney (Ser Barristan Selmy).

Figure 4.11: Promotional flyer for Winterfell Festival 2018.

For three consecutive years (2016–2018), Castle Ward has also been the venue of the 'Winterfell Festival' in which its role as the capital of the North of Westeros has been celebrated. Part Renaissance fair, part fan convention, the 'Winterfell Festival' attracted thousands of Game of Thrones fans from across the world and offered countless performances, activities and experiences, such as jousting, medieval crafts and cuisine, participatory re-enactments and celebrity appearances of former cast members such as Mark Addy (King Robert Baratheon I) and Ian McElhinney (Ser Barristan Selmy) (fig. 4.10-11). In 2019, the author George R.R. Martin himself visited Castle Ward for an exclusive Q&A event for fans, strengthening the ties between fantasy and reality even further.

4.4.1.2.Inch Abbey: The Riverlands/Robb Stark's Encampment

Figure 4.12: Game of Thrones Tour at Inch Abbey.

While remaining an unnamed ruin in the Riverlands within the series, Inch Abbey has become the place of Robb Stark's acclamation as the King in the North. Just outside of Downpatrick, Inch Abbey was founded in 1180 by John de Courcy, who, according to the tour guides encountered there, was the *real* 'King in the North (of Ireland)', as he led the 1177 Anglo-Norman conquest of Ulster. Ever since Game of Thrones became popular the 12th century Cistercian Abbey now bears witness to at least one daily ceremonial procession of Game of Thrones fans who descend upon the ruins wearing cloaks, banners and swords to re-enact the pivotal scenes of King Robbs acclamation by assembling in front of the abbey and shouting 'The King in the North!' (fig. 4.12). Once this ritual is complete, the group disperses for individual photo sessions within the frame of the Abbey ruins, exchanging arms and banners with fellow travellers to be able to pose with some of the legendary swords such as Eddard Stark's 'Ice', Jon Snow's 'Longclaw' or Arya's 'Needle'.

4.4.1.3.The Dark Hedges: The Kingsroad

Figure 4.13: The road more travelled. The Kingsroad (S02E01) and the Dark Hedges.

One of the most iconic filming locations are the Dark Hedges, a picturesque 18th century avenue of intertwined, gnarly beech trees in the proverbial middle of nowhere in County Antrim (fig. 4.13). Unlike other Game of Thrones filming locations, which have been visually explored across many episodes, the Dark Hedges have only been on screen for about twelve seconds at the end of the first episode of the second season of Game of Thrones. Nevertheless, since its short-lived yet highly memorable role as the Kingsroad, the central cross-country route of Westeros, it became one of the most popular attractions

in the area. Arriving by the busloads, countless people are walking down this scenic tunnel of trees from morning until evening, making it as frequented as its fictional counterpart. Indeed, this new popularity has caused problems with the conservation of the trees, as the pressure of passing-through vehicles is both damaging the roots and branches of the over 200-year-old trees. Even though vehicle access has been prohibited as a result of the increased pressure, both cars and busses continue to frequent the road, making this site an often-named example of overtourism caused by Game of Thrones.

4.4.1.4.Ballintoy Harbour: The Iron Islands

Figure 4.14: Ballintoy Harbour, a.k.a. Lordsport, the harbour of Pyke on the Iron Islands.

According to Theon Greyjoy, the Iron Islands are a hard place that breeds hard men. The rocky and sparse geography of this archipelago created the Viking-like culture of the Ironborn, who 'do not sow' but pillage and reave from others as they please. This 'hard place' in real life is Ballintoy Harbour, a quaint little 19th century fishing port along the Antrim coast where locals used to have a quiet Sunday tea and cake at the harbour café. However, like at the Dark Hedges, the calm and tranquil atmosphere has since been replaced by droves of tourists. Situated between the UNESCO World Heritage Site Giant's Causeway and National Trust's Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge, Game of Thrones' Iron Islands at Ballintoy Harbour have become the third must-see attraction located along the Antrim Causeway Coastal Route. The interest has outgrown the harbour's small capacity

to an extent that cars and busses are often queuing for hundreds of meters on the narrow access road.

Figure 4.15: Iron Island Tour participants posing on the shores of Ballintoy Harbour.

Figure 4.16: A visitor gets her photograph taken with a Game of Thrones interpretation board

Visitors can often be seen taking photos of and with the two Game of Thrones interpretation boards that are prominently positioned at the docks and the shore and retell the story of Theon Greyjoy's arrival at the Iron Islands (fig. 4.14-16). Similar to Inch Abbey, Ballintoy harbour is another prime destination for tours to have an extended stay and dress up as characters from the series. Here, they don the costumes of the Ironborn and descend upon the shores where Theon received the blessing of the Drowned God, repeating the Ironborn proverb 'What is dead may never die!' as instructed by the guide, before taking countless photos of them posing on top of rocks and duelling. Being far less secluded and on the beaten path than Inch Abbey, this spectacle usually attracts a fair share of bystanders whose reactions range from bewilderment to envy.

4.4.1.5.Of Tapestries and Dragons: Crafting new artefacts

> Game of Thrones® has truly become part of Northern Ireland's heritage and culture. –
> Game of Thrones Tapestry Exhibition, Ulster Museum, 2017

Particularly in Northern Ireland Game of Thrones is prominently featured beyond its filming locations. Under the 'Game of Thrones Territory' brand the last three seasons were accompanied by the creation and public display of the 'Doors of Thrones' (2016), the 'Game of Thrones Tapestry' (2017-2019) and the 'Glass of Thrones' (2019). Conceptualised by the London-based advertisement agency Publicis, these campaigns were mainly intended for marketing purposes, however, became tourist attractions and heritage sites in their own right, fusing the iconography of Game of Thrones with the heritage landscape and narrative of Northern Ireland.

The 2016 'Doors of Thrones' literally transformed parts of a Northern Irish heritage site into a Game of Thrones related attraction (fig. 4.17). When Storm Gertrude fell several of the over 200-year-old beech trees of the Dark Hedges in January 2016, their wood was salvaged and carved into ten doors, each visually telling the story of an episode of Season 6 and hung across pubs and restaurants close to filming locations across Northern Ireland. At each location, visitors can get a special passport stamped, thus not only verifying, and authenticating the visit, but encouraging to find all doors and complete the collection.
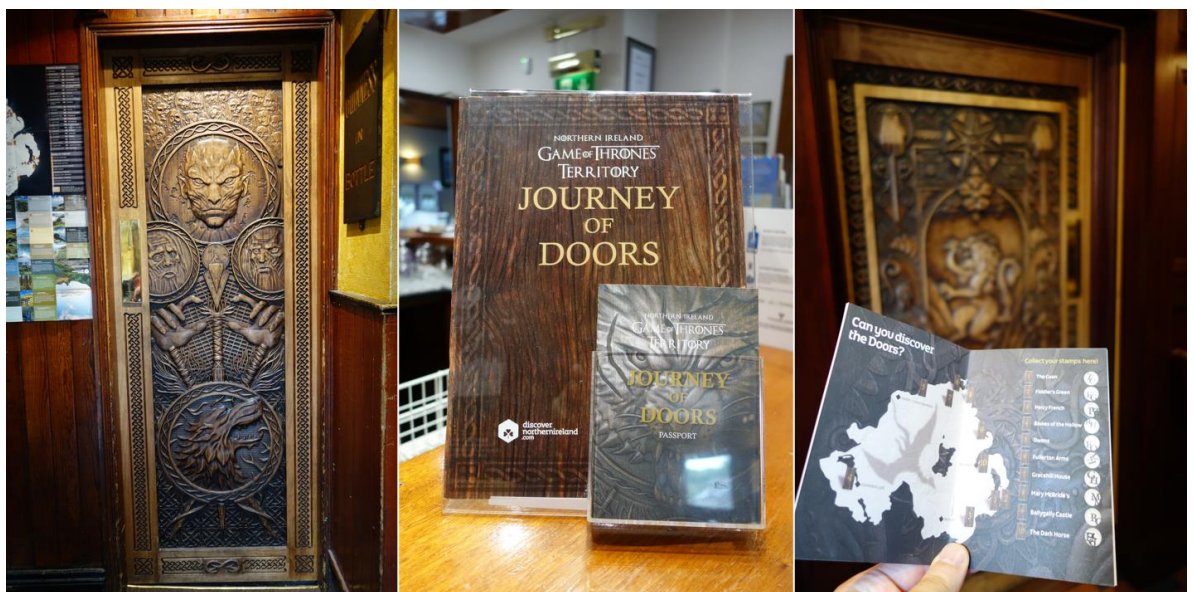
Figure 4.17: Doors of Thrones. Door #5 at Owen's Bar in Limavady (left); Journey of Doors passport (centre); Door #10 at The Dark Horse in Belfast with fully stamped passport (right).

In 2019, the 'Glass of Thrones' windows, six medieval-style painted glass windows, have been integrated into the urban heritage landscape of Belfast by being laid on a path between Belfast City Hall and the Titanic Slipway, and since then have been public monuments (fig. 4.18). They are placed on a concrete pedestal and consist of several panels showing scenes and iconographies attributed to some of the Great Houses of Westeros and the White Walkers. The sixth and final Glass of Thrones, located at the end of the Titanic Slipway and next to the studio in which Game of Thrones has been filmed, shows the Iron Throne and offers visitors to take a seat. Some have been since relocated away from the city centre to create a more walkable trail along the new gentrified Maritime Mile around the Titanic Quarter (see Chapter 8).

Figure 4.18: Glass of Thrones windows across Belfast from City Hall to Titanic Studios.

The most elaborate of these newly created artefacts is the 'Game of Thrones Tapestry', an 87-metre-long, hand-stitched retelling of the entire series in the style of the Bayeux-Tapestry which has been exhibited in the Ulster Museum, the National Museum of Northern Ireland (NMNI) on numerous occasions (fig. 4.19). It has been woven with 19th

century Jaquard looms which had been used during the prime of the Northern Irish linen industry and the panels portraying the episodes of the last two seasons have been hand-stitched in the gallery for visitors to observe the process (pers. comm. Valerie Wilson, Curator of Textiles NMNI, Cultra 20.04.2019).

Figure 4.19: The Game of Thrones Tapestry in the Ulster Museum.

On the sides of the gallery, information on the local linen industry of the 19th century is provided. The tapestry became a tangible manifestation of centuries-old traditions and changing industries made relevant again through pop-culture, interweaving Northern Ireland and Game of Thrones in every imaginable way. Roisin Aiston (Ulster Folk Museum, Cultra 09.04.2019), one of the embroiders, described the tapestry as a gateway to 'highlight and promote traditional crafts', bringing 'people from all interests and all walks of life together under one roof' and 'promote Northern Ireland in a good way' – the 'good way' being not with the Troubles (see Chapter 8). One of her favourite experiences while working on the tapestry was of a day when two visitors from Spain headed directly from the airport to the Ulster Museum just to see the tapestry. On the same day, a local woman in her 90s without any interest in Game of Thrones came to see the large-scale embroidery

and was delighted how skills her mother had taught her were displayed and celebrated in the museum. 'Two completely different sets of people, two totally different interests. But one tapestry brought them together', Roisin remembered. It also evoked a strong sense of ownership among the local population. Valerie Wilson reported of an encounter with a man from Belfast who could not thank her enough for creating and exhibiting this artefact:

> He actually wanted to shake my hand. And he says, 'I'm so glad the museum has done this'. And he said, 'This is ours now, isn't it? This belongs to Belfast? This is ours now?' So again, as the way people locally have taken ownership of other aspects of the Game of Thrones programme, I think they're feeling the same way now about the tapestry. (Valerie Wilson, NMNI, Cultra 20.04.2019)

Not only has this exhibition exceeded all expectations and attracted a record number of visitors (Pamela Baird, Head of Strategic Research & Planning NMNI, 20.02.2019), but it also became a much-requested item, most notably from Bayeux, which exhibited this pop-cultural re-imagining next to the medieval inspiration in 2019. The Chief Executive of the NMNI, Kathryn Thomson, calls these artefacts not only 'heritage assets', but she also sees them as a present and future representations of Northern Ireland's history:

> The tapestry maybe a new thing today, but in 100 years – like the Titanic story in Belfast – the tapestry will allow us to tell the story of the screen industry in Northern Ireland, the growth of the creative industries, how that shaped the city. (Kathryn Thomson, NMNI, Cultra 21.06.2019)

These Game of Thrones artefacts, and in turn Game of Thrones itself, have been incorporated into the official national narrative and heritage cannon by being exhibited in the national museum and being treated as public monuments. Game of Thrones' status is thereby elevated above a mere commodity, transforming it into a representation for the nation and its history and therefore, an essential part of Northern Ireland's identity and perception. By becoming a sought-after loan and a means to 'highlight the centuries-old links between Normandy and Ireland [and their] shared linen heritage' (Kathryn Thompson, Cultra 21.06.2019), the Game of Thrones Tapestry is acting as a cultural ambassador and representing Northern Ireland abroad as 'Game of Thrones Territory' (cf. Knowles, 2011).

4.4.2. Dalmatia: King's Landing and the Cities of Essos

Figure 4.20: Fieldwork locations Croatia (adapted from d-maps.com).

The second region that has played a significant part both in Game of Thrones and the present research is Dalmatia, the southernmost of Croatia's four historic provinces (Biondich, 2005). Characterised by its Mediterranean climate, turquoise sea, rocky coastlines and spectacular historic harbour towns and fortifications, this narrow stretch of land along the East Adriatic Sea has been the most important filming destination besides Northern Ireland (fig. 4.20). As showrunner David Benioff put it in a promotional video clip 'Croatia has become kind of our home away from home' (HBO Adria, 2014).

Dalmatia's rich architectural heritage has played a significant role in the portrayal of urban centres of Westeros and Essos for five out of the series' eight seasons, most notably Westeros' capital King's Landing and the mercantile city of Qarth (Dubrovnik; S02-S05

and S08), the magnificent though decadent Slaver City of Meereen (Split, Fortress of Klis; S04 and S05) and the Free City of Braavos (Šibenik, Kaštel Gomilica; S05). Previously relatively unknown by most people around the globe, these centuries-old monuments and towns have been used so extensively in the filming of Game of Thrones that they became more than the foundations but the embodiment of those imaginary cities themselves. Unlike locations such as Castle Ward in Northern Ireland, where many practical and digital enhancements had to be added to the frame to create Winterfell, the breath-taking architecture and the historic streets of Dalmatia's harbour towns often required little to no digital effects. Short of some digitally inserted towers and monuments in the far distance, most locations are instantly recognisable and look almost exactly like encountered on-screen when standing in front of them. This overlap between screen and reality has been echoed by numerous informants as well as those involved in creating the series, such as the actor Pedro Pascal, better known as his on-screen persona Prince Oberyn Martell, the charismatic yet deadly Dornish nobleman, who 'thought it was a green screen when [he] watched the show' joking that 'there's no way they could have found a place that beautiful' in real life when talking about Dubrovnik (HBO Adria, 2015).

Like Northern Ireland, Croatian filming locations, particularly Dubrovnik and its onscreen incarnation as King's Landing, saw a substantial increase in Game of Thrones related media coverage, visitors and businesses who started offering products and experiences. However, even though Dalmatia's landscape has been used extensively and many places, just as in Northern Ireland, became synonymous with their on-screen identities, there has only been very little official utilisation of the Game of Thrones brand in the same way heritage and tourism stakeholders have done in Northern Ireland. This lack of interest in creating new visitor experiences and promoting filming locations has been noted by most tour guides and tour providers encountered during fieldwork in both Split and Dubrovnik as well as Croatian media which criticised the local and national tourist boards for not tapping into this vastly profitable market in a similar manner as Northern Ireland did (Pauček Šljivak, 2019). Conversations with various local stakeholders during fieldwork revealed a multitude of contributing factors for this lack of destination marketing, including the structure of regional and national tourism boards, avoiding to develop additional market segments due to already existing concerns over overtourism, reservations rooted in local pride to avoid 'Disneyfication' of heritage spaces, or, according to some

local tour guides, those in charge not being necessarily in tune with current trends in pop-culture and tourism (see Chapter 8).

Indeed, the Game of Thrones effect in Dalmatia, apart from very few and mostly one-off local initiatives, is mainly driven by private businesses, such as (walking) tour providers, merchandise shops and other Game of Thrones experiences as well as individual tourists who engage in Game of Thrones inspired performances. These, however, are so substantial and frequent that Game of Thrones' iconography has become omnipresent around the most prominent filming locations even without public endorsement.

4.4.2.1.Dubrovnik: King's Landing and Qarth

Figure 4.21: Old Town of Dubrovnik with Lokrum Island on the left. View from Srđ Hill.

While Dubrovnik can look back on a long and eventful past as well as holding the prestigious status of a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979, this historic harbour town only recently re-entered global consciousness (fig. 4.21). This is not necessarily due to a growing interest in the history of the Merchant Republic of Ragusa or the turmoil of its siege during the Yugoslav Wars in the early 1990s, but more recently due to its role as King's Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms, and, to a lesser extent, as merchant city of Qarth, the self-proclaimed 'greatest city that ever was and ever will be'. With its magnificent city fortifications of walls and bastions, the red-roofed medieval houses and the stunning Renaissance palaces next to the turquoise Adriatic Sea, it was, according to

showrunner David Benioff, 'a shock, because the whole city really looked the way we pictured King's Landing' (HBO Adria, 2014).

Figure 4.22: King's Landing (S04E02) and Dubrovnik.

Within the imaginary world, the small harbour town of only a few thousand inhabitants has been transformed into a medieval metropolis of half a million people, the much fought-over seat of political power and a snake pit of scheming and intrigue. Even though Dubrovnik has been vastly expanded digitally and major monuments that play significant roles within the series, such as the Red Keep (the royal castle of the rulers of the Seven Kingdoms) and the Great Sept of Baelor (a cathedral-like temple of the predominant

religion of Westeros), have been inserted in postproduction into its cityscape in overview shots and as backgrounds, most locations in which the filming took place are instantly recognisable (fig. 1.2; 4.22-4.24).
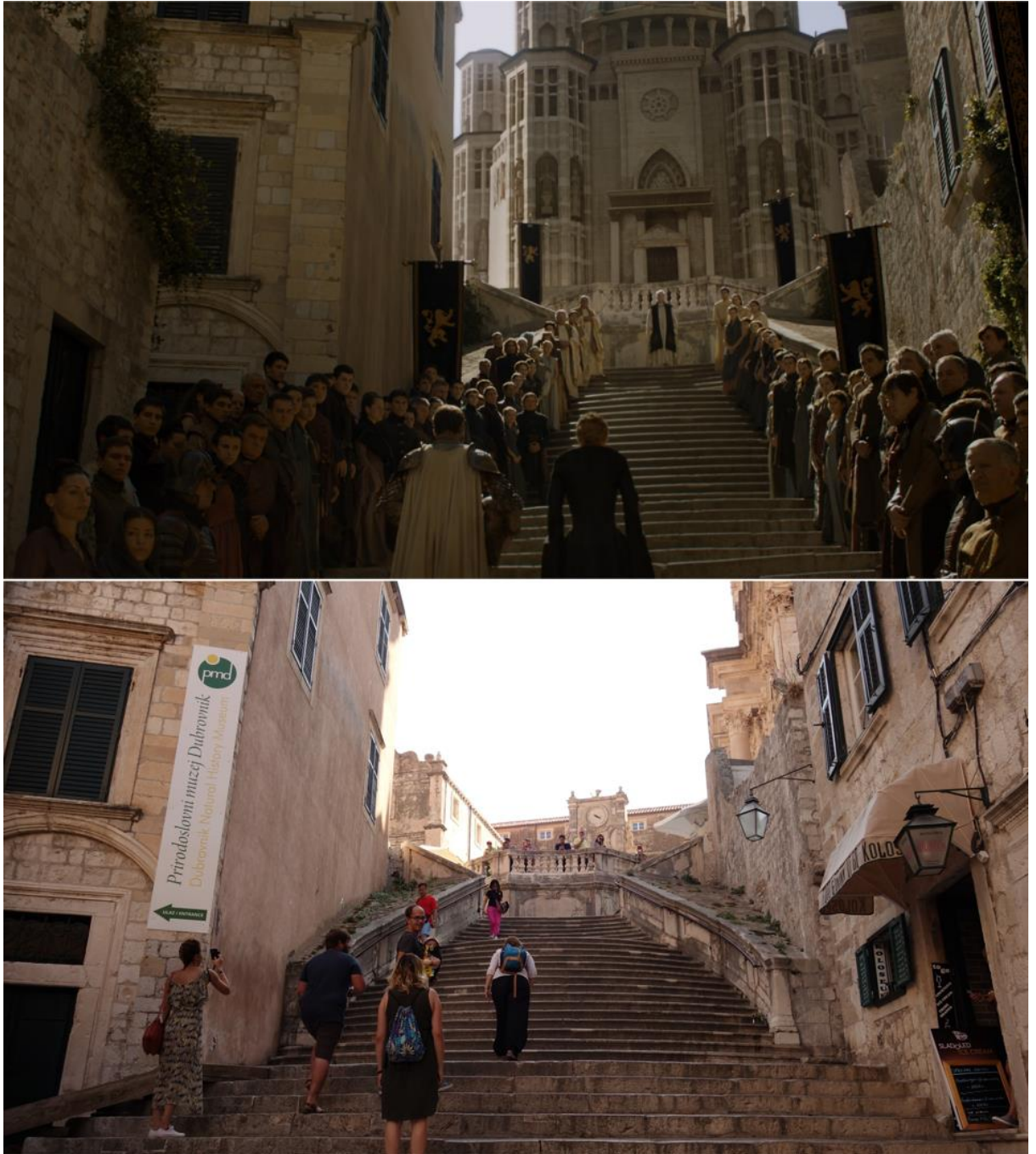
Figure 4.23: The steps of the Sept of Baelor (S05E01) and the Jesuit Steps.

Filming locations can be found across Dubrovnik's old town and its surroundings and are now frequented daily by dozens of themed walking tours and countless individual tourists who engage in various Game of Thrones inspired activities and performances, such as re-enacting scenes and re-creating shots photographically. The main locations that show a

particular high frequency of Game of Thrones related performances are Fort Lovrijenac (Red Keep), Kolorina Bay (Blackwater Bay), the Jesuit Stairs (Sept of Baelor) and Minčeta Tower (House of the Undying) (fig. 4.25). However, the iconography of Game of Thrones is omnipresent in almost every nook and cranny of Dubrovnik's medieval alleys and inescapable even for those who are only vaguely familiar with the series.
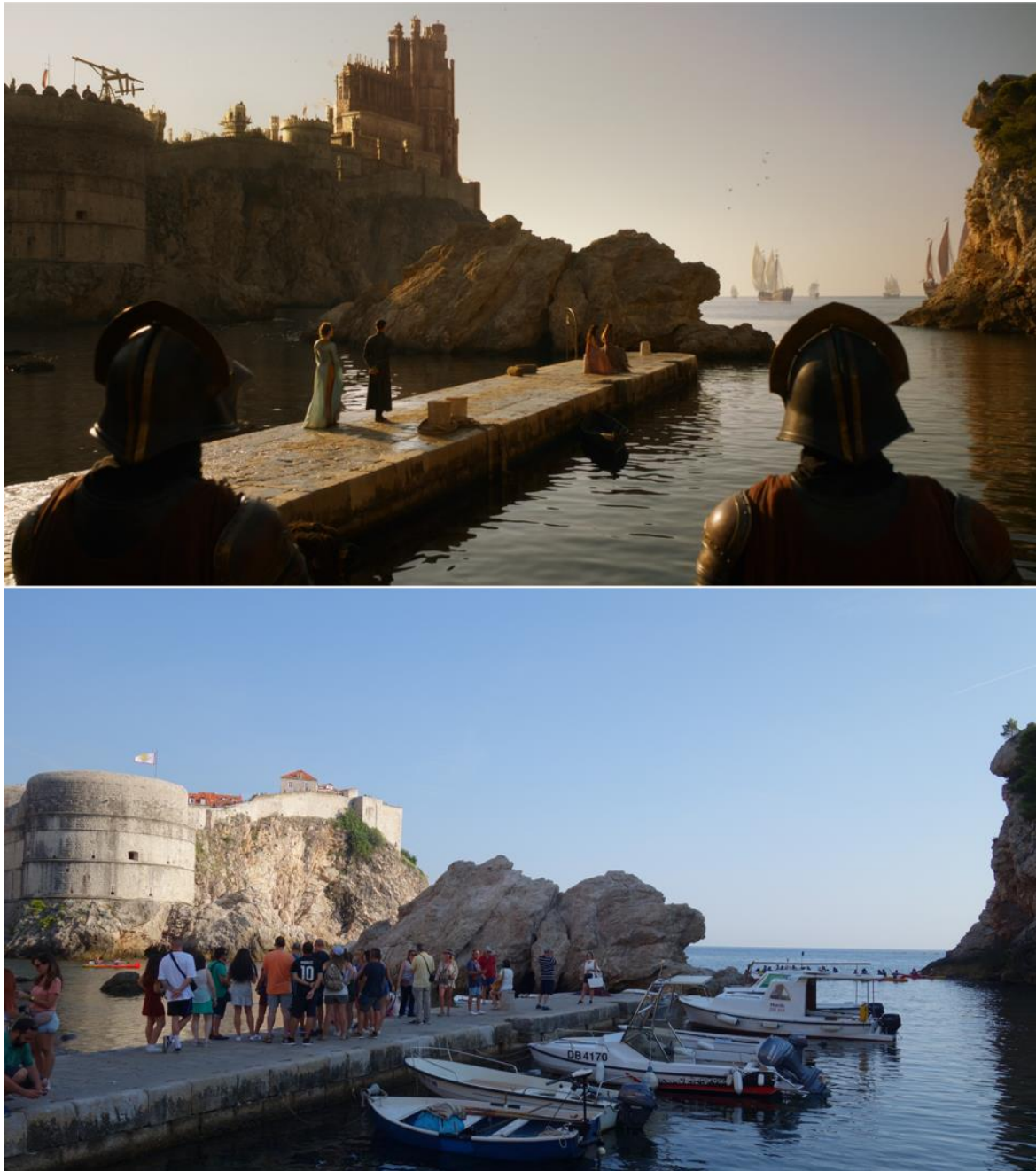
Figure 4.24: Blackwater Bay (S03E01) and Kolorina Bay.

Figure 4.25: Filming locations map by 'Game of Thrones Tours King's Landing'; https://gameofthronestours.com/kings-landing-walking-tour-dubrovnik/ (accessed 10.05.2022)

If one does not encounter one (or more) of the many tour guides leading flocks of tourists through the narrow streets by holding up Game of Thrones screenshots, one will see advertisements for those walking tours all across town; numerous shops, often only meters apart, are trying to lure in potential customers with life-size mannequins of Game of Thrones characters or an opportunity to sit on an Iron Throne replica to sell 'officially licensed merchandise'; restaurants and bars offer specially named meals and drinks; while countless tourists wearing t-shirts with the emblems of their favourite Great Houses of Westeros push throw the narrow streets, often referencing Game of Thrones when they pass by any of the many markers (fig. 4.26-27).

Figure 4.26: The omnipresence of Game of Thrones in Dubrovnik. Streetlamp that advertises Game of Thrones tours (left); purchasable paintings of characters in a wine bar (centre top); tourist gets his photo taken with Jon Snow('s mannequin) in front of a merchandise shop (centre bottom); Drink menu of a bar adjacent to the filming location of the infamous 'Walk of Shame' listing a 'Shame Mojito' and a 'Shame cocktail (often pointed out by tour guides) (right).

Figure 4.27: Iron Throne Shop Dubrovnik. Tour guide Davor takes a photo of one his guests in the Iron Throne shop at the end of their filming locations tour. While others have to buy a souvenir (i.e. Game of Thrones merchandise), tour participants can sit for 'free'.

Although Dubrovnik's former mayor Andro Vlahušić (2009–2017) was eager to utilise Game of Thrones in the same way as New Zealand with *The Lord of the Rings*, starting several initiatives such as filming location maps and a Game of Thrones Visitor Centre (see below), and planning several more such as a theme park, film studio and a sign stating 'Welcome to King's Landing' (cf. HrTurizam, 2016), many of these plans have not been followed up or have been abandoned by the new conservative local government in 2017, which won the election on the promise of reducing, rather than increasing tourism (Morris, 2017). After the change of government, all public endorsement and marketing of Game of Thrones ceased. Similarly, during my visit, official filming location maps issued by the previous government were out of print and could only be found in targeted searches online. This might be partly due to the popular narrative that Game of Thrones has been directly blamed for issues of overtourism (e.g. Capps, 2017; O. Smith, 2019; Wiley, 2017), however, these narratives have been found to be often exaggerated by international media (cf. Sæþórsdóttir et al., 2020). Indeed, according to Davor Majić, a Dubrovnik tour guide, and Denis Orlić, the secretary of the Society of Friends of Dubrovnik Antiquities (the charity tasked to conserve the city walls), cruise ships are the main culprit of clogging the streets and not leaving any financial benefit, while 'Game of Thrones tourists' usually are part of the much more desired overnight stays (pers. comm. Davor Majić, Dubrovnik 25.09.2018; pers. comm. Denis Orlić, Dubrovnik 11.10.2018).

One of the few official Game of Thrones offers provided by the local government is a Game of Thrones visitor centre which is located just a short ferry ride from the harbour of the old town on the island and nature preserve of Lokrum (fig. 4.31). Inside an abandoned Benedictine monastery there is an exhibition that provides information on the monastery and Lokrum Island itself, while around a half of the visitor centre is dedicated to Game of Thrones. It contains a locations map, screens that loop two promotional video clips in which the production team and the cast gush over the capable local crew and the 'physical splendour of Dubrovnik and Split' (HBO Adria, 2014, 2015), and, of course, the centre piece: A recreation of the Red Keep's throne room, complete with an Iron Throne replica on a pedestal on which visitors can sit, pretend to be the King or Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and, naturally, have their photo taken.
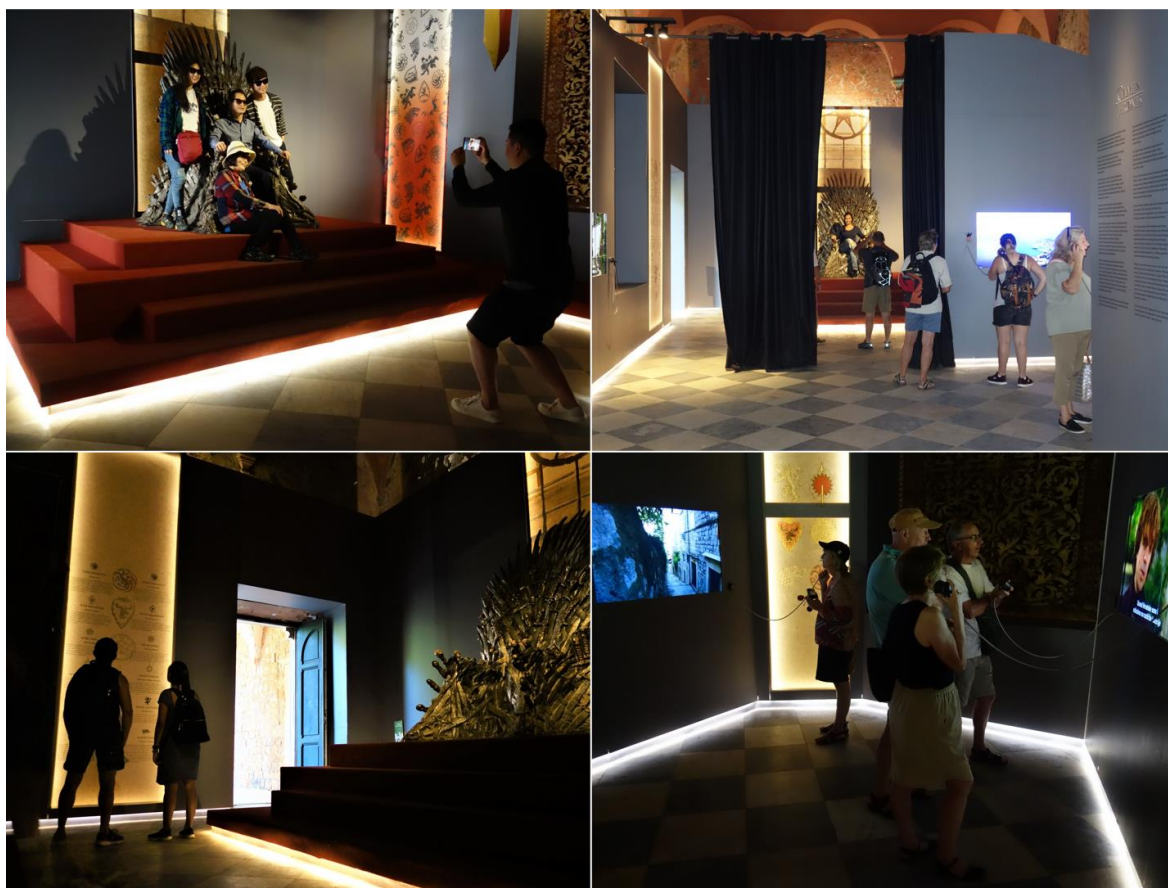
Figure 4.28: The Game of Thrones Visitor Centre in the Benedictine Monastery on Lokrum Island.

However, this visitor centre is a relic from the previous government. While it is allowed to exist, it is neither mentioned and advertised in any way shape or form (not even on the website of Lokrum Island) nor part of any current strategy, as illustrated by the comment of Ivica Grileć, who was the director of the Lokrum Island Nature Reserve until 2020:

> It's hard to tell from my point of view, what the idea of the previous director of Lokrum and [the previous] mayor was, but I think that they recognized the big potential of that filming industry as something which is interesting for our visitors. […] I'm not saying that we will not keep the exhibition in the future […] but I think that we will keep it as something on the side that has no great impact for us. Maybe we are wrong because we are not following this issue through interviewing our visitors [laughs] (Ivica Grileć, Lokrum Island Nature Reserve, Lokrum 09.10.2018)

It appears that this exhibition is also not entirely free from controversies among the local population. While online reviews are overall very positive about Game of Thrones' presence within the walls of the Benedictine Monastery, one local describes it as 'a place

where real history lost its battle with Game of Thrones'[7]. Particularly these examples illustrate, that the issue of Game of Thrones might not lie with the number of tourists but the kind of heritage narrative they bring with them (see Chapter 8).

4.4.2.2.Split and Klis: Meereen
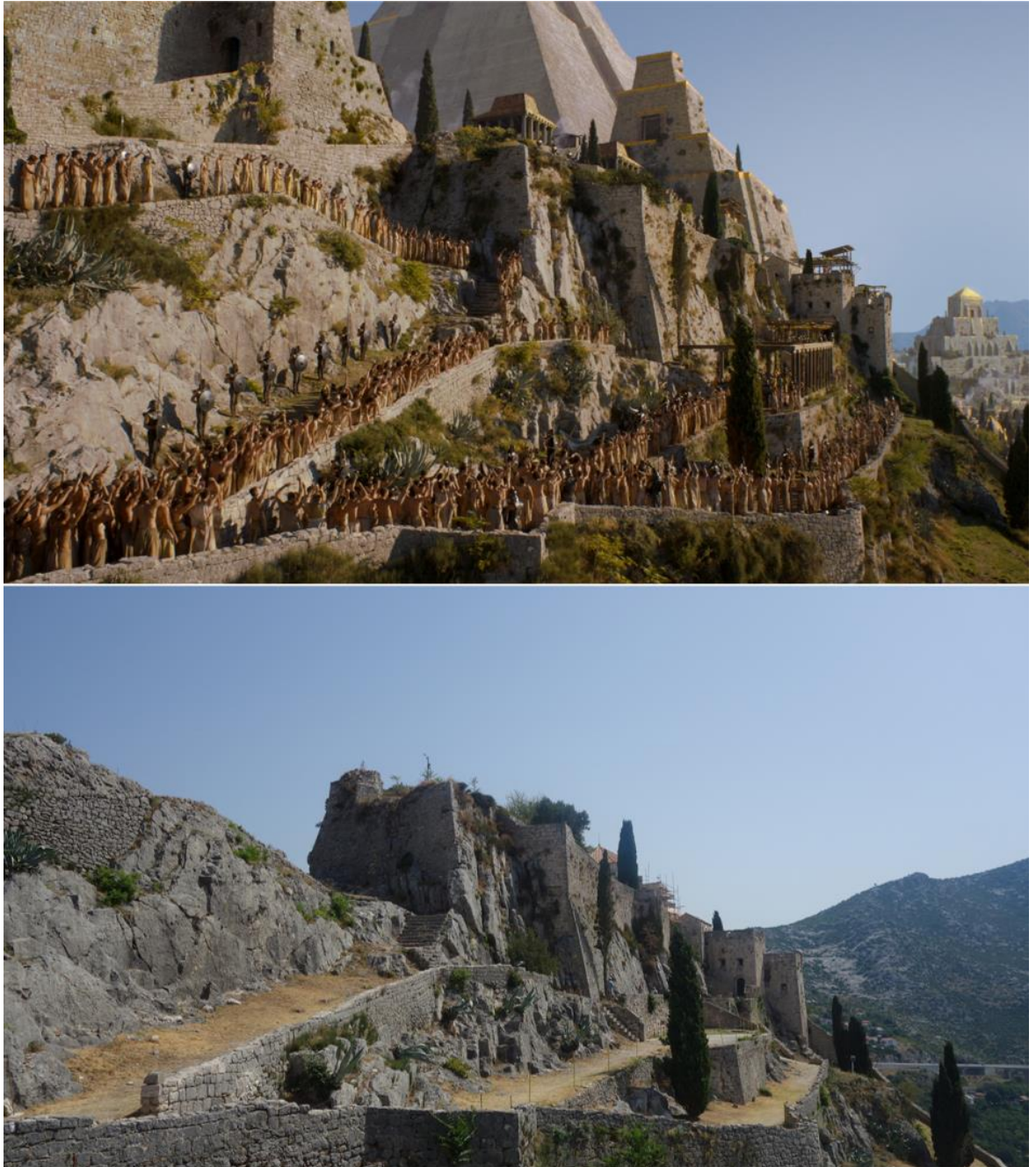
Figure 4.29: The liberation of Meereen by Daenerys Targaryen (S04E04) and the Fortress of Klis.

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[7] https://goo.gl/maps/jJf5v9HU4cmZXjRf8 (accessed 02.05.2022)
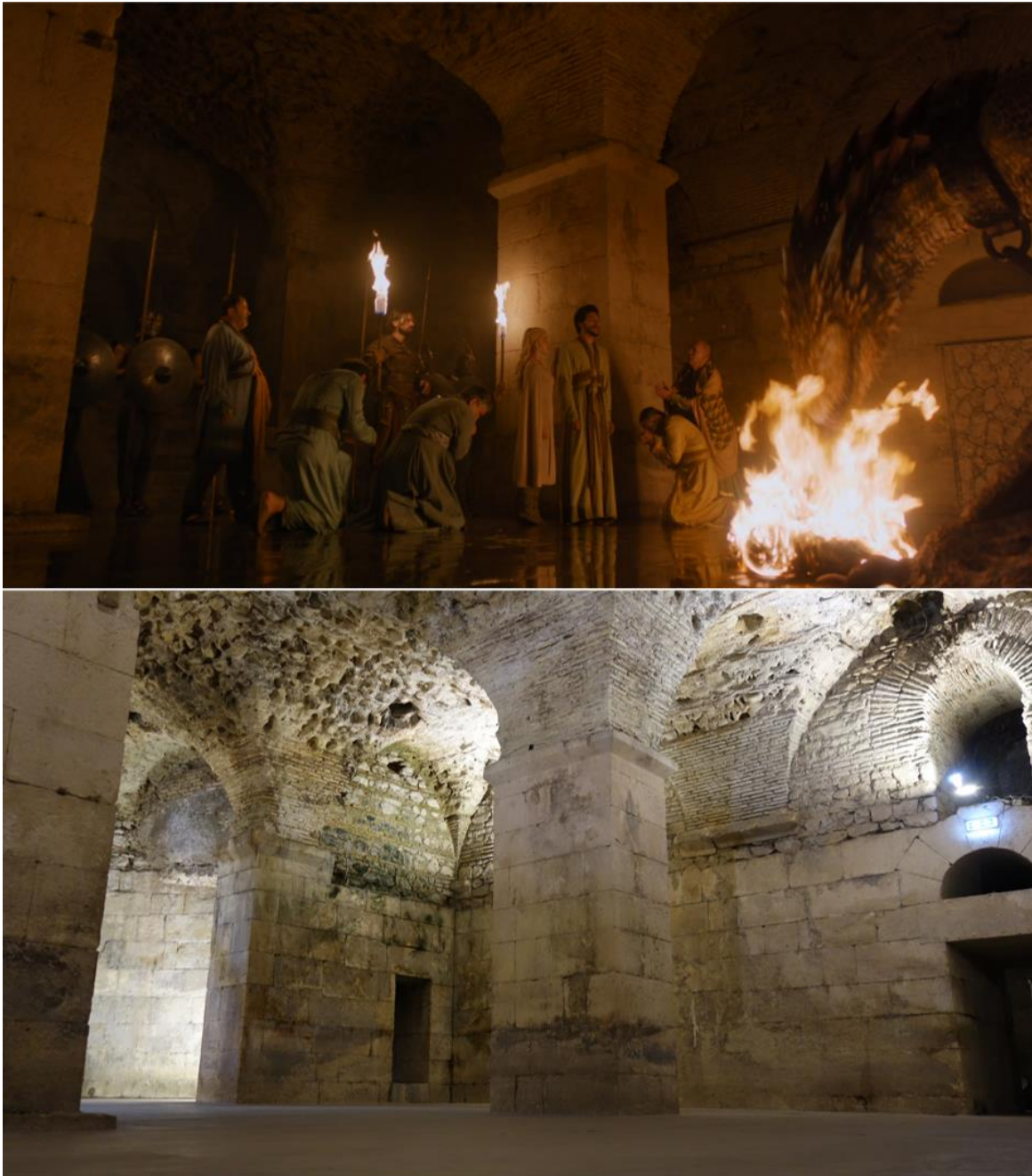
Figure 4.30: Daenerys Targaryen introduces the Slave Masters to her children Viserion and Rhaegal in the dungeons of the Great Pyramid of Meereen (S05E05); The substructures of the palace of the Roman Emperor Diocletian in Split.

Built on the foundations of the palace of Roman Emperor Diocletian and an Illyrian hillfort respectively, the harbour town of Split and the late-medieval fortress of Klis have been reimagined as Meereen, an ancient and decadent city of slave masters that has been conquered by Daenerys Targaryen (fig. 4.29-30). Unlike King's Landing or Winterfell, which are modelled after European medieval architecture, Meereen is one of the few prominent locations of the Eastern continent Essos inspired by ancient civilisation of the South Mediterranean and the Middle East. Showrunner D. B. Weiss described Split and

Klis as 'a great skeleton on which to build the city of Meereen' as they 'look very, very different from the other architecture in Dubrovnik' (HBO Adria, 2015). This 'oriental' and 'ancient' nature is most strikingly visualised by the 300 ft tall pyramid crowned by a colossal bronze statue of a harpy, which has been digitally inserted on top of the Fortress of Klis, as well as the extensive use of the imperial Roman architecture of Diocletian's palaces such as the monumental vaults, its substructures and the fully preserved Roman gatehouse (fig. 4.31).

Figure 4.31: The Gates of Meereen/Diocletian's Palace presented by tour guide Gytha.

Like Meereen in the series, Split and Klis are living their existence as a secondary site that are often overlooked due to the overwhelming prominence of Dubrovnik within the series as well as the phenomenon of Game of Thrones tourism. Only being featured in the fourth and fifth seasons, there is considerably less Game of Thrones activity to be found, however, almost all phenomena encountered in Dubrovnik or Northern Ireland are also present here, if to a lesser degree. In Split, Game of Thrones tours still roam the filming locations and merchandise shops can be found in prominent locations. In 2019, Luca Galić, a local entrepreneur who owns the merchandise shops in Dubrovnik and Split that offers visitors to sit on an Iron Throne replica (if they either pay a fee or purchase an item), opened a 'Game of Thrones Museum' which is exhibiting hand-made and officially licensed replicas of Game of Thrones artefacts, models, sets, behind the scenes

photographs, and one wooden window shutter used in the production (fig. 4.32). While the local government and tourist board do not market Split and its surroundings through Game of Thrones, criticised by both local media and tour providers (cf. Pauček Šljivak, 2019), Luca and his museum effectively took over this role as it aggressively advertises its existence in- and outside Split and thus raises awareness of the filming locations (fig. 4.33):

> I always felt that Split didn't expose itself enough as a Game of Thrones filming location. This is why I wanted to open something like this […] I really think it upgraded the tourist offer to large extent. Split deserved a Game of Thrones Museum. (Luca Galić, Game of Thrones Museum & Iron Throne Shop, Split 15.09.2019)

Although the museum is commercially run, it understands itself as a fan-project, as fans across Croatia created and curated the exhibition while also functioning as meeting place for the Croatian Game of Thrones fan-club every Thursday.

Figure 4.32: 'Game of Thrones Museum' Split. One of the three exhibition rooms with models, behind the scenes photographs and various examples of licensed merchandise, available in the adjacent shop (top); 'certificates of authenticity' of official replicas (centre); a wooden window shutter described as 'the authentic scenography piece used on the set' (bottom).

Figure 4.33: Game of Thrones Museum as destination marketing. Billboard on the road to Split (left); advertisement in the historic exhibition in the fortress of Klis (top right) and the entrance of the basement of Diocletian's Palace (bottom right).

The Fortress of Klis, located about 10 km inland on a hilltop, has particularly profited from the attention generated through Game of Thrones and has seen a significant influx of interest both internationally and domestically (see Chapter 2). According to Filip, a member of staff at the fortress of Klis, the fortress is now financially viable and even finances local school projects and bus passes for children:

> It was something like a liability because you have to invest in the fortress. You didn't get anything back. But now, the fortress is self-sustaining because of the Game of Thrones. Lots of money is going into the fortress, and then the fortress is getting that back to the community. (Filip, Klis 17.09.2019)

Unlike Split and Dubrovnik, this led to a more open acknowledgement of Game of Thrones' impact, also within its site interpretation which draws parallels between Klis' history and the narrative of the series (fig. 4.34). It dedicated a room to the production with behind-the-scenes photos, screenshots and a papier mâché dragon, which, unfortunately was struck by lightning in 2018 and burnt down (fig. 3.5). In 2019, an augmented reality

camera has been installed at the site through which visitors can photograph themselves with digitally inserted dragons and send the image as a postcard (see Chapter 6).

Figure 4.34: Official site interpretation that illustrates Klis' significance and history through Game of Thrones. 'The game of thrones has been occurring in the Klis fortress since ancient times when rulers and states were constantly changing. This potential was recognized by an HBO production in 2014 when Meereen and Daenerys were placed inside the walls of the ancient fortress'. (Klis Municipality)

4.4.3. Andalusia: 'Tierra de Dragones'

The final region considered for this research is Andalusia (fig. 4.40). While filming took place across many regions of Spain between S05 and S08, the southernmost region of Andalusia included some of the most impressive backdrops for the world of Game of Thrones, such as the famous Moorish Real Alcazar Palace in Seville, which stood in for the Watergardens of Dorne, or the enormous Roman Amphitheatre of Italica, transformed into the Dragon Pit where all plot and character threads were drawn together (fig. 4.1; 4.35).

Figure 4.35: Fieldwork locations in Andalusia (adapted from d-maps.com)

Figure 4.36: The Real Alcázar in Seville which stood in for the Watergardens of Dorne.

Several filming locations have been visited and examined during and after the conference. While the Real Alcázar is the most famous example of Andalusian architecture used in Game of Thrones, the site, apart from a conference organised Game of Thrones tour and a

few overheard references by other tourists, was not further investigated due to time and accessibility restraints (fig. 4.36). The archaeological park of Italica has no tangible expressions of Game of Thrones apart from a souvenir vendor selling magnets outside the site's gates (fig. 4.37). According to the site's conservator Daniel González Acuña this is due to the fact that the local distribution partner of HBO did not allow them to utilise any imagery from Game of Thrones for their official site interpretation (Daniel González Acuña, Italica 29.06.2019). Teresa, a member of staff at Castillo de Almodóvar del Río, reported something similar. Although they could get permission to use imagery throughout their site, 'it was very difficult. […] We even have to get permission by HBO to sell [merchandise]' (Teresa, Castillo de Almodóvar del Río 31.05.2019). The sites

Figure 4.37: Magnets with screenshots from Game of Thrones and with motives from the mosaics found at the archaeological site sold outside of Italica.

most closely examined due to the extent they have been impacted by Game of Thrones are the city of Osuna and Castillo de Almodóvar del Río, both located approximately an hour east of Seville.

4.4.3.1. Osuna: Meereen and Game of Thrones Exhibition

One of the most unique sites encountered during fieldwork is the city of Osuna. Rather fittingly, the city's 19th century bullfighting arena, to this day a place of blood sports, has been used to portray the even more violent Daznak's Fighting Pit, a Colosseum-inspired arena where slaves had to fight to their deaths for the amusement of the citizens of Meereen (fig. 4.43-44).

Figure 4.38: Daznak's Fighting Pit in Meereen (S05E09) and the Plaza de Toros in Osuna.

Osuna, like some previously mentioned filming locations, realised the potential for diegetic tourism and the local tourist board started the tourism campaign 'Tierra de Dragones', Land of Dragons, to attract Game of Thrones fans from across the globe. However, unlike previous examples, the manifestations of Game of Thrones throughout Osuna are mainly concerned with the local community's involvement and the larger global fan community.

In the filming of one of the most pivotal scenes of the series' fifth season at this location, over 650 locals from and around Osuna were involved as extras. Taking inspiration from the series, where it is described that the names of those who had fallen in the arena were

carved into the gates of Daznak's Fighting Pit, a large plaque has been placed in the central passageway of the bullfighting arena, commemorating the names of all locals involved in the production of these scenes (fig. 4.39-40). This was the idea of Jesús Cansino López, who is also the creator and curator of the *Salón de Hielo y Fuego*, a Game of Thrones exhibition in the local city museum (see below):

Figure 4.39: Jesús describes conference attendees this commemorative plaque in the vomitorium of Osuna's Plaza de Toros, its connection to Game of Thrones and the significance to the local community.

> The mayor wanted to make some kind of tribute to all the extras who participated in that scene, about 650, since they honoured Osuna's name. […] I remembered that scene between Hizdahr zo Loraq and Daenerys Targaryen and suggested the idea of putting a big plaque with all the names of the extras that participated. He loved the idea and it was done. Now their names will be there for all eternity as in the Meereen's Fighting Pits. (Jesús Cansino López, curator of *Salón de Hielo y Fuego* and local Game of Thrones geek, via email, 02.10.2019)
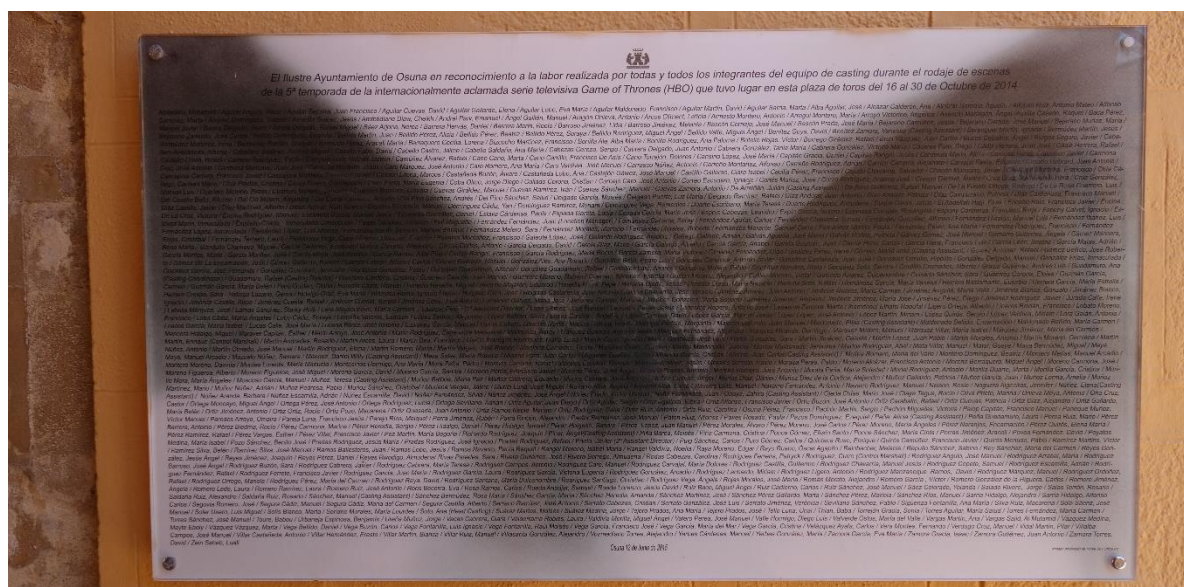
Figure 4.40: Detailed view of plaque in Plaza de Toros.

Another local initiative was the creation of a permanent Game of Thrones exhibition in the local city museum. More curiosity cabinet than museum gallery, the *Salón de Hielo y Fuego*, the Hall of Ice and Fire, consists of two rooms exhibiting a variety of different

objects connected to Game of Thrones. However, while the Ulster Museum is professionally run with the Tapestry being part of an expensive marketing-campaign, and the Split Museum being largely a commercial endeavour, the *Salón de Hielo y Fuego* in the city museum of Osuna was a completely community driven project. Jesús himself claims that his only qualification was to be a locally known Game of Thrones geek, and had never worked in a museum context before. As the city council could not afford professional curatorship, he, as a fan, designed the gallery in the way he would enjoy a Game of Thrones exhibition:

> I had no experience in this type of work, so I only asked myself one question: being myself a fan of the series and the books, what would I like to see when I entered the doors of the *Salón de Hielo y Fuego*? So, I designed a place that I liked. (Jesús Cansino López, via email, 02.10.2019)

Figure 4.41: Museo de Osuna with banner advertising the *Salón de Hielo y Fuego*.

This community-driven approach is also reflected in the exhibits themselves. Most objects are created through active creative involvement of Game of Thrones fans, both local and international, who sent their fan-replicas and artworks to be exhibited and shown to a wider audience, or donated collectibles (4.41-42). The *Salón de Hielo y Fuego* is partly an autobiographical exhibition of the local people of Osuna. Photos in costume, with the cast, autographs and a production team shirt are used to tell the story of how Osuna became the

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Tierra de Dragones, the Land of Dragons. They made it part of their own story and identity and wanted to communicate to themselves and the world who they are in their local museum through pop-culture. And through the active of involvement with distant fans worldwide, the exhibition is both an expression of local and global identity. Javi, a Spanish superfan who co-runs the largest Spanish-speaking Game of Thrones and A Song of Ice and Fire fan-website and podcast *Los Siete Reinos*, told me after we visited the *Salón de Hielo y Fuego*, that 'it is very nice to see how something from your country became part of something bigger' (Javi Marcos, *Los Siete Reinos*, Seville 16.06.2019).

Figure 4.42: *Salón de Hielo y Fuego* in the Museo de Osuna. Photographs of locals with cast (left top); one of the galleries containing fan-made portraits of characters, replicas of costumes and collectibles (left bottom); hand-carved 'Sons of the Harpy' mask made by fan (right)

4.4.3.2. Castillo de Almodóvar del Río: Highgarden

Crowning the top of a hill surrounded by olive groves is Castillo de Almodóvar del Río, better known by Game of Thrones fans as Highgarden, the seat of the powerful House Tyrell (fig. 4.43). Although this Moorish castle has only been on screen for less than a minute in season seven, Game of Thrones imagery is omnipresent. The first sight visitors will encounter when stepping through the castle gate is a free-standing cast-iron frame with a screenshot and a short descriptive text, one of many that are placed throughout the castle and mark the path of Jamie Lannister towards Olenna Tyrell after successfully conquering her stronghold. The castle map which presents both Castillo de Almodóvar and

Highgarden parallel to each other guides the visitors to each of those locations as well as a small exhibit of costume replicas. In many ways, the site feels almost like a miniature blend of all other previously experienced filming locations: Visual and narrative interpretation through screenshots, a locations map, a small exhibit of replicas and, of course, a souvenir shop that is filled with Game of Thrones merchandise (fig. 4.44).

Figure 4.43: The Lannister Army marches on Highgarden (S07E03); Castillo de Almodóvar del Río from afar.

Figure 4.44: Game of Thrones at Castillo de Almodóvar del Río. Screenshots are provided throughout the castle to showcase various scenes (top left); costumes of Highgarden, Unsullied and Lannister soldiers, and Olenna Tyrell (bottom left); Game of Thrones merchandise in museum shop (bottom centre); site map containing information on both real and imaginary castle (right).

4.5. Conclusion

No matter which of the many sites one visits, reminders and spatial signifiers that demarcate Westeros and Essos are nearby. Filming location maps and interpretations boards at every single site, sometimes in the remotest of locations, in Northern Ireland will remind the tourist that they are in 'Game of Thrones Territory'; the countless tours holding up screenshots and Game of Thrones merchandise shops on every corner of Dubrovnik will never let a moment of doubt emerge that this is indeed King's Landing; the plaque on the bullfighting arena and the *Salon Hielo y Fuego* in Osuna will remind visitors what deep significance Game of Thrones has for the local communities. Neumann (1988, p. 24) described how 'tourists are rarely left to draw their own conclusion about objects or places before them' but 'instead, they more often confront a body of public discourse – signs, maps, guides and guidebooks – that repeatedly mark the boundaries of significance and value at tourist sites'. Similarly, the realm of Westeros and Essos provides all typical paraphernalia of heritage that can be utilized to perform the imagination in the landscape. Therefore, the question is less whether Game of Thrones has become the heritage of its filming locations but more how it is expressed.

This chapter not only illustrated how Game of Thrones has utilised heritage to craft its imaginary world but how in turn, this imaginary world manifested itself within the landscape of its filming locations. Although this chapter's purpose was in large parts to provide a spatial frame and an overview of the extent of the impact of Game of Thrones on its filming locations, it already showcased various issues surrounding the use and purpose of heritage and the impact of Game of Thrones' imaginary geographies that will be examined more closely over the course of this thesis. While almost all these manifestations started out as marketing or products to profit from the popularity of Game of Thrones and an increasing lucrative market of diegetic tourism, in many cases they transcended its purpose as mere commodities and became almost seamlessly incorporated into their surrounding heritage landscapes and in some instances even part of local and national narratives through their integration into site interpretation and museums. This has not only established a landscape full of visual and material signifiers one can interact with, but also gives cultural legitimacy to the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones. They have not only become 'heritage assets' for touristic purposes, as Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive of the NMNI, described them but also expression of identity, community as well as contestation. Certain values and attitudes regarding Game of Thrones and its presence in the landscape can be projected onto these objects and tangible manifestations. They can act as vehicle for local and national narratives like in the case of Northern Ireland, an expression of local pride and foundation of a transnational community of fans as seen in Osuna, but also become a source of discontent when looking at Dubrovnik.

As already described in Chapter 2, heritage is not defined by the materiality but the processes and performances that surround them. Without the intangible values that various parts of society attribute to them all these physical manifestations would be rendered meaningless. While these objects aim to foster and promote certain engagements with the landscape, none of them would even exist in the first place if it was not for fans starting to seek out these places and perform the imagination within the landscape. Therefore, although the physical manifestations and musealisation of imaginary realms such as Westeros and Essos would warrant an entire thesis itself, the following chapters will mainly focus on how the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones is performed in the landscape, firstly as part of guided tours, secondly as individuals, who engage in activities and behaviours inspired by the imaginary world and infuse the filming locations with visual and performative signifiers.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOURING THE 'REAL' WESTEROS

Guided tours and selling authentic fantasies

Vignette 5.1: The King in the North!

By the time we reached Inch Abbey, I had completely surrendered myself to the fantasy and all initial fear and awkwardness were but a distant memory. Visiting Winterfell, the unexpected meet and greet with Thor and Odin, the dogs who played the direwolves Summer and Greywind, and bonding with my fellow travellers over the shared experience truly made me forget any concerns on how my 'fanboy-goggles' would jeopardise my academic integrity (fig. 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Attending the 'Winterfell Locations Trek' by 'Game of Thrones Tours' in Northern Ireland. Meeting the 'direwolves' Summer and Greywind a.k.a. Odin and Thor in Strangford (left); holding Eddard Stark's greatsword at Inch Abbey.

Robbie, our guide, opened the boot of the bus and started handing out the fur-collared black cloak and demonstrated how to adjust the leather straps, while our bus driver turned into the master-of-arms and opened a crate containing the epic weaponry everyone knew from the show. Ice, Needle, Oathkeeper, Longclaw. Those who would guess their names right would become their wielder. The first sword that was looking for a temporary owner was, of course, Eddard Stark's greatsword made of Valyrian steel. Instead of waiting and observing if any of my fellow companions would be knowledgeable enough, I burst out the answer 'ICE!' before anyone else could. Holding the most famous blade gave me an odd sense of pride. Not only would I feel that I have proven my worth within our small, initiated group, but it would also grant me some privileged status in the upcoming performance. First among equals. While others would wield swords of lesser fame and no name or would become bearers of Stark banners, I was leading the upcoming procession down the path to the medieval ruins. It would be me who would stand in the centre of the group when we commemorated Robb Stark's coronation.

After Robbie re-told the story and reminded us of the scenes by showing us screenshots and playing a short video clip on his tablet, he urged us to get into position, directing everyone where and how to pose. Raising our weapons and banners high, we repeatedly shouted, 'THE KING IN THE NORTH!' while Robbie would take photos for the social media page of 'Game of Thrones Tours'. Afterwards, we were given half an hour to excessively pose for photographs, swordfights and immerse ourselves fully into the place. With my heavy cloak and Eddard Stark's greatsword in my hand, positioned myself in the gate of the abbey ruin and asked one of my fellow travellers to take my photo. Everyone would exchange their weapons, take each other's picture and start conversations about the place, the experience and the series. Handing cloak and weapons back at the end of the session, boarding the reality of the coach and thus exiting the fantasy was almost disappointing.

5.1. Introduction

Scenes like described above have become a daily occurrence not only at Inch Abbey but across countless Game of Thrones filming locations. Around 2014, when Game of Thrones started to become the pop-cultural phenomenon that it is known for today, filming location tours became one of the most common and popular ways of experiencing the diegetic heritage of Westeros and Essos. While not all tours are as elaborate as the 'Winterfell

Locations Trek' offered by 'Game of Thrones Tours' in Northern Ireland, which includes props and meeting fan-favourite celebrities like Thor and Odin, they became a prominent part of the landscape of the filming locations across several countries. Whether walking through the Tollymore Forest in Northern Ireland, exploring the medieval towns of Split and Dubrovnik in Croatia, discovering the magnificent palace and gardens of the Real Alcázar in Spain or traversing the Almannagjá gorge in Iceland, one will encounter groups of people guided by someone holding up screenshots from Game of Thrones and telling its tales (fig. 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Filming locations tours across the Seven Kingdoms.

These tour offers are heavily tailored to the demands of fans of Game of Thrones who want to live out their fantasies in the 'real' Westeros and Essos. Therefore, this chapter will start by providing a brief introduction into the development of contemporary fandom, its significance as communal, interpretative institution, its transition from sub- to mass-culture, and subsequently its importance in shaping modern pop-cultural discourse. It will be illustrated that, like Game of Thrones, fandom has become a significant factor of contemporary global mass-culture and a way of seeing, experiencing and engaging with our lived world. This also extends to the heritage landscapes utilised to create Game of Thrones. This chapter will illustrate how these filming location tours have become a formative part of the heritage landscapes they are operating in, restructuring places and spaces by imposing and reiterating its narratives and iconography daily to provide the most

'authentic' experience of the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones. Although most of the processes described in this chapter are not limited to guided tours, they are a useful vehicle for exploring various aspects through which the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones is authenticated and to present important discussions about the nature of authenticity within the realms of tourism and heritage.

5.2. A Very Short Introduction into Fandom: From Sub- to Mass-culture

5.2.1. Defining Fandom

Game of Thrones' diegetic heritage is deeply embedded in fandom and fan performances that are taking place at the programmes filming locations and that have turned into a mass-phenomenon. Although 'most people are fans of something', may it be sports, music, literature, cinema or even political parties, fandom has been understood as a particular performative and communal practice (Sandvoss et al., 2017, p. 1; cf. Gray et al., 2017; Click & Scott, 2018). Particularly Henry Jenkins' work on fandom as a creative community, network and identity has been influential with modern studies on fandom and also resonates strongly with the context of the present research (Jenkins, 2006, 2012, 2018). According to him, fandom defines itself as having a strong communal component by 'sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 41). Fandom not only 'provides a space to explore fabricated worlds that operate to different norms, laws and structures than those we experience in our "real" lives' but 'also necessitates relationships with others: fellow fans with whom to share interests, develop networks and institutions, and create a common culture' (Duncombe, 2012, para. 1), something that is strongly reflected in many of the interview responses and on-site performances occurring across Game of Thrones filming locations (see below and particularly Chapter 7).

Furthermore, fans have been understood as 'active producers and manipulators of meanings' who form a 'participatory culture which transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 41, 2012, p. 23). Those who engage in fan related activities, such as joint speculation, discussion, fanfiction, and – for the purpose of the present research – participate in filming location-based performativity are both consumers and producers, thus 'blurring the distinction between reading and writing' (Jenkins, 2012, p. 155). In what Jenkins calls 'textual poaching', fans build their own culture and

subsequently their own identity 'from the semiotic raw materials the media provides' to create new texts that originally did not exist (ibid., pp. 37. 49). This textual poaching and creative energy have also been noted for fans of Game of Thrones and its source material A Song of Ice and Fire, particularly in the case of virtual engagement and fan-made merchandizing, a prime example of the latter being the already presented *Salón de Hielo y Fuego* which primarily exhibited fan-made artefacts (Finn 2017; Escurignan 2017; see Chapter 4). The raw materials in the case of the present phenomenon are the filming locations and their portrayal in the series, while the tangible and intangible manifestations that are inscribed into the heritage landscapes are the new spatial texts. Many newly created performances within those Game of Thrones spaces are not just truthfully copying what has been seen on the screen but are often merely inspired and creatively re-arranged. Those who are travelling through those landscapes and are engaging in Game of Thrones related performances are thus not only consuming Dubrovnik, Castle Ward and Osuna, but they are also producing King's Landing, Winterfell and Meereen.

However, until relatively recently, being a fan, particularly of science fiction or fantasy, was subject to countless negative stereotypes, starting with the very term being shorthand for 'fanatic' that implies unhealthy, overly zealous behaviour (Jenkins, 2012, p. xiv-xvi. 12; Sullivan, 2020, pp. 192–193). American film critic Roger Ebert famously lambasted fandom for being 'a security blanket for the socially inept, who use its extreme structure as a substitute for social skills' and while 'they have mastered the "Star Wars" or "Star Trek" universes or whatever […] their objects of veneration are useful mainly as a backdrop for their own devotion' (Ebert, 2009). This pessimistic and cynical perception of fandom as a refuge for the socially inept has been reiterated in popular culture for decades and is even reflected in comments made by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, Game of Thrones' showrunners, who admitted to have intentionally limited the more fantastical elements compared to the book source because they 'didn't want to appeal to *that type* of fan' (Stolworthy, 2019; my emphasis). Fans have been ridiculed and looked down upon for a long time throughout media and society as 'cultural dupes, social misfits, or mindless consumers' (Jenkins, 1988, p. 472, cf. '7 Stereotypes observed about Trekkies' in 2012, p. 10). Coincidently, the first and third of those judgements can also often be observed in regard to tourists and other non-expert users of heritage who are often patronised, belittled or even condemned by 'experts' for the way they engage and practice tourism and heritage (Crang, 1996b, 2011; L. Smith, 2006).

The persistence of these patronising attitudes contributed to fandom's strong sense of community as an act of resistance, as exemplified by Jenkin's description of Star Trek fans:

> The Trekkers, however, see themselves as already participating in a larger social and cultural community, as speaking not only for themselves but also for Star Trek fans more generally. These fans often draw strength and courage from their ability to identify themselves as members of a group of other fans who shared common interests [...] To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities. Yet is it also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic. (Jenkins, 2012, pp. 22–23)

Since the early 1990s Jenkins tried to counter this pathologizing of fandom by pointing out that the difference between excessively (over-)analysing and fetishizing perceived 'high culture', such as Shakespeare and Italian opera, and 'low culture', such as Star Trek and Japanese Anime is purely intellectual, especially given that the former examples have been initially part of the popular rather than elite culture themselves and only have been elevated into the canon of high culture long after their initial conception (Jenkins, 2012, p. 53). As with many things, the difference seems to be just perceived value, taste and social acceptance, poignantly pointed out by the spoof newspaper *The Daily Mash* when it published 'Lad in football shirt makes fun of nerds in Harry Potter robes' (The Daily Mash, 2018). However, with taste and society changing, so did fandom.

5.2.2. Resistance is futile: Assimilation into mass-culture

Since the rise of global digital distribution of entertainment media and the increasing popularity and dominance of large pop-culture franchises, the perception of fan-culture has not only 'shifted away from pathologization' but lead 'to a positive embrace of fans' vital role for contemporary cultural industries' (Sandvoss et al., 2017, p. 2). This is reflected in the shift of meanings of terms such as 'nerd' or 'geek', once used in derogatory manner, which are now a desirable badge of participation in the pop-cultural debate. With this mainstreaming 'fans are more easily found these days as fans are less stigmatized; consequently, networks and producers have begun to expect and even create fannish behavior in their audiences […] because of viewer loyalty, free advertisement, and

increased purchase of connected products' (Busse, 2013, pp. 77–78; Coppa, 2014). Because fandom has become a profitable business, new texts are not only created by the fans themselves, but also by a tourism and heritage industry that is developing an increasing number of products and experiences, eager not only to cater to the demand but to produce and encourage it (Hewison, 1987; cf. MacCannell, 1973; Malcolm-Davies, 2004). Fandom has moved from a 'vehicle for marginalised subcultural groups' (Jenkins, 1988, p. 472) to a 'trendy' commodified mass phenomenon (Coppa, 2014; Gray et al., 2017). What was once an obscure, almost esoteric desire, such as sitting on a plastic replica of a fictional throne, has now become an activity a larger segment of the population is participating in – and willing to pay for it (fig. 5.3). Game of Thrones tour guide Richard commented on how Game of Thrones tourism used to be the domain of just 'a few nutters', however, through official location marketing and adding site interpretation of even the remotest of locations, it entered the mainstream:

Figure 5.3: Shut up and take my money! - Flyer for 'Game of Thrones Merchandise & Fan Shop' in Split, emphasis clearly on 'fan'. 'Fans' are invited to come to sit on the 'Iron Thrones', however, this costs a nominal fee or the purchase of a Game of Thrones souvenir

> It's not just like it was seven years ago, you know, a few nutters with information off Google who would head off in their car, setting out trying to find Melisandre's Cave or any of these places, you know. They're now branding them, I think it is becoming more mainstream. (Richard, Game of Thrones Tours NI, Bangor 07.05.2019)

However, this produces a discrepancy between the bottom-up nature of fandom as a counterculture and top-down mainstreaming for profit. Some fans see this 'pop-cultural appropriation' and mainstreaming in a critical way and even as a devaluation of their own fan-identity. Rona and Gareth, as Scottish couple who I met at the above-described Game of Thrones tour, are enthusiastic diegetic tourists who have travelled the world in their

quest to find places of their favourite films and television programmes, lament the commercialisation of fan-culture by big corporations:

> **Gareth**: We went to Star Trek conventions and that kind of thing when we were younger. […] When we started out this was probably in the very early 90s. All the conventions were run by fans for fans […]. But then the likes of Paramount, the big television companies noticed they can make money. So, they started charging people for using the television shows, for selling merchandise, it all got very corporate. And we kinda distanced ourselves from that.
>
> **Rona**: It was no longer fan-done, the business side had taken over.
>
> (Gareth and Rona from Scotland, Belfast 13.06.2018)

Figure 5.4: Photograph with leading fan-community representatives. Javi Marcos (*Los Siete Reinos*), Elio Garcia and Linda Antonsson (*Westeros.org*) and myself at the filming location Italica, Seville (left to right).

Similarly, Elio Garcia and Linda Antonsson, founders and operators of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* fan community website Westeros.org, and confidents and co-authors of George R. R. Martin himself, see the commercialisation of fandom as both a blessing and a curse as it has changed the dynamic and power-relations (fig. 5.4). Meeting them at the 'Game of Thrones: Views from the Humanities' conference in Seville, Elio sees the danger of devaluing the meaning of franchises dear to fans:

I used to think that it would be so amazing to see all of this stuff on the screen and now I'm bored of it. […] So, for me, a lot is superficial, it is the corporate world finding a way to appeal, take something that was niche and make it large […] I am glad everyone is taking great enjoyment out of it but there is a danger in that it just starts becoming commonplace, it no longer is special. (Elio Garcia, *Westeros.org*, Seville 18.05.2019)

However, Linda highlights that the mainstreaming of fandom has not only created social acceptance of 'fannish behaviours' but also lead to a growing community of fans around the globe one can interact with, resulting in increased opportunities to express, exchange and interact with the media and make a stronger impact in society:

On the other hand, when you have something that goes really big you get fun moments like Queen Elizabeth being asked if she wants to sit on the Iron Throne and having to decline it.[8] So there are still these bizarre moments when you realise that 'Oh my god, everyone is somehow involved or touched by this thing'. You still have that extra feeling of amazement because you were there from the beginning and now all of a sudden there are commercials with Game of Thrones references everywhere, Trump making Game of Thrones references. It is so bizarre in an entertaining way. (Linda Antonsson, *Westeros.org*, Seville 18.05.2019)

Although there are ongoing debates about hierarchies and various degrees of fandom, both within fandom literature and fandom itself distinguishing often between the 'active, creative fans' and the 'passive, consuming audience' (Busse, 2013; Sandvoss et al., 2017), joining these discussions and attempting to define who might or might not be a 'proper' fan would be a fool's arrant and limiting for this thesis as its focus lies on behaviours coming from fandom rather than fandom itself (fig. 5.5). While only few of those encountered in the field would tattoo the effigy of Jon Snow on their arm (fig. 5.6), most of those interviewed would either describe themselves as fans and/or participate in typical fan performances, such as seeking out and engaging with the imaginary realm in the real world, dressing up, re-enacting scenes, and producing new (spatial) texts with an imaginary world within the context of the heritage spaces of the filming locations.

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[8] During a 2014 visit of the *Game of Thrones* film set in Belfast, Queen Elizabeth II was offered to take a seat on the original Iron Thrones, however, declined. This kindled wild speculations on the internet if she refused to do so due to an ancient custom that prohibits the English monarchs to sit on a foreign throne (J. Beattie, 2015).
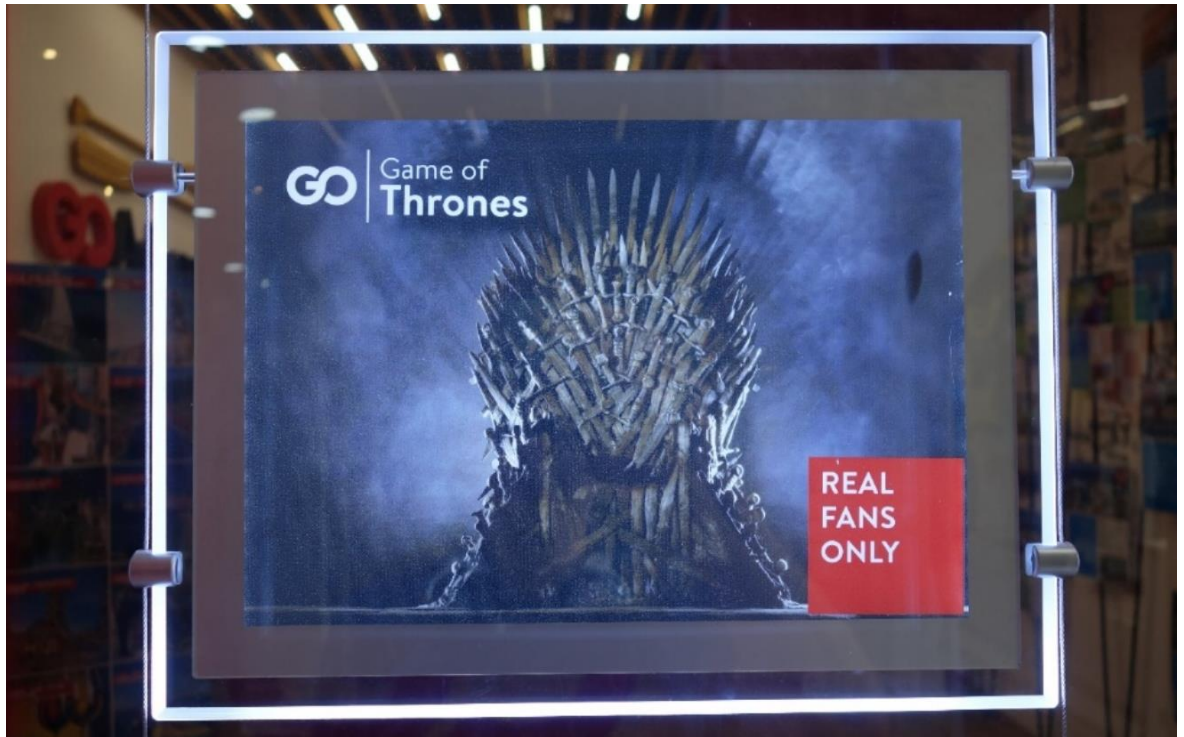
Figure 5.5: A Split-based tour provider advertising their Game of Thrones tour with 'real fans only'. It is not specified what constitutes a 'real fan' or if only 'real fans' are allowed to participate.

Figure 5.6: Northern Irish fan Emma shows off her Jon Snow tattoo at the 2018 Winterfell Festival at Castle Ward. Unintentionally documented easter-egg in the background: Mark Addy, a.k.a. King Robert Baratheon, talking with fans.

However, these performances are far less rooted in the creative 'textual poaching' that is traditionally associated with fandom, and much more based on emulation that is more in line with the mechanisms of mass-tourism and particularly social media (see Chapter 6). As it will be illustrated in subsequent chapters, due to the above-described popularisation

of fan behaviours, these performances have not only been taken up by casual viewers, but even those who have not seen the source material, therefore becoming a significant factor in making Game of Thrones part of the heritage landscape (see Chapter 7). Therefore, the use of expressions such as 'fans', 'fan community', 'fan behaviour' and similar are understood in the broadest of senses for everyone who is engaging in Game of Thrones related activities after watching the series. This, in no way aims to suggests, that fandom has been 'watered down', rather it illustrates that many aspects of this former subculture have entered the mainstream heritage and media performance, and thus have become site-defining. By transforming these subcultural behavioural patterns into global, commercial pop-culture, fandom as a 'social, cultural and interpretative institution' (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995, p. 23) has become an interpretative force to be reckoned with. What was once a small group of initiated has now become an international mass-phenomenon.

5.3. Tour guides: Presenting and selling heritage

Tour guides are a crucial part of the heritage landscape they are presenting (Del Casino & Hanna, 2000). They establish the 'beaten path' of a heritage site and act as mediators and interface through which the symbolic meaning of the heritage space is produced, deciphered and understood, 'as theirs is the task of selecting, glossing and interpreting sights' (Dahles, 2002, p. 784; E. Cohen, 1985). They encode 'preferred readings', thus giving meaning to cultural products and conveying a sense of place (Macdonald, 2006; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Cohen (1985, p. 8) understands them as leaders and mentors, providing guidance in navigational as well as spiritual sense, turning the movement across visited sites and the information provided into a spatial experience. Being both 'directors and stage-managers' who 'choreograph' tourists' movements and behaviours within the tourist spaces they travers, tour guides establish an 'accepted' habitus and solidify certain performances into the landscape by telling tour participants where, when, how and what to look at (Edensor, 2001, p. 61). Thus, tours like the ones described above are tightly crafted and run like well-oiled machines from the very beginning to the end, leaving little to no room for improvisation. Every point of the finger, every punch line and reference are planned, 'trac[ing] and retrac[ing] the same restricted set of options' (MacDonald 1997, p. 153 in Edensor, 2001, p. 69). These tours are not simple products, they are part of an 'experience economy' in which cultural activities are packaged and presented in an exciting and memorable way (Pine et al., 1999; Weiler & Black, 2015).

However, on the other side of this equation, the tourist is not a *tabula rasa* but has a pre-shaped conception formed by the information and media consumed and thus also expectations they want met, necessitating tailoring of the content of these tours and therefore the presented heritage landscape itself to the demand of the tourists' taste and travel agenda (E. Cohen, 1985, p. 16; Moyle & Croy, 2009; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Consequently, tour guides create and direct while simultaneously serve and work under the tourist gaze (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 77). No longer (if they ever truly have) are guides just 'initiat[ing] the tourist into the culture of the host country' as it has been claimed in the past (J. C. Holloway, 1981, p. 387), they cater to what is already known and expected. This is particularly true for Game of Thrones fans who are usually deeply familiar with the locations and stories they are visiting long before ever setting foot on the soil of those places. They are here to confirm and authenticate their already fully fleshed-out image and knowledge of the fantasy version of whatever location they brought with them from the television screens. As part of the 'experience economy' the filming locations are staged as 'theatres of memory' for Game of Thrones fans to act out their fantasies and build a foundation for sustaining their fictional realm in the real world (cf. Samuel, 1994). Thus, guides do not act as educators but memory workers, invoking already experienced collective memories through narration and visual references. Apart from the few (unfortunate) souls who have been dragged on the tour by a loved one, everybody who joins these tours has already visited these places and is deeply familiar with its legends, stories and important figures, even if it was only from the comforts of their living room.

However, among tourism and heritage literature, particularly from the second half of the 20th century, such catering to the demands of (mass-)tourism, has often been equated with a devaluation of the 'authentic' nature of heritage and travel experiences. Being referred to as 'pseudo-events' (Boorstin, 1964), 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell, 1973, 1976), or 'commodification' (E. Cohen, 1988; Hewison, 1987), experiences sold to tourists, particularly those that fabricate 'unhistoric' and thus 'inauthentic' narratives, are often deemed to be of questionable cultural and intellectual value, even to this day. Particularly the dreaded 'commodification' of culture and heritage (or indeed any product) has been regarded as the polar opposite of 'authentic', indicating that those who create and consume such commodified products are destroying the meaning of heritage spaces and the rituals, traditions, folk arts and festivals that can be encountered there (cf. E. Cohen, 1979; Getz, 1994; Nuryanti, 1996). Other readings see tourists simply seeking diversions, not caring

for or desiring authenticity, and 'quite eager to accept the make-believe and not to question its authenticity; after all one does not need to be convinced of the authenticity of a TV play or a motion picture in order to enjoy it' (Cohen 1979, p. 184; see Chapter 6). Especially tour guides have been accused of being some of the main culprits in fabricating and thus falsifying the 'true, authentic nature' of history and heritage while tourists have been painted as gullible dupes or indeed do not even care if they are sold lies (Overend, 2012). In contrast, some scholars have argued that postmodern tourists have no need for authenticity as they (sub)consciously know that there is no such thing (cf. Heitmann, 2011; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Given that both Game of Thrones and the pre-packaged tours are first and foremost commercial products and the world they are engaging with are entirely imaginary, one might easily jump to the conclusion that authenticity is not of any importance. However, as we will see, this could not be further from the truth.

5.4. 'Welcome to the *real* Westeros!': Guided tours and authentic fantasies

5.4.1.   Tours across the Seven Kingdoms

One of the most visible types of fan performance at Game of Thrones filming locations is the guided filming locations tour. Ranging from relatively short walking tours to elaborate day-long immersive experiences, these tours offer to delve into the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones with fellow fans and to experience the places seen on screen, with one's own eyes (fig. 5.7). First appearing around 2013/2014 when Game of Thrones became increasingly popular and began to build up a strong following, they quickly became a defining feature of the cultural landscape due to the large numbers that began to roam many of the filming locations and the spaces in-between daily. They have a visually distinct way of operating, utilising screenshots, videoclips and Game of Thrones iconography, as well as often involving props and costumes. This is not a novel concept and have been defining features of other filming locations tours (Buchmann et al., 2010; Light, 2012; Reijnders, 2011a; e.g. Roesch, 2009). However, unlike others, the frequency and visibility through the sheer volume of tour groups, the diversity of visual and performative expressions and its transnational dimension exceed any previous case study.

Figure 5.7: Selection of promotional flyers for Game of Thrones tours across fieldwork sites. Using easily recognisable (often copyright-protected) iconography, fonts, screenshots, and various special offers only their tour provides.

Figure 5.8: Four Game of Thrones locations tours at Kolorina Bay in Dubrovnik at the same time.

Every established tour company encountered during fieldwork had expanded their portfolio to meet the new demand, adding a minimum of one daily Game of Thrones related

experience. Several new tour companies emerged that would focus primarily on Game of Thrones. Some, like Castle Ward's 'Winterfell Tours' (formerly ClearSky Adventures), rebranded themselves entirely to profit from the popularity. As of 2018, Dubrovnik saw approximately 30–40 Game of Thrones walking tours every day during high season visiting the same four to eight sites, resulting in a constant presence of one or more tours at the same spot at any given time from morning to evening (pers. comm. Ana Hilje, Head of Department of Culture of City of Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik 29.09.2018; fig. 5.8).

Figure 5.9: 'Dubrovnik Walking Tours' flyer. Nine out of eighteen tours per day were Game of Thrones tours or heavily feature Game of Thrones (incl. the 'Movie Tour') in 2018. In 2022, according to their website, five out of nine daily scheduled tours are Game of Thrones related with no daily 'Story about the War', 'Movie Tour' and German historic tour like in 2018 (https://www.dubrovnik-walking-tours.com/scheduled-tours/) (accessed 05.05.2022)

According to several local tour guides, as well as walking tour timetables of several tour providers on leaflets and online, about half of all tours in Dubrovnik and Split are Game of Thrones themed, even in 2021/2022 (fig. 5.9). Vjeran, both employee at the tourist information in Split and tour guide, estimates that he would be booked at least 30 times a year to go to Klis because of Game of Thrones, compared to two times for historic tours (pers. comm., Split 21.09.2019). In Northern Ireland, even though filming locations are geographically dispersed, one can expect five to ten coaches with dedicated Game of Thrones tours daily at each of the major filming locations (fig. 5.10).

Figure 5.10: Map by 'Game of Thrones Tours Northern Ireland' shing the itineraries of both 'Winterfell Locations Trek' and 'Iron Islands and Rope Bridge Adventure'.

Castle Ward registered seven tour operators in 2018 daily, some of them with multiple groups from both Belfast and Dublin (National Trust Castle Ward, 2018). Even the iconic black taxis are now offering Game of Thrones experiences in addition to their usual political tours (see Chapter 8). Game of Thrones tours have become so numerous, that some guides are even commenting on this fact themselves on their tours. Pointing at other groups, one Dubrovnik guide loudly proclaimed, 'Game of Thrones Tour! Game of Thrones tour! Game of Thrones tour!', highlighting how many others are here for the same reason at the same time and in the same space, as well as illustrating how defining Game of Thrones has become for these sites.

Figure 5.11: Week-long tour across Dalmatia by Vetus Itinera, including King's Landing, Meereen and Braavos.

Figure 5.12: Davor waiting for his group with a Lannister banner, Dubrovnik.

Figure 5.13: Gytha and her co-worker wearing dresses referencing those worn by Tyene Sand and Margery Tyrell (Photo: Gytha Galic)

Tours can last between 1.5h and an entire day, depending on the number of sites visited, the distance between them, and what activities are offered. A few tour providers even offer week-long multi-sited tours (fig. 5.11). Group sizes vary, from relatively small private

tours with only a few participants, to entire bus loads. Although varying in extent and degree of immersion, the core of these tours remains the same across all sites visited. Tour guides will often welcome the participants by holding up easily identifiable Game of Thrones imagery, such as banners of one of the great houses of Westeros or in some cases even wear costumes (fig. 5.12-13).

From there, travelling either by foot or bus – though some premium packages can also include private cars or boats, or even historic sailing ship replicas and helicopters – the tour groups are visiting a series of locations used across the series. At each of the stops, the guide will hold up a flipbook with screenshots from the series as a visual reference and memory cue asking, 'Do you remember this place?', almost as if the guests have already been there (fig. 5.3). The flipbooks are the guides' central tool to interpret the space and act as visual frame of reference to structure the narrative and the spaces encountered. The guides use them to re-tell the story of the scenes seen on the picture as if they had occurred in reality rather than on television, and to point out features and discrepancies in the landscape or on monuments. Tour participants usually take photographs of the screenshots with the background, trying to include both fiction and reality within the same frame. In particularly iconic locations, the guides will encourage the group to pose as the characters of the scenes or stage a group photo thematically fitting the place. Throughout the tour most places are referred to by their fictional names only and stretches of landscapes will become identified with the geographies of Westeros and Essos. The guide will not announce that we are about to arrive at Castle Ward, Fort Lovrijenac or Italica but rather at Winterfell, the Red Keep or the Dragon Pit. Furthermore, any body of water that has to be crossed to get to another filming locations, be it Strangford Lough or the sea between Dubrovnik and Lokrum Island almost always becomes the 'Narrow Sea', the strait between the continents of Westeros and Essos. Traversing the landscape on a cross-country road usually urges guides to say that we are travelling down the 'Kingsroad' – though the only 'official' stretch of said road are the Dark Hedges in County Antrim. More elaborate and expensive experiences will also include handing out weaponry, costumes and other props replicas at certain stages of the tours, which participants can use to pose, re-enact scenes or just have a jolly old sword fight, often to the delight and/or bewilderment of bystanders (fig. 5.14).
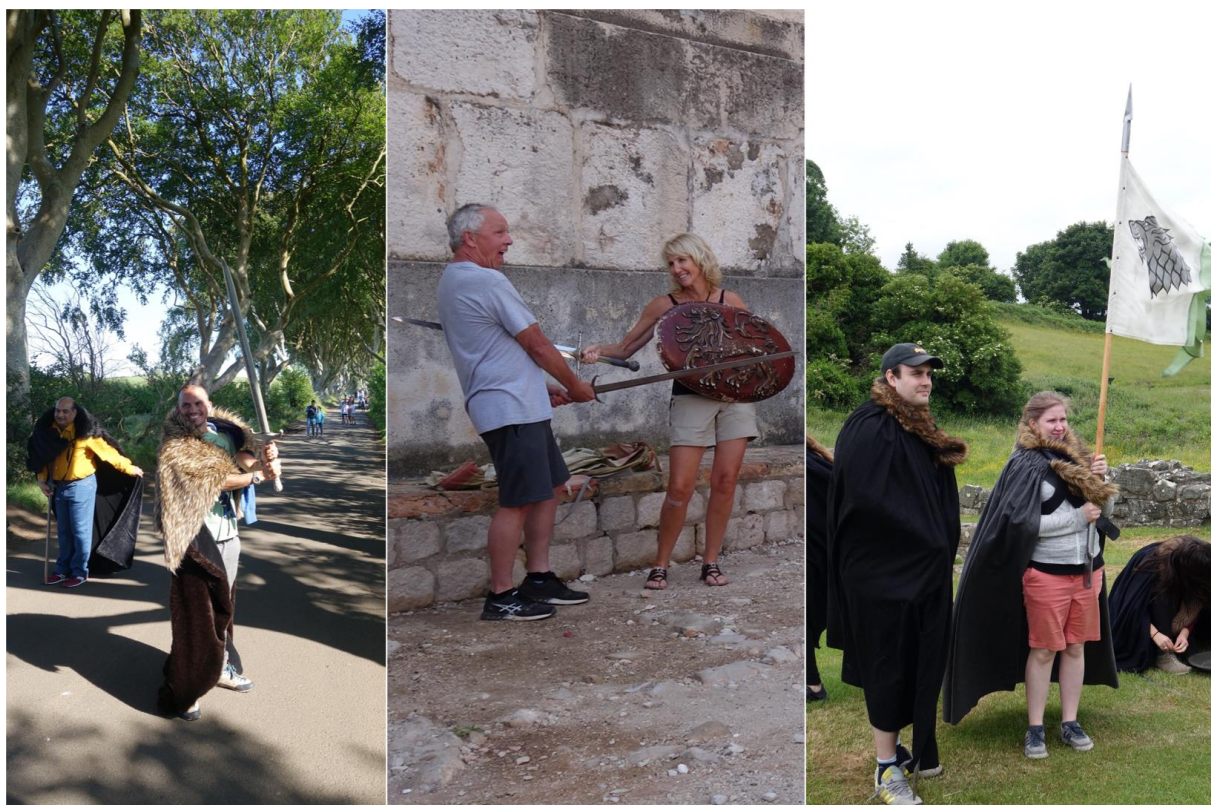
Figure 5.14: Tour participants with costumes and props at the Dark Hedges (left), Dubrovnik (centre), and Inch Abbey (right).

Some of the more unique experiences used to be encountering the direwolves in Strangford, County Down, as part of the Game of Thrones Tours Winterfell Trek or private 'Meet & Greets' with their owners at Castle Ward, however, they have since been retired. Day-long tours will have lunch at places that have some connection with the series. On the Winterfell Locations Trek, one will rest at The Cuan in Strangford, the place where the main cast was accommodated during the filming of the first season and the first of the ten wooden doors is exhibited. In Osuna, the tour will feast on tapas named after characters in the Casa Curro, where newspaper cut-outs, photos and autographs on the wall prove that the actors themselves have been there. Tours in Dubrovnik and Split will conclude by being led to each city's only Game of Thrones souvenir shop that has an Iron Throne replica. Usually being required to either purchase a souvenir or pay a fee for having their photo taken on this most iconic of plastic chairs, this experience is included in the price of admission. Those who booked with Vetus Itinera in Split will be taken to a remote filming location where an erotic (some might call it voyeuristic) scene between the characters Missandei and Greyworm took place. There, participants will then be served a hearty feast with many alcoholic beverages (fig. 5.15). Winterfell Tours at Castle Ward offers archery, costumes and self-guided bicycle tours (fig. 5.16).

Figure 5.15: Dinner with local specialities at filming location at the restaurant and historic mill Antoničin Mlin (left); flyer that advertises Antoničin Mlin as a filming location (right).

Figure 5.16: Cycle Tour by 'Winterfell Tours' at Castle Ward. Visitors receive a map with all filming locations around the Castle grounds, a tablet with screenshots and video clips from the show and rucksack with swords and cloaks.

Participants of 'Game of Thrones Tours' in Northern Ireland will end the last stretch of the bus journey back to Belfast or Dublin by viewing a particularly popular episode of Game of Thrones that featured a number of scenes encountered during the day, and most likely, exhausted from the day, fall asleep to the sound of direwolves howling and gore splattering.

5.4.2. Visiting real imaginary places

Even though the world and narrative of Game of Thrones are entirely fictional, and the guided tours are primarily presenting the filming locations through a 'Westeros lens' rather than a 'historically correct' perspective, those who seek Game of Thrones locations are more than ever on a quest for 'authentic experiences, perceptions and insights' (cf. MacCannell 1973, p. 602; Buchman et al. 2010). Contrary to several statements above, for fans 'authenticity is key' (cf. Boake, Chapter 4) when it comes to experiencing both the television series and the filming locations. To cater to this demand, there is a downright one-upmanship between tour providers in terms of who is offering the most authentic and thus best Game of Thrones experience. Failing to deliver an authentic 'Westeros experience' by not meeting these expectations and invoking those memories, or worse, challenging or belittling them, may even lead to financial repercussions for tour guides. One tour guide, maybe overdramatically, disclosed that he used to wear a t-shirt saying 'Dubrovnik is much more than King's Landing' (a statement I have heard many times by different local stakeholders during my fieldwork there; see Chapter 8), however, stopped doing so out of fear it could alienate fans resulting in negative online reviews. Tour providers employ several strategies to stage what can be broadly categorised as spatial, visual, material, narrative and personal authenticity to build links to the imaginary world and provide their guests with the expected immersion.

The essence of every filming location tour is, of course, to visit the places used for creating the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones. The promotional material of almost every tour provider promises to take their guests to the 'real' Westeros, Winterfell and/or King's Landing. Walking across the spaces, standing in the same spots as one's favourite characters and listening what happened there are the core of every tour. Being able to offer visitors to be in an authentic Game of Thrones space is a valuable asset and is highlighted on countless occasions. For some guides, this means that it is not only important to emphasise what is a Game of Thrones location, but also what is not. Trogir, a beautiful medieval harbour town close to Split, has often been named a filming location online, a claim that has been reproduced in film location maps and even published work (cf. Šegota 2018). This information had been so persuasive that even I, though I had always wondered where the supposed scenes should have taken place, reproduced this false claim on Twitter, prompting an almost immediate response by Dubrovnik tour guide Ivan Vuković rectifying

and listing the only correct places in Croatia where one could have an 'authentic' Game of Thrones experience. Some filming locations even attempt to 'over-authenticate' their place. When visiting Castillo de Almodóvar del Río both staff and site interpretation declared that the final confrontation between Jaime Lannister and Olenna Tyrell has been filmed in the tiny chamber in the highest tower of their castle, even though it took clearly place in a different room and was, as most indoor scenes, filmed on a soundstage in Belfast (fig. 5.17).

Figure 5.17: Comparison between room where, according to Castillo de Almodóvar del Río, the confrontation between Olenna and Jaime took place (above), versus the scene in the series (below).

Trying to craft an engaging narrative, the role Game of Thrones had on the surrounding sites, or the surrounding sites had on Game of Thrones, is sometimes overstated and subsequently created place-myths on top of those already inscribed through the series. There seems to be almost a need to attribute Game of Thrones' connections to every possible location, even though no filming had taken place at any point. If it is an iconic

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vista or an important location, it surely must have a Game of Thrones connection. For example, in Northern Ireland, the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge and Dunluce Castle have been successfully integrated into the fantasy of Game of Thrones even though they have not been featured as filming locations (fig. 5.18). Even more so, according to some guides, rather than being filming locations (though often claimed in online reviews as a result), those places supposedly served as direct inspiration for the Greyjoys' castle on Pyke, even though descriptions and illustrations of said castle have existed years before the series filmed in Northern Ireland.

Figure 5.18: Pyke, seat of House Greyjoy (S02E02) (left); Dunluce Castle (top right); Carrick-a-Reed Rope Bridge (bottom right).

In Dubrovnik, the city's main gate, the Pile Gate, has reportedly not been fully closed since Ragusa's surrender to Napoleon in 1814 as one of the peace treaty stipulations. Depending on who you ask, however, this tradition was either upheld in defiance of the production company that wanted to see it shut for the long-awaited arrival of Jamie Lannister and Brienne of Tarth in King's Landing, or, much more spectacular, it was due to Game of Thrones that this 200-year-old tradition has been broken for the first and only time since its inception.

On the other hand, unless explicitly wished for by the guest at the beginning of (private) tours, guides will for the most part avoid immersion-breaking confrontations with reality. Apart from the above stated new place-myths, the most real-life information one will

encounter are production details and behind-the-scenes gossip. While the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge and the Giant's Causeway, two prime attractions of the Antrim Coast, will be included in the Iron Island Tour because 'when you visit the north coast of Ireland you have to do Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge [and] the Giant's Causeway, that's just what you do' (Richard, Bangor 07.05.2019), these attractions remain self-guided, given that they have nothing to do with Game of Thrones. If one has not explicitly booked a mixed Game of Thrones and history tour, the history and heritage of the filming locations is often kept to a minimum and only featured where direct comparisons or analogies with Game of Thrones can be made, particularly in Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland where most of the series has been filmed. For example, Dubrovnik's past of the Merchant Republic of Ragusa can be compared to the mercantile city of Qarth, as tour guide Davor explains:

> Qarth corresponds rather well to what Dubrovnik was in its own peak. And that makes it interesting, you draw these comparisons. […] I would say, when Daenerys Targaryen arrives in Qarth, she finds a place that's a little bit different than your usual place and then I can explain some things about Qarth. And then all I have to do at the end is to say, 'All of these things are also true about Dubrovnik. (Davor, Dubrovnik 25.09.2018)

Similarly at Inch Abbey, the 'real' King in the North, John de Courcy, the medieval conqueror of Ulster and founder of the abbey will be mentioned; in Split, the political and religious conflicts surrounding the Tetrarchy and Diocletian are perfectly suited to be compared with the usurpations during the War of the Five Kings and the fight between the followers of the Lord of Light and the Faith of the Seven in the series; while strolling through the breath-taking Real Alcázar palace and its gardens, connections between the Moorish and Dornish culture will be drawn. In contrast, when attending purely historic tours, mentioning Game of Thrones appears to have become obligatory. No matter what audience is guided and how unlikely it appears that any of them have watched a single episode, the guide will point out that Game of Thrones has been filmed at the location they are currently visiting – almost always resulting in at least a few acknowledging nods and comments. Gytha, a tour guide in Split, explains how the series will influence the presentation and experience of the place:

> I always mention Game of Thrones. I always ask in the beginning, Is anybody here a Game of Thrones fan? I don't want to do the tour and not say anything because many people don't even realize that Split was one of the sets. So, even if you do a historical

tour you have to mention Game of Thrones because you walk those locations and you hear everybody speak about it. […] So here [in Split] it's almost impossible, not to mention Game of Thrones. (Gytha, Split 14.09.2019)

The imaginary world is so well-crafted that it now also custom in several places to present the local heritage through the means of Game of Thrones. For example, Lola, tour guide and owner of Sevilla4Real, uses the screenshots of the series as interpretative materials for her historic tours through the Real Alcázar, as she thinks the fully furnished sets bring the now barren palace back to life:

Sometimes when I am guiding inside the Alcázar, even if people don't know about Game of Thrones, or they're not fans, sometimes I show them the screenshots in the main room, because it's super cool to see the furniture. You can imagine how it was to live there, how everything was. I like to do that. (Lola, Sevilla4Real, Seville 23.05.2019)

Even more so, several heritage sites have adopted Game of Thrones as a means to present their own sites. The 'Thrones and Towers Tour' at Castle Ward in Northern Ireland is using Game of Thrones as a hook to present the history of its tower house (see Chapter 4).

Figure 5.19: Screenshots from 'Medieval Ulster – Beyond Westeros' website. https://www.strangfordlough.org/projects/medieval-down.html; (accessed 05.05.2022)

In 2019, Strangford Lough & Lecale Partnership and the Department of Archaeology at Queens University Belfast launched the Heritage Lottery Fund supported project 'Medieval Ulster – Beyond Westeros' (fig. 5.19). This project aims to harness the interest generated through Game of Thrones as a vehicle to present County Down's medieval history and heritage. Not only does the name of the project directly reference the imaginary realm of Westeros, the focus on easily recognisable visual signifiers such as the medieval crests imitates the iconography of the sigils of the Great Houses of Westeros which are omnipresent in the series as well as the landscape of Game of Thrones tourism.

5.4.3. Seeing, touching and feeling Westeros

Throughout the entire encounter with the tour, from booking to completion, there are constant iconographic reminders and audio-visual references to the series. The importance of the screenshots cannot be overstated and have been pointed out by numerous visitors and guides alike. Screenshots act as memory cues, as proof that these locations are truly the places seen on television, illustrate how CGI has enhanced the landscape and can be used as comparative material when reframing scenes and placing oneself into the fantasy through photography (fig. 5.20).
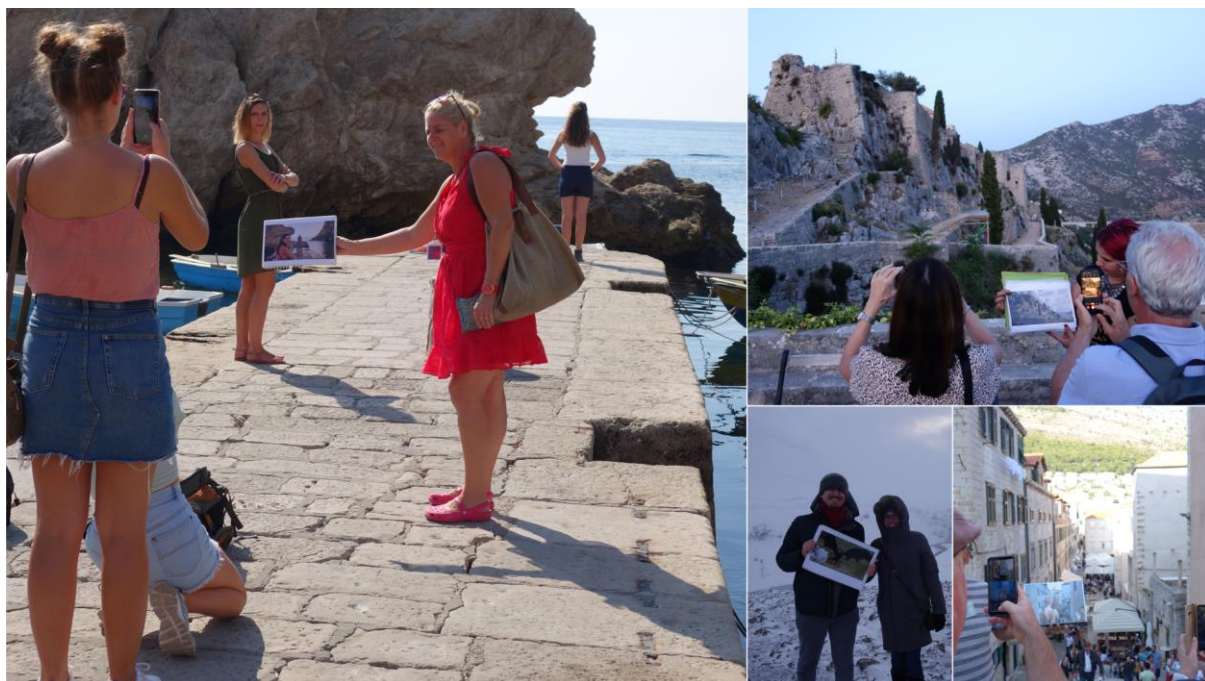
Figure 5.20: Screenshots as a multi-purpose tool. They are used to remind visitors of places and narratives, interpret the landscape and its use in the imaginary world, they can act as a visual comparison and place authenticator, and used to place oneself into the fantasy

Tour guides will instruct and direct their guests to position themselves on the exact same spot as the characters in the series to recreate and capture the scene photographically, often including the screenshots in the same frame to further authenticate the accuracy of both place and performance (see Chapter 6). These screenshots are deemed crucial by both visitors and guides, not only in the moment of the tour but also in reflecting and remembering on the experience afterwards, as the following comments by Jo and Davor illustrate:

> I loved the Game of Thrones tour. It was really interesting to see all the different sites around King's Landing. The Blackwater Bay area, the Red Keep, how HBO filmed it, Walk of Shame, etc. Seeing the actual photos that the tour guide showed us and relating it to the different sites of Dubrovnik was fascinating. And for me, it actually brought Game of Thrones much more to life again in my head to the point where I'd like to go back and watch it all again to see the shots within the actual production again and knowing that we've already walked over those paths. (Jo from England, 52, Dubrovnik 01.10.2018; fig. 5.21)

Figure 5.21: Response photo-questionnaire #2. 'This is a great reminder of the reason why I wanted to visit Dubrovnik. To see the areas where major scenes from Game of Thrones were filmed! […] Davor explaining the scene by showing a film shot from the Game of Thrones brought the whole area to life and made it even more magical, imagining you were there in King's Landing.' (Photo and comment: Jo Pratt, 04.07.2019)

> This visual aid comes in handy [to] remind [the visitors]. I think the tour would be useless without it. If I'm showing them a scene from season two, for example, they forgot in most cases exactly what was going on in those scenes. […] But when you show them the image, it's like an instant reminder and they know immediately what I

am talking about and that really brings the tour to life. […] Some people are super-fans and they remember everything, but a lot of others are just superficial fans and they would forget most of the stuff. (Davor, Dubrovnik 25.09.2018)

Some guides are also even proud of the quality of their flipbooks. For example, Davor said that he made his own and 'really go[es] the extra mile to have high quality photos, to have more photos of single locations […] to go a little bit deeper than other guides' (Davor 25.09.2018). Vjeran, a guide from Split, prides himself to have the most comprehensive collection of comparative screenshots of all local guides, which he painstakingly created and turned into a photobook rather than the usual (and cheaper) flip-folders (Vjeran, Split 21.09.2019; fig. 5.22).

Figure 5.22: Tour guide Vjeran shows off his photobook.

Other ways of visually authenticating the fantasy involve appearing in costume or wear clothing or hold banners bearing the sigils of the characters most closely attached to the places encountered – the Golden Lion of House Lannister in Dubrovnik, the Direwolf of House Stark at Castle Ward, the Kraken of House Greyjoy at the Antrim Coast, the Sun and Speer of House Martell in Seville and the three-headed Dragon of House Targaryen in Split and Klis. Utilising objects such as 'authentic' weapon replicas to wield and costumes to wear at filming locations provide an opportunity to delve even further into the fantasy by providing a sensory and tactile experience (see above). Participants of Vetus Itinera's tours will receive a hand-drawn sketch of some characters as a souvenir. Some tours, like

the 'Direwolf Tours' in Northern Ireland will even present some artefacts that are allegedly from the production itself, which will be handled with utmost care and reverence, almost like religious relics (fig. 5.23; see vignette 5.2 and Chapter 7).

Vignette 5.2: Touching the Khaleesi's Horseshoe

Figure 5.23: Pilgrims seeking out an old sage who tells the ancient tales of Season One and allows them to touch the 'Khaleesi's Horseshoe' to get closer to the fantasy of Game of Thrones.

Almost sage-like, William Mulhall Sr. sat on a stone bench with his long white beard, waiting for our small group to gather around him in a semicircle. Wearing a jacket with the words 'Dothraki Slave Master' embroidered on its sleeves, a role he played as an extra in Game of Thrones' first season, the patriarch of the family owning the direwolves presented us with an old worn and torn book. A horseshoe was firmly tied to its front cover with copper wire. This was no ordinary horseshoe. With his deep and commanding voice, the old man would proclaim that it was indeed the horseshoe of the Khaleesi's white mare on which she rode across the grasslands of Essos. There was no talk of how this object came into his possession nor if this clearly mass-produced equestrian footwear was genuinely ever in direct contact with the white mare of Daenerys Targaryen. His authority remained unquestioned. 'Touch the Khaleesi's horseshoe!', the Dothraki Slave Master proclaimed, more demanding than offering. One after another, first cautiously, then eagerly, all would obey his call as he slowly moved the sacred object from left to right, while he was repeating his command, 'Touch the Khaleesi's horseshoe!'. Everyone touched it with so

much care and respect, almost as if it was something precious and fragile that could easily break, not a mass-produced solid iron object. It felt, as if touching this otherwise mundane piece of iron allowed us to get in direct contact with the world of Game of Thrones and its characters.

Particularly the example of the 'Khaleesi's Horseshoe' illustrates the importance of getting as close to the fantasy as humanly possible. Therefore, one of the most important parts of authenticating the experience and making the tours memorable is crafting an immersive narrative that ties the location, the tours and the guides themselves as closely to the fantasy and becoming a direct link between the series and the visitors. No matter how minor the connection to Game of Thrones has been, it will be mentioned by the tour provider. At the most basic level, McCombs' Tours advertises that they have been contracted by the production to drive actors and crew to the filming locations. Many tour providers advertise that their guides have been extras on Game of Thrones, thus being able to provide first-hand insight into the production (fig. 5.25-26).

Figure 5.24: Gytha proudly showing a photograph of her as an extra during the filming of Season Four
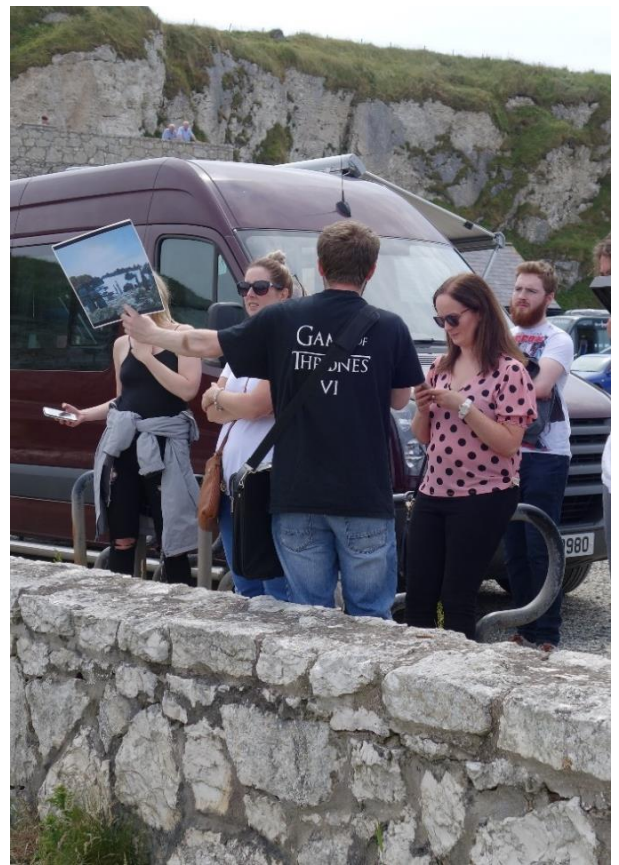
Figure 5.25: Tour guide at Ballintoy Harbour wearing a shirt that extras and other members of the production crew were given after wrapping up Season Six.

For some, like the owners of the 'direwolves', their involvement in the series is the main selling point. Meeting the 'direwolves' Summer and Greywind, two of the most iconic and emblematic 'actors' of Game of Thrones, is not only the closest most will ever be to the characters on screen but provides a living, breathing part of the fantasy (fig. 5.26).[9] One of the visitors felt, that having the direwolves and their owner, who was also an extra, guide them across the filming locations 'makes you feel like you're a part of it' (Jessica, UK, Castle Ward 16.06.2018). This feeling is further reinforced by being handed a certificate that makes visitors part of the 'pack' after meeting the direwolves (fig. 5.27).

Figure 5.26: Response photo-questionnaire #3: 'To have the opportunity to be in the place where several of the Winterfell scenes were filmed in GOT was amazing. We love the show and seeing the buildings, meeting the Direwolves and the Dothraki Slavemaster were memories we will never forget.' (Photo and comment: Jeffrey Crume 27.05.2019).

Also, businesses besides location tours aim to associate themselves as closely with Game of Thrones as possible. The Cuan, an inn in Strangford, close to Castle Ward, advertises

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[9] Due to the death of one of the dogs, the advancing age of the other as well as the pandemic, these personal sessions with the 'direwolves' have been phased out in 2020. However, the selling point of the tour still remains the personal connection of the owners of the dogs.

that their rooms have been occupied by the main actors during production of Season One, holds the first of the ten Game of Thrones Doors as well as exhibits supposedly real props, and offers themed dinners to make the stay as 'authentic' as possible:

> We began to develop our 'King's Banquet at Winterfell', which celebrates that opening scene in Game of Thrones when King Robert Baratheon comes up to ask Ned Stark to be the Hand of the King. [O]ver the years we developed that and made it more authentic. People want authenticity. The goblets […] we have made to look identical to those used by Tyrion Lannister in the film. We put the sigil of the direwolf on it. People want to get as close as they can. (Caroline McErlean, owner of The Cuan, Strangford 18.06.2018)

Figure 5.27: Wolfpack member certificate.

Some businesses are taking more 'creative liberties' to outdo the competition. The Dubrovnik-based tour provider Atlas offers Game of Thrones cruises on their Karaka, a fully functional replica of a 16th century Ragusan merchant ship, and advertises on their website, promotional material and on their tours that visitors can 'sail the same ship on which Daenerys Targaryen sailed in the series', claiming that their ship has been 'used in the making of Game of Thrones' itself (fig. 5.28).

This casts a particular strong aura of both historical and pop-cultural authenticity onto this vessel, although no ship remotely similar has ever graced the screen and all ship-scenes, according to behind-the-scenes bonus features on Blu-ray, were filmed on one constantly redressed ship set in Belfast. However, given that this requires almost fanatical devotion to the series (and/or fact-checking for a doctoral thesis) by meticulously rewatching every naval scene and rigorously sieving through every making-of feature, the provider's narrative is now seemingly accepted as truth through reiteration on their tours as countless online reviews indicate.

Figure 5.28: The Karaka in Dubrovnik's Old Harbour (left); booking agency with guide in royal outfit and two Unsullied helmets on the information board (right).

5.4.4. One of us: Guides being fans – fans being guides

Figure 5.29: Tour guide in Dubrovnik showing his participants how he went to Northern Ireland and participated in an 'Iron Island Tour'.

Lastly, authenticity is created on a personal level. Every guide will declare, loud and proud, that they are huge fans of the series to personally connect with their audience. The 'Meet Our Guides' section on the website of Dubrovnik Walking Tours stages short

interviews with each tour guide.[10] Even though the company is not a dedicated Game of Thrones tour provider, eleven questions out of fifteen are related to Game of Thrones, including one in which every tour guide will be ask whether they are big fans – which each of them, of course, answers with yes – and most photos of them show them engaging in Game of Thrones related activities. At least two guides encountered in Dubrovnik are making their fandom explicit part of the narrative of their tours. They present several photos of themselves that show them participating in locations tours by Game of Thrones Tours in Northern Ireland wearing costumes and petting the direwolves to 'prove' their fan status. Thereby, they are drawing a link between them and their guest as fellow fans as well as a narrative and spatial link between the different sites (fig. 5.29). Richard, who coincidentally guides the tours in Northern Ireland portrayed in the images of his Croatian colleagues, does not see himself as a tour guide but first and foremost as a fan who shares the passion of his visitors:

> I don't feel myself to be a proper tour guide […] I just see myself as another one of the fans. Even as a company, we reside in fandom. So, we're just fans that are very, very lucky that the gods at HBO let us babysit their product and let us help promote it to other fans, you know? I'm just a fan just drawn the short straw and has to stand there with a microphone all day. (Richard, Game of Thrones Tours NI, Bangor 07.05.2019)

Gytha emphasises how fandom creates a reciprocal relationship with her guests by engaging in joint speculation and discussion about past and future plot developments:

> Obviously, my guests and I would share our theories between the seasons because it's a long wait – Winter is long! […] For me, guiding these tours is very cool because you get to interact with the fans. (Gytha, Split 14.09.2019)

The shared fandom between guides and guests is not only creating an immediate connection, but for some guides an essential qualification. Lola, who runs Game of Thrones tours across Andalusia, would go as far as saying that being a fan is a requirement to be able to properly guide tours:

> In my opinion, to do a good Game of Thrones tour and to have a good product, you have to be a huge fan. You need to read the books, watch the show, and work a lot on

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[10] https://www.dubrovnik-walking-tours.com/dubrovnik-guide/category/guides/ (accessed 02.05.2022)

the script. […] So, it's not easy to get a Game of Thrones guide. (Lola, Sevilla4Real, Seville 23.05.2019)

While not being an extra herself, she incorporates information provided by extras or books them to be on the tour as an additional offer for her guests. However, given how fandom has become a lucrative business model, some guides are not as involved or invested in Game of Thrones as they might claim. For example, Dubrovnik-based tour guide Paula criticised that many of her fellow guides, even though claiming otherwise, are neither extras or even fans, they 'haven't even watched one season of Game of Thrones, but they're still guiding Game of Thrones tours because somebody will instruct them what to say' (Paula, Dubrovnik 24.09.2018) and therefore are not able to properly convey the fantasy of King's Landing and share the emotional investment of their guests, reflecting Lola's assessment above. According to Paula, many guides indeed 'hate' Game of Thrones as it took focus away from Dubrovnik's history and, according to some, devalues the qualifications that tour guides need to obtain. Filming locations tours are much better paid than historic tours due to their high demand and thus financially attractive as well as do not require an official tourist guide license, which does not only require significant efforts and knowledge but is also costly to acquire (cf. 'identity versus economy' in Tunbridge 1994; Chapter 7). While a surface level presentation might be enough for most casual viewers, some guides fear that such half-hearted tours might have detrimental effects on the experience of visitors and shine a bad light on their profession. Gytha was particularly frustrated with fellow tour guides who are not even familiar with the basic iconography and reoccurring catchphrases, as she exemplified by another guide's lack of knowledge of a commonly used High Valyrian salutation from the series:

I saw a guide wearing a [Valar Morghulis] shirt and I walked by and said to him 'Valar Morghulis' [All men must die] but he did not know that he should say 'Valar Dohaeris' [All men must serve]. He wears the shirt and doesn't know the basics! He's a fake! Shame! [...] I asked those guides who will do [Game of Thrones tours] just for profit and they say, 'I have never watched it, I just have the pictures and that's it.' But you need to know the basics, you never know who can be on your tour. What if you have very crazy, passionate fans who remember everything, but you don't know anything about the characters, anything about their interactions, the actors and you have nothing to speak about except pinpointing where the locations are? Some can

barely pronounce the names, you know!? If you do it, do it right! (Gytha, Split 14.09.2019)

During my fieldwork I encountered a few tour guides that fit the description by Paula and Gytha. Being one of those 'very crazy, passionate fans who remember everything' myself, I have to confess that repeatedly listening to obvious 'wrong' representations of the imaginary realm I am deeply invested in, bothered me more than I want to admit. More than once I had to bite my tongue when I wanted to say 'Well, actually...'. Not just for my own sake but for my fellow fans who would not have the 'authentic' Game of Thrones experience they deserved.

5.5. Travels in Hyperreal Westeros and Essos

> As strange as it may seem, I grew up in the world [my father] created. For me, the cities of The Silmarillion are more real than Babylon. – Christopher Tolkien (Rérolle, 2012)

Authenticity, like heritage, has been recognised as much more fluid and is negotiated by the individual or communal perceptions rather than being reliant on historical accuracy and the commercial aspects (Bruner, 1994; E. Cohen, 1988; Heitmann, 2011; H. Silverman, 2015; Wang, 1999). Thus, a lack of authenticity seems not to be tied to missing historicity of a cultural heritage landscape or cultural practices, being a 'pseudo-event', staged or commodified (indeed, 'authenticity' in a Game of Thrones tour usually comes at a higher price, as only the higher-priced offers include certain immersive experiences), but the absence of a personal connection, shared emotion and experiential fulfilment. However, national and international heritage and tourism management agencies as well as local and international stakeholders have come into conflict over who defines, owns, accesses and performs authenticity (H. Silverman, 2015, p. 84). In his concept of 'emergent authenticity', Cohen (1988, p. 279) acknowledged that 'a cultural product, or a trait thereof, which is at one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic may, in the course of time, become generally recognised as authentic, even by experts'. Once dubbed a 'staged "tourist trap"' could soon be widely recognised as an '"authentic" manifestation of local culture' (ibid.). Two of the best examples of such recognition are Las Vegas and Disneyland, both places that became absolutely authentic expressions of American culture not despite but because of their utter 'inauthenticity' (Baudrillard, 1994; Eco, 1986; Holtorf, 2005). Eco goes as far as describing Disneyland as America's Sistine Chapel (Eco,

1986, p. 48). Particularly in postmodernity, it has been observed that commerce and culture have become intrinsically intertwined and experienced through a highly 'mediated gaze' (Lester & Scarles, 2016; Mains et al., 2015; P. Robinson, 2014; Urry & Larsen, 2011), Game of Thrones being a prime example of this synergy. Even though the series is a made-for-profit pop-cultural commodity, it became a globally shared cultural phenomenon (see Chapter 1). Experiencing and viewing the world through media and thus mainly consuming signs and representations rather than 'authentic' originals, has been called 'hyperreality' (Baudrillard, 1988, 1994; Eco, 1986; Perry, 1998). Although commonly oversimplified as 'the "completely real" being identified with the "completely fake"' (Eco, 1986, p. 7), hyperreality does not imply misrepresentation or fakeness but describes that a previously held belief of 'authentic', 'pure' and 'real' culture is untenable in an increasingly globally mediated world. 'Hyper' refers to the 'social and cultural realms created and maintained through contemporary technologies of communication, transportation, and information that have radically transformed notions of time and place' (AlSayyad, 2006, p. 10). While most concepts or ideas of authenticity presupposes not only the existence of both an 'original' or 'true' state of existence and a 'copy' or 'fake' in which the former outweighs the latter in value, hyperreality erases 'the distinction between historical reality and fantasy' (Eco, 1986, p. 42). Eco explored this further in his historic novel *Baudolino* in which the eponymous main character is being told that, when it comes to relics, 'it is faith that makes them true, not they who make faith true' (Eco, 2000, p. 12).

Authenticity is thus not bound to historicity or 'truth' but the (visual) senses, if something looks, sounds or feels real, it is real (Heitmann, 2011, p. 52), something illustrated by the 'Khaleesi's Horseshoe' and expressed by several of my informants:

> As long as it looks real – I think ultimately you know it's not going to be real. I don't think that it matters in terms of the final product. As long as the story takes you to that place that they are trying to show you, it works. (Gareth from Scotland, Belfast 13.06.2018)

It is not that fans do not know that they are entering a fantasy world and cannot tell it apart from reality, it means that there have different requirements of the landscape and are playfully transgressing the boundaries between 'official' history and counter-history drawn from fiction (M. Beattie, 2016; Holtorf, 2005, p. 240). For many, making a distinction between history and fantasy appears to be purely intellectual (Buchmann et al., 2010).

Indeed, Madhav and Ashit explained not only how this counter-history emulated by Game of Thrones has become omnipresent within the landscape of Dubrovnik, but it also created a special bond between them and the site and giving them some interpretative authority through their fandom:

> **Madhav:** I mean, people talk almost only about Game of Thrones. We didn't hear anyone talking about the history of this place. We only heard that the Game of Thrones was filmed here, this scene was there.
>
> **Ashit:** I can relate to any historians who visit the place and relate with that place because they know about its history. But we feel the same! We know the... fake history! (Madhav and Ashit from India, Dubrovnik 05.10.2018)

Therefore, claims that in postmodern modes of travelling 'not all tourists are in quest for authenticity and in-depth understanding, but rather for visual and experiential enjoyment' (Wong, 2013, p. 918), misunderstand that this 'visual and experiential enjoyment' itself is the authentic experience of travel. Rather than conceding agency to tourists, the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) 'renders the emotional and physical experiences of heritage performances as culturally illegitimate or inauthentic' even though the performance of travelling, moving across the space and performing are an integral part of the heritage itself that shapes, constructs and negotiates heritage meaning (MacCannell, 2008; L. Smith, 2006, p. 73). Silverman (2015, p. 85) rightfully concludes that new cultural manifestations, either entirely new or additions to previously existing heritage, produced through forces such as globalisation, commercialisation, mass-communication and tourism are 'far from being kitsch, inappropriately labelled postmodern, or demeaned as a simulacrum'; instead 'current performances and consumption of identity and place are as valid as those historically legitimated […], generat[ing] and enable[ing] new spaces and forms of human interaction and creativity' which manifest themselves in tangible and intangible form 'without necessarily bringing the past "faithfully" into the present'. Therefore, heritage performances and narratives created through pop-culture, mass-media and global fandom, even if they inspired by an entirely fictional world like Westeros and Essos, can be as authentic and legitimate as previously existing, officially sanctioned heritages for those who attribute significance and meaning to it.

5.6. Conclusion

In Michael Crichton's 1973 film *Westworld* (and its recent TV adaptation by HBO), it is almost prophetically predicted that in a not-so-distant future real experiences can only be had through fiction, extreme artifice and hyperreality. *Westworld* takes place in a high-tech theme park in which guests can relive historic periods with humanlike robots as reenactors (with which one can do as one pleases before they start to run amok). Although, the visitors are entering an entirely artificial world, it is only within the confines of the park's imagination that they can live out their own true, authentic self. Similarly, visiting the filming locations and participating in various experiences provides an authentic way to live out the fantasy of the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones and one's own fandom.

Once a niche, subcultural activity for 'some overzealous nerds', immersing oneself into a fantasy world has become a mass-phenomenon. Due to the popularity of Game of Thrones and the mainstreaming of fandom through new ways of consuming media and an increasing dominance of pop-culture, seeking out the imaginary world of Westeros and Essos has become an increasingly popular tourist activity. This is best illustrated by the popularity of filming locations tours that offer an immersive gateway into the world of Game of Thrones. More than just simple entertainment and playful escapism, filming location tours have become a significant part of the heritage landscape that surround the filming locations and an important vehicle for realising and authenticating the fantasy of Game of Thrones' diegetic heritage. The fantasy is made real for fans through a framework of spatial, performative, visual and narrative signifiers that enable tour participants to see, touch and feel Westeros and Essos, making these performances the authentic way of experiencing the heritage of the filming locations. Thus, the fantasy has become so persuasive that places like King's Landing and Winterfell can appear as, in some cases even more, culturally legitimate as Dubrovnik and Castle Ward. Not only has this created a new diegetic heritage that can be performed and experienced in addition or instead of the previously dominant heritage narratives, but this also illustrates the fluidity of heritage, thus, challenging previously established hegemonial heritage discourses and preconceptions of what is or what is not an authentic way of creating, consuming and performing heritage.

How truly persuasive the nature of Game of Thrones' diegetic heritage is and how influential it has become within the heritage landscape becomes particularly clear when

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extending our view from above-described pre-packaged tours to individual fans. In the following chapter, we will see how they are travelling through the imaginary world of Game of Thrones by themselves and engaging with the filming locations in the same, if not even more comprehensive, manner. Without explicit instruction, direction and provided material by tour guides, they established a new habitus of re-enacting and reframing scenes through photography and social media through which they create highly ritualised spaces of visual reiteration and digital performance.

CHAPTER SIX

PERFORMING WESTEROS

Visualising and territorialising imagination through on-site practices

6.1. Introduction: Walking the Walk of Shame

Figure 6.1: The Walk of Atonement, commonly referred to as 'Walk of Shame' (S05E10)

'Shame! Shame! Shame!' — Anyone who is walking past the Jesuit Steps in the heart of Dubrovnik's old town is likely to hear these words being uttered or even shouted. Being modelled after the Spanish Steps in Rome, these baroque steps have been used in the final episode of the series' fifth season, in which Queen Cersei Lannister is forced to undergo a public ritual of punishment and penance demanded by the Faith of the Seven, the so-called Walk of Atonement, or – more commonly referred to – the Walk of Shame. Shaved and stripped naked, she descends from these steps down into the filthy streets of King's Landing through which she is paraded before the eyes of gods, men, and the voyeuristic viewers at home for her many 'sins of falsehood and fornication' while a bell-wielding septa (the Westerosi equivalent of a Catholic nun) who would repeatedly yell 'Shame!' at her (fig. 6.1). Not only has this scene become one of the more harrowing and traumatic parts of the series, but also one of the most iconic, partly due to its strong audio-visual iconography and the utilisation of Dubrovnik as architectural frame. Re-enacting and

photographing the so-called Walk of Shame of Cersei Lannister has become one of the most popular activities for tourists in Dubrovnik (fig. 6.2). The stairs are crowded all day long with individual visitors and tour groups who are going to painstaking efforts to recreate the perfect shot, shouting the infamous 'Shame!' at each other and referencing the infamous scene in every possible way. Countless visitors pose facing down the stairs and are being photographed from behind, preferably framing their bodies from head to shoulder looking towards the (CGI-added) Red Keep and the stairs and streets below, just like Cersei did in the series. Often, the act of walking down the steps is filmed by fellow travellers or the person walking down themselves. At times, these performances take on a communal dynamic in which people, who have never seen each other before will join in shouting 'Shame!' at the person who is descending ostentatiously from the top of the stairs.

Figure 6.2: A few examples of re-enacting the Walk of Shame at the Jesuit Steps in Dubrovnik.

Additionally, the bar on the foot of the steps sells 'Shame (i. e. non-alcoholic) Mojitos', the restaurant above offers Game of Thrones themed lunches served in earthenware bowls bearing the Lannister lion, while tour groups will gather in the square in front of the Jesuit church to pose with props such as swords and shields with Lannister crests. Often only referred to anymore as 'Shame Steps' or 'Walk of Shame' by visitors and local tour guides alike, the Jesuit Steps and their immediate surroundings have become a highly ritualised space on which there is no escaping the fantasy that literally 'took place' here. It is the

centre of everything Game of Thrones in Dubrovnik and indeed indicative for what is happening at Game of Thrones locations at large.

Expanding on the previous chapter, this chapter examines in more detail how Game of Thrones fans perform the imaginary world at filming locations. While the performances and perceptions described in the previous chapter have mostly been examined through pre-packaged products of tours, the following chapter is focussing more strongly on examining how individual tourists have adopted an array of different practices related to Game of Thrones without participating in explicitly curated experiences. Thereby, the performances of re-enacting scenes, documenting these through photography, utilising new fictional toponyms on-site and geotagging the imaginary geographies on social media will be described and analysed for how they (re)shape the habitus within the surrounding environment and inscribe the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones into the landscape using new digital ways of place- and space-making. This chapter will firstly describe the visual performances, how filming locations can be experienced and expressed through a 'Westeros-lens' and how these fit into contemporary (social) media culture. Secondly, the practice of using and subsequently mapping the fictional toponyms from the world of Game of Thrones through verbal and digital performances and how it territorialises the imagination onto the landscape will be discussed. These performances inscribe new identities onto the existing heritage landscapes, which enable fans to engage in novel and more personal ways with the spaces surrounding the filming locations.

6.2. Seeing Heritage through the Westeros-lens

Vignette 6.1: Taking the perfect shot.

The two young women, Tingting and Zhi, arrived at Kolorina Bay once the morning rush of Game of Thrones tours that usually occupies the entire pier had finally dissolved. In the series, this was the place of Blackwater Bay, King's Landing's royal harbour, most famous for the scene in which Lord Petyr Baelish and Sansa Stark stood at the end of the pier looking towards the horizon and plotting her escape from King's Landing, while her handmaiden Shae mistrustfully observed what happened. Like many others before and after them, Tingting and Zhi came here to recreate this scene. Almost immediately they identified the spot where Shae stood in the series, and Tingting applied more lipstick, fixed her hair and adjusted her posture. The green, long dress that she wore has been picked

specifically for this occasion, as she would later tell me. As she stood there with a stern, stoic facial expression in a 90-degree angle and turning towards the camera, her arms crossed in front of her body, Zhi started to take photographs with her phone (fig. 6.3).
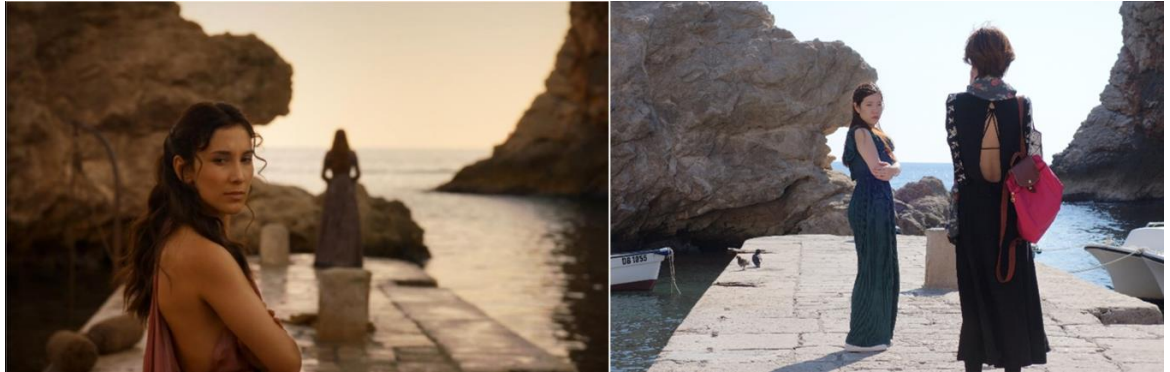
Figure 6.3: Shae and Sansa standing on the pier of Blackwater Bay (S03E01) (left); Tingting and Zhi are re-staging the scene at Kolorina Bay (right).

What followed was a forty-minute photo shoot in which they constantly compared, discussed and reshot the same photograph. Once Tingting was satisfied, it was Zhi's turn. As they would tell me afterwards in a short interview, this was the first thing they did after arriving in Dubrovnik, and even though they would only stay here for one and a half days, using their morning to recreate this scene was of utmost importance and time well spent. Especially Tingting was a big fan of Game of Thrones and these photographs were for Instagram – so it had to be perfect. (Tingting and Zhi from China, Dubrovnik 12.10.2018)

Activities such as this have become commonplace across many filming locations. Oftentimes, site visitors would arrive at locations already trying to triangulate the scenes within the landscape looking at screenshots on their phone, followed by discussions including what this place had been in the series, what happened there, and which characters had been involved. Frequently, monuments and other features in the landscape are pointed at, named and similarities and differences between fantasy and reality pointed out. Thereby, presences and especially absences are of particular interest. While specific practices can vary between filming locations, such as comparing screenshots, introduce elements of the series' iconography, certain items, costumes and re-creating scenes, the performances occurring at these sites are, with few exceptions, always captured through photography and/or video.

6.2.1. (Re-)framing fantasy

Visiting places and taking pictures is intrinsically linked and a crucial part of the tourists' performance (Urry & Larsen, 2011). In what he called the 'tourist gaze', Urry (1990) described how imagery creates place identity, directs how and at what we look at the world and creates a set of certain expectations about tourist destinations. The 'tourist gaze' is one of the most influential analyses of how previous knowledge, cultural and social background act as 'lenses' through which we are seeing and experiencing our physical and built world (Lester & Scarles, 2016; Mains et al., 2015; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Gazing as an 'embodied social practice' beyond just sight is transforming our material reality into a cultural image (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 20). Thereby, media and tourist industries are particularly influential in constructing particular gazes by creating, shaping and projecting signs and images onto places (Butler, 1990; Schofield, 1996). This 'gaze' is trained and fostered through daily consumption of and exposure to media and put into practice through specific ways of consuming places, most notably photography. The act of taking photographs is not only documenting a visit but authenticating, framing and shaping experiences and memories of travels as well as producing and reproducing a certain image of a place (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Haldrup & Bærenholdt, 2015). No image represents reality but is manipulated by an array of technical and aesthetic choices by both photographer and intended audience (Goldstein, 2007). By capturing only what the camera has been directed towards and what is in the frame, photographs are 'a record of that to which attention has been paid' (Grady, 2004, p. 21). Thus, photographs do not create 'visual copies' of places but 'imagined pictures' that are highly edited through framing and focus (Christmann, 2008, para. 6). This rings particularly true in the landscapes of Game of Thrones where imagination is paramount. If we apply these concepts to Game of Thrones locations, we can see that many people started seeing these places through a 'Westeros-lens'. The performance of tracking down locations, identifying and reframing the fantasy through photography as well as sharing these experiences online is not only confirming but reinforcing the fictional world created through Game of Thrones (cf. M. Robinson & Picard, 2009). The practices occurring across Game of Thrones locations are infusing places and spaces with signifiers that aim to insert as much of Game of Thrones' fantasy in the landscape as possible.

Those practices may vary but what they all share is their intent to merge fantasy and reality within the same frame using visual signifiers. One of the most common ways of merging fantasy and reality across all sites is utilising screenshots from the series. While primarily being a tool utilised by tour guides as visual aids, these are often also brought by visitors themselves or are provided at the sites, for example in the form of filming location maps. At some places, screenshots have even become part of the sites themselves in the form of interpretation boards as they can be encountered across Northern Ireland and Castillo de Almodóvar del Río (see Chapter 4). Photographing screenshots and interpretation boards, preferable with the filming location in the background has become a common practice everywhere I travelled during my fieldwork. Oftentimes, just the screenshot and especially the interpretation boards are photographed, almost as if they are regarded as attractions themselves (fig. 6.4).

Figure 6.4: Response photo-questionnaire #4: 'We made this photo because we walked and climbed around the Iron Islands like the Ironborn ;) It is doubly beautiful to capture such impressive nature when it is also at a GoT filming location.' (Photo and comment: Malte and Saskia, 08.04.2019).

The interpretation boards in particular became an expected asset of sites associated with Game of Thrones in Northern Ireland, illustrated by a German couple who were actively

looking for them at each site, yet were disappointed to find out that there was none at Inch Abbey (Tourist 16 and Tourist 17 from Germany, Inch Abbey 22.06.2018). Others merge fantasy and reality in the way they process their photographs after they have taken them. Daniel and Nathalie from Germany planned to create a photobook that will juxtapose screenshots from the series with the photographs taken at the site, representing both trips to Westeros and Northern Ireland in an object specifically created for preserving memories (Daniel, and Nathalie, from Germany, 38 and 40, Castle Ward 21.06.2018). Laugnd went a different route. He digitally inserted dragons into a photograph in which he is overlooking Dubrovnik and fittingly labelled 'King's Landing', describing it as an example of how reality and fantasy can merge (Laugnd from the Philippines, 27, Dubrovnik 19.10.2018; ig. 6.5). This appeal for fusing reality and fantasy has been recognised at the Fortress of Klis, where the site management erected a digital photobooth that makes it possible to take a photo of oneself, add dragons to the scenery and send the result as a postcard back home to your loved ones (fig. 6.6). While on both occasions the dragons are not those seen in the series, the connection to Game of Thrones becomes immediately apparent through the surrounding environment.

Figure 6.5: Response photo-questionnaire #5: 'A photo of me on the walls of Dubrovnik overlooking the city and some dragons that I added through snapchat. It shows that reality and fantasy from a show can actually coexist in a travel photo.' (Photo and comment: Laugnd, 15.06.2019).

Figure 6.6: 'Look@' photo column at Klis fortress (left); the finished photograph with 'dragon filter' that can be downloaded to one's phone and sent as postcard (right).

Furthermore, taking pictures is also 'a way of relating to the materiality of the site' in which the photograph becomes a tangible token and provides the possibility to touch and bring home the places one has visited (Haldrup & Bærenholdt, 2015, p. 63). Thus, photographs become objects themselves, mediating between the place and the everyday life of the visitor (ibid.). Paul, a Northern Irish photographer I encountered at Ballintoy Harbour where he supplied the local café with postcards (most of them of Game of Thrones locations), would describe photographs as a 'piece of time' (Paul from Northern Ireland, Ballintoy Harbour 01.07.2018); however, as the spatial practice and the tangible quality attributed to them by Haldrup and Baerenhold illustrate, photographs (even when they are only in digital form) are also a piece of place. The act of 'capturing' the moment makes it possible to take possession and ownership of a part and specific aspect of a place, and in the case of Game of Thrones, bring home some of the fantasy. This corresponds with numerous interviews and particularly questionnaire responses who would call their photos souvenirs. Laugnd, who described the previous photograph as 'a souvenir and something to look at back when I feel nostalgic', would even buy some Game of Thrones branded merchandise that according to his choice of words he clearly had no interest in for getting the 'real' souvenir he was after:

> I bought a magnet with Cersei saying 'in Game of Thrones you either win or die' or something along that line. I bought it so I can take a picture on a makeshift Iron Throne. (Laugnd from the Philippines, 27, Dubrovnik 19.10.2018)

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Despite the popularity of comparing scenery and scene, Laugnd's photographic practices and comments already illustrates the appeal of placing oneself into the fantasy. Photographs therefore not only provide a means through which one can bring the materiality of the place back home, it also provides the possibility to become part of the site and the imaginary realm.

6.2.2. (Re-)capturing the scene

Placing one's own body into the place where characters stood and emulate their behaviour can be seen as a means to be able to transcend the border between reality and fiction and get both physically and emotionally closer to the imaginary realm. Numerous informants said that it felt special to be in the place where 'it' happened:

> Just being able to, you know, go where [the characters] went. And I guess be a part of it, even though you're not in the actual show. It's just kind of cool to walk in those footsteps. (Chris from the USA, 30, Castle Ward 30.06.2018)

Although taking photographs of oneself is nothing new and revolutionary within travel photography, particularly in the age of the selfie, the practices that have established themselves at many Game of Thrones filming locations are a particular form of conduct that would not exist without the existence of the series and often go beyond the mere placing oneself into the frame. Particularly in clearly architecturally and environmentally structured spaces re-enacting scenes and posing as characters has become exceptionally fashionable among Game of Thrones fans. For example, in many places people would lie down to emulate the death of fan-favourite characters, such as Ser Barristan Selmy who found his demise in the basement of Diocletian's Palace. Some visitors at the Cushendun Cave might sit down on the cold, seawater drenched sand to 'give birth' to a shadow demon like the Red Priestess Melisandre. Staring out the window of Castillo de Almodóvar's highest tower like Lady Olenna Tyrell, who was watching the Lannister army approaching her home Highgarden, or walking down the Kingsroad like Arya Stark at the now immensely popular Dark Hedges, has become a common sight. Admittedly, for most people, particularly the last two examples might not look any more specific than looking out of a window or walking down a tree-lined avenue, for those initiated, the iconography of place in conjunction with the way the bodies are placed in them feel and looks both special and different for those familiar with the scenes. However, nowhere else have these

re-enactments have become more visually and performatively distinctive than in Dubrovnik, and nowhere else have they become as site-defining, as Dubrovnik's heritage sites provide an architectural frame in which these performances can be easily inserted and re-framed.

Vignette 6.2: Playing dead.

Deep in Tollymore Forest, I could not resist asking one of my fellow travellers, Gareth, to take a photograph of me in this place. For most people, this would be just some ditch in a forest. For me and the other tour participants, it was the place where it all began. Immediately, Gareth would climb onto the earth bank that surrounded that place, trying to recall the screenshot our guide Robbie showed us a minute ago and find the perfect angle to re-frame the scene. While he started taking pictures, I would be lying there, down on the cold ground, playing dead and reminisce (fig. 6.7).

Figure 6.7: Playing a dead Wildling at the place where it all started.

I was remembering the snowy desolation of the Haunted Forest, far north beyond the Wall, where the three members of the Night's Watch found a camp of dead wildlings, slaughtered by the mysterious White Walkers, mere minutes before becoming the prey of these creatures themselves. This was the very first scene of Game of Thrones, the scene that introduced me to the magical world of Westeros and started my now over decade long obsession with this fantasy series.

Gazing towards the horizon on the pier of Kolorina Bay like Sansa and Petyr Baelish when they conspired to smuggle her out of her captivity at Blackwater Bay; re-enacting how Daenerys was staring up and walking around the 'House of the Undying' at Minčeta Tower on Dubrovnik's city walls; looking down the courtyard of Lovrijenac fortress, one foot on the balustrade and leaning forward, just like King Joffrey did when he cheered for Gregor Clegane's performance during his Name Day Tournament in the Red Keep; or, most iconic, recreating the Walk of Shame at the Jesuit Steps; these scenes are now recreated day in and day out, all day long (fig. 6.3; 6.8-10).
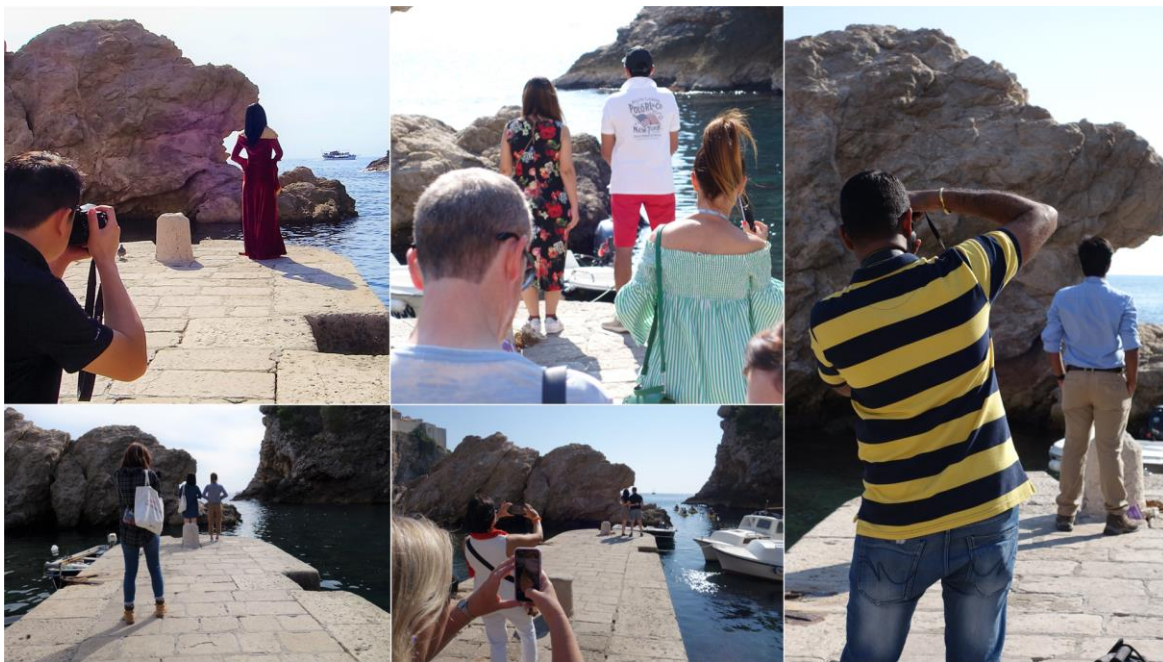
Figure 6.8: Tourists re-staging the scene of Sansa Stark and Petyr Baelish standing at the end of the pier of Blackwater Bay.

Photographs of these scenes are more than simple snapshots. Not any photo will do, it must be framed exactly like it looks on the screen. They are often elaborately staged and meticulously framed recreation of scenes that require specific iconographic knowledge, often utilise previously downloaded screenshots, several people and multiple devices. Partners and fellow travellers are instructed how and what to capture. This importance of placing oneself into the scene has also been recognised – and to a large degree fostered – by guided tours that would encourage their guests at any given moment to recreate the shots, often assisting them to capture the best possible photograph. At the behest of Marija, a tour guide I befriended during my fieldwork, I would act as a human prop for her guests to recreate the previously mentioned scenes at Kolorina Bay when she spotted me taking my fieldnotes. Stepping in as Petyr Baelish, each of the five tour participants would take

their place beside me and pose as Sansa Stark while Marija took photos, not only recreating photographs but additionally adding a screenshot into the frame so there could be no doubt about the intent and purpose of this photograph (fig. 3.7).

Figure 6.9: Daenerys Targaryen looking for her stolen dragons at the House of the Undying (S02E10).

Figure 6.10: Tourists re-staging the scene of Daenerys searching for her dragons at Minčeta Tower on Dubrovnik's city walls.

Figure 6.11: Fernanda poses as Cersei while her friends help to stage the perfect shot.
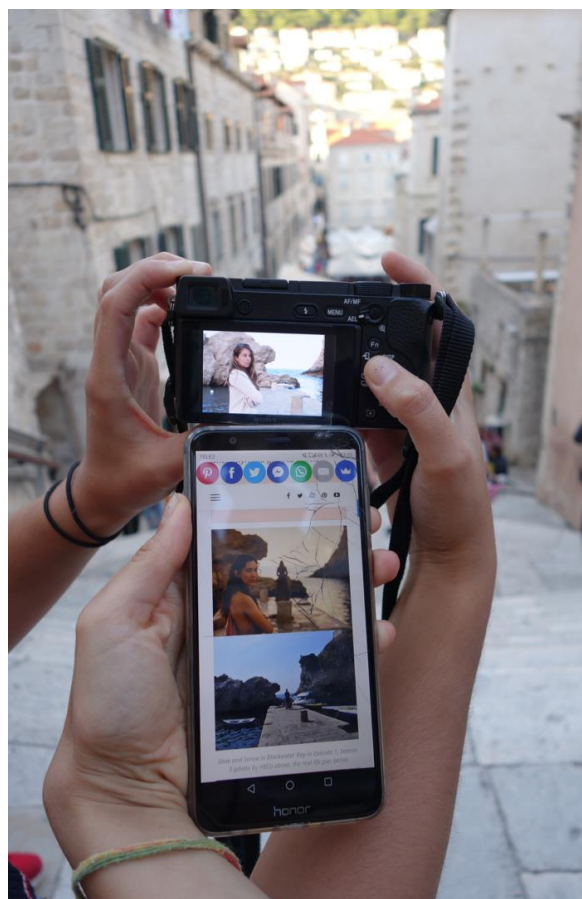
Figure 6.12: Fernanda and her friends proudly showing me their re-creation and a screenshot to proof its accuracy.

An example of the careful preparations occurred at the 'Walk of Shame', where three friends have gone to some length to capture the Walk of Shame correctly. This needed the involvement of each of them, each having their own, dedicated role to place in this recreation. One of them positioned herself in middle of the steps facing towards the imaginary Red Keep in the distance, another one squatted down to take a photograph in the perfect angle with her phone while the third of the trio was providing the photographer with screenshots from the series as a frame of reference (fig. 6.11). After some framing, reframing, adjusting stance and hair, and waiting until no other tourists would obstruct the view, it was the next persons' turn and the whole process would commence again. When asking them what the appeal was of coming here and recreating these scenes, one of them responded that it is her admiration for the series and a way to enter the fantasy of Game of Thrones through this practice:

> I love the show. And the place is amazing. It looks like, like you're in a fairy tale, you
> know? Like in the past. And then you see it and it's just fun to recreate the scenes and

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feel like you're here in King's Landing. (Fernanda from Chile, 25, Dubrovnik 08.10.2018)

After the interview, they would return later in the day, they even came back and proudly presented the photographs they had taken at both the 'House of the Undying' and 'Blackwater Bay' in the meantime, showing me screenshots from a blog they have used as a visual guide through Dubrovnik as proof for the fidelity of their recreation (fig. 6.12). Similar to previously mentioned practices of juxtaposing reality and fantasy, Fernanda was eager to show me how she would use the app *InstaQuick* to composite both screenshot and photograph side by side for an Instagram post so others would instantly know what she tried to capture. A German tourist in Northern Ireland showed me a photo of her sitting on the Iron Throne in Dubrovnik, claiming that she definitely 'felt a little bit like Cersei' when she sat in it (Tourist 37 and Tourist 38 from Germany, Dark Hedges 24.06.2018). For Andreia, standing where Cersei stood and recreating the Walk of Shame was also authenticating the reality of the place:

> Because sometimes you see places that you, I mean, you see the shows, and sometimes you don't know if that's a real place, or it's all made for the show. So sometimes when you arrive to a place you see, and you say, 'Oh, this is where this was shot, this show was filmed.' And you see how much it can be changed for the show. […] This place was changed. Because there was the big church [Sept of Baelor]. […] This place is, I think is better in the show, because it seems bigger, different. (Andreia from Spain, 27, Dubrovnik 08.10.2018)

Muriel and Beatriz, who posed in cloaks and with swords at Castle Ward, describe that being in the place is 'something special' because it is an essential part of the experience, highlighting the importance of the reality of the filming location to be able to immerse oneself into the fantasy:

> **Beatriz**: You need the scenery to create the world. You just cannot have a basic set, you need to see the trees and the nature, so you can feel immersed. **Muriel**: We are standing where they filmed it. It's something special. […] Even though you cannot see nothing right now, you can get immersed in it. You can have the feeling of it. (Beatriz and Muriel from Puerto Rico, 27 and 33, Castle Ward 16.06.2018)

However, for some simply being at the place is not enough, leading to some more elaborate ways to bridge the gap between fantasy and reality and immerse oneself even deeper into the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones. Almost as a culmination of the previous activities, many fans merge bodily performance with easily identifiable iconography by wearing Game of Thrones related clothing.

6.2.3. (Un-)dressing the part

Wearing Game of Thrones t-shirts and other branded apparel has become a common sight across all filming locations. Either brought from back home or bought in one of the many merchandise shops that can be found in proximity to filming locations, t-shirts with prints of the heraldry of various Great Houses of Westeros or bearing famous quotes can be seen everywhere across my fieldwork sites (fig. 6.13). Wearing those pieces of clothing at filming locations are not only for personal amusement and immersion, but are also acting as mobile, bodily signifiers to others that one belongs to the group of Game of Thrones fans who shares knowledge and understanding of the fantasy that is attached to the filming locations, showcasing intent

Figure 6.13: Wearing your fandom on your sleeve – or at least front and back of your t-shirt.

and motivation to visit those sites (something exploited in the recruitment process for informants; cf. Doppelhofer & Todd, 2021), as well as indicating personal preferences and allegiances with characters of the diegetic world through choosing particular iconography over other. Additionally, this clothing can also be seen as an insertion of Game of Thrones' iconography into the frame and thus merging reality and fantasy during photographic documentation of the travel experience, similar to the practices described above. However, for some, simple t-shirts do not seem enough to achieve the desired immersion into the fantasy, as the highly popular trend of costumed filming location tours and activities

reveals. For several tour providers dressing up in costumes and providing props at filming locations has become one of their main selling points. Walking through the Tollymore Forest and the Dark Hedges, or posing in front of Inch Abbey, Castle Ward and the shores of the Antrim Coast wearing heavy, black cloaks with fur collars and faux leather jerkins has become a common sight. At Castle Ward various packages are offered by Winterfell Tours that are centred around costuming, such as self-guided bike tours that include a rucksack containing a cloak and wooden sword to pose at the many sites along the path, costumed archery to emulate the scene in which the viewers are introduced to the main characters in the series' first episode or short guided tours on foot, including handling of 'special replicas' (fig. 6.15-16; see Chapter 5).

Figure 6.14: Response photo-questionnaire #6: Jeffrey with 'family in front of Tower at Winterfell in GOT clothing'. (Photo and comment: Jeffrey Crume, 27.05.2019)

Figure 6.15: Response photo-questionnaire #7: Muriel and Beatriz 'capture the feeling of the place' by wearing cloaks at Castle Ward. Muriel is holding 'Longclaw', Jon Snow's bastard sword, Beatriz 'Oathkeeper', Jaimie Lannister's Valyrian Steel Sword. (Photo and comment: Muriel Gonzales, 08.05.2019)

Costumed tours in Dubrovnik are fewer but are still offered. Those who book tours with the previously mentioned Karaka will also be offered costumes, however, similarly to the general performances in Dubrovnik, much more focussed on individual characters such as Cersei and Daenerys than on larger groups in Northern Ireland (fig. 6.16).[11] While not

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[11] It appears that Northern Ireland's Game of Thrones Tours expanded into Croatia in 2021/2022 and is now also offering costumed tours according to their website. According to Lola, a guide from Seville, costumed tours are not offered in Andalusia for the simple reason of high temperature during tourist season.

including costumes, another tour provider in Dubrovnik offers experiences including replicas of shields and swords, which are usually handed out and posed with next to the Jesuit Steps. Once again, like all other performances, the places where costuming and handling of replicas takes place are usually occurring at particularly recognisable locations and are taken as a setting for elongated photo sessions to excessively document these experiences, often being the centrepiece of the entire tour. Most common is the practice of getting a photograph on one of the Iron Thrones at the end of all Game of Thrones walking tours in Dubrovnik and Split.

Figure 6.16: Flyer advertising the Karaka Game of Thrones Tour, emphasising strongly on the aspect of costuming.

However, one can still encounter those dedicated enough to bring their own garments to wear at the filming locations, most notably for special events such as the 'Winterfell Festival' (fig. 6.17). Many are even locals themselves, such as Helen from County Down who attended her third 'Winterfell Festival' dressed as Daenerys (Helen from Northern Ireland, Castle Ward 16.09.2018; fig. 6.18). A different Helen, this time from China, brought her costume all the way from her home to Dubrovnik. Despite the scorching heat of the surprisingly hot south Dalmatian Autumn, she was wearing a long heavy gown reminiscent of the garments worn in the series to recreate the usual scenes at the pier of

Kolorina Bay with her partner (fig. 6.19). Having previously visited other filming locations in Malta and Spain, coming to Dubrovnik and cosplaying as a character was 'very special just because of Game of Thrones' (Helen from China, Dubrovnik 03.10.2018).

Figure 6.17: Visitors arriving at Castle Ward to attend the Winterfell Festival.

She had never done anything like this before but regarding King's Landing as the most significant place of all of Game of Thrones, she knew her visit required some special attention to experience it in the most 'real' way possible. Helen was not the only one who thought that exploring Dubrovnik and other sites with costumes would enhance their experience. Paula, a local tour guide in Dubrovnik, told me of a group of Spanish tourists who travelled across Croatia to all filming locations in full costume:

They went from the fortress Lovrijenac, which is the Red Keep, and they all got dressed up. They all brought masks and costumes from Spain to get dressed in there. One of them was a White Walker, one was Khaleesi, one was Cersei, you know, all of them dressed differently. So, they've been in Dubrovnik just because of Game of Thrones. Then they were going to Split and Šibenik, just because of the Game of Thrones (Paula, Dubrovnik 24.09.2018)

Figure 6.18: Helen from County Down dressed as Daenerys Targaryen at the 2018 Winterfell Festival.

Figure 6.19: Helen from China dressed as Sansa Stark at the pier of Kolorina Bay.

Similarly, Gytha reported that two previously unfamiliar fans found each other in Dubrovnik, one dressed-up as Daenerys Targaryen, one as Jon Snow, who then decided to continue their journey across Croatian Game of Thrones locations together (Gytha, 14.09.2019). What is notable is that many costumes are not exact replicas of clothing worn by characters in the series but are merely reminiscent by broadly being medieval-ish. However, by being worn within the spaces used for Game of Thrones, they are often immediately attributed to the fantasy series, rather than being a reference to anything historic. This can be illustrated by one of the most peculiar encounters during my fieldwork in Dubrovnik, 'The Contessa', a Renaissance enthusiast and vlogger who has

been asked by several people if she dressed up in her historic dress because of Game of Thrones (see Vignette 6.3).

Vignette 6.3: Meeting the Contessa.

Wearing a voluminous red gown with golden linings, a white conical hennin with a black brim a sheer veil, and large dark sunglasses, I encountered 'the Contessa' while her partner filmed her talking about Dubrovnik in front of the Jesuit Steps (fig. 6.20). 'The Contessa', or Rachel, describes medieval and living history as her greatest passions. Visiting historic sites in her self-made, period appropriate garments and documenting these experiences in her vlog 'Travels with the Contessa' is among her favourite hobbies and preferred mode of travel. 'I enjoy experiencing places in an immersive way. I think that's probably the best way.', she responded when asking about her motivations to do so. 'And since we are in Dubrovnik, I said "By God, I'm going to walk around in my 1470s ensemble".' For her, it is a 'question of which version of the place you want to experience', a notion she extended to those who 'come here to immerse themselves in the Game of Thrones world', immediately inquiring if I had seen anyone who had worn Game of Thrones inspired costumes during my research.

Figure 6.20: Interviewing the Contessa.

The Contessa also told me, how she had been asked numerous times if her choice of medieval clothing had anything to do with Game of Thrones by people who wanted to take

a photograph with her, something that seemed to both amuse and irk her in equal parts. While she was generally favourable towards the series and the filming taking place in Dubrovnik, the presence of 'kitschy Game of Thrones statues here for photo ops' saddened her, as it made the old town feel like a 'Mediterranean Disneyland' that takes away from it being a 'natural historic place', makes it 'very artificial' and 'freezes it in a particular manner'. However, lamenting Dubrovnik's 'Disneyfication' while wearing a faux-renaissance dress mainly held together by pins on her 21st century cruise that she documents for a vlog, does not lack a certain irony. (Rachel from the USA, 38, Dubrovnik 16.10.2018)

A very different form of 'costume' can, once again, be reported for the 'Walk of Shame', where some rather strip down than dress up. Evocative of John Berger's observation that 'nudity is a form of dress' itself (Berger, 1972, p. 4), the bodies at this site are often framed in such a way that the nudity of Queen Cersei in the scene is referenced in photographs. Often, women remove the straps of their shirts to have bare shoulders to further emulate the nudity of the character (fig. 6.21).

Figure 6.21: Emulating the nudity of Cersei in her Walk of Atonement by removing clothes and necklaces from neck and shoulder to 'authentically' recreating the Walk of Atonement.

Though not encountering any of them myself, there are even occasional sightings of those who are committed enough to recreate the 'Walk of Shame' as accurately as possible, however, this time mostly (intoxicated) men, as reported by several tour guides as well as Ana, a local shop clerk, who works in a Game of Thrones souvenir shop not far from the steps[12]:

> Yes, they take everything off and do the Walk of Shame. With a selfie. And the nuns get very cross and come out and scream at them. Those are steps of the church! The Jesuit Church! (Ana from Croatia, Dubrovnik 10.10.2018)

However, not all performances are as scandalous or an eyesore but happily acknowledged and even embraced by locals that report favourably how these performances of dressing up and re-enactment have become enjoyable parts of the heritage sites themselves. One of those who see these performances as a welcome addition to the site is Shaun O'Boyle, Ballintoy Harbour's licenced artist, who can be encountered every day sitting in front of his caravan painting the surrounding landscapes of the Antrim Coast, with his little dog resting by his feet (fig. 6.22).

Figure 6.22: Shaun O'Boyle, Ballintoy Harbour's licensed artist. Behind him his paintings, several showing Game of Thrones locations.

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[12] Although readily available on social media platforms and travel blogs, I have decided against showcasing photographic evidence of these re-enactments.

Ever since Game of Thrones has been filmed there, he can scarcely meet the demand for paintings of filming locations. Being there every day, he observed how the tours have become a daily routine and a part of the harbour itself, and how people engage with the place:

> They're going to dress them up, put them on the beach and try to re-enact the scene that was done at the beach. You know, that goes on every day. Two or three, coaches come up from the south as well and they take them around and show them. You'll see them today, around two. […] You should go see those guys. It's well worth it. Whenever you're here, it's well worth going for seeing that scene. That does add to the harbour. A lot of people that come to this harbour somewhat know that Game of Thrones took place here. They come and look at those couple of [interpretation] boards and things like that. […] Game of Thrones tends to split them into two groups: either fanatical about it or people who just seen a wee bit or haven't watched it. You know there's no middle ground with the Game of Thrones. You'll see that in a minute. (Shaun O'Boyle from Northern Ireland, Ballintoy Harbour 23.06.2018)

Similarly, at Inch Abbey, the locals from Downpatrick, who are usually walking their dogs around the grounds of the ruin, know exactly when and how many tours arrive and often actively chose to be there to look at the spectacle, and if only for the dog to joyfully run among the cloaked tourists. One local woman commented on the fact that not much attention is paid to the actual abbey and people are more interested in duelling and getting their picture taken; however, rather than being bothered by this disregard for the local heritage, she admitted that she enjoys seeing how grown, middle-aged men can be so playful, getting dressed up in cloaks and fighting with swords. And if Game of Thrones encourages playfulness and imagination, and on top brings people to beautiful places, it cannot be bad.

Just as the series transformed these heritage sites and made them stages for its imagination, performing this imagination by recreating scenes and dressing as characters is also a transformative and theatrical activity to act out fantasies (cf. Goffman, 1974; Samuel, 1994). This creates liminal spaces which have been described as the 'borderland between mundane and extraordinary' (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006, p. 764) where ideas of the 'ludic, consumption, carnivalesque, deterritorialization, and the inversion or suspension of normative social and moral structures of everyday life' take place (Andrews and Roberts 2012a, p. 6; see Chapter 7). The activities that create and maintain these spaces can be

categorised as Goffman's 'make-belief', an 'activity that participants treat as an avowed, ostensible imitation' (1974, pp. 48–56):

> [This is] being done with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing. The 'reason' for engaging in such fantasies is said to come from the immediate satisfaction that the doing offers. A 'pastime' or 'entertainment' is provided. […] Further, the engrossment of the participants in the dramatic discourse of the activity – the innermost plane of being – is required, else the whole enterprise falls flat and becomes unstable. Finally, when an individual signals that what he is about to do is make-belief and 'only' fun, this definition takes precedence; (ibid. p. 48)

Indeed, even though many of the described performances are conducted with the upmost care and often painstaking attention to detail, when directly asked most interviewees would simply respond with 'because it is fun'. Few would ascribe, or admit to, a deeper meaning than entertainment, although, most would state their *engrossment* as 'fans' of Game of Thrones being the primary driver for their behaviour.

Figure 6.23: Playfully murdering each other. Slaying a defeated enemy at Audley's Castle near Castle Ward (top left); execution at the Dark Hedges (bottom left); dealing the final blow with an Dothraki *arakh* in Dubrovnik (right).

However, re-enacting intrinsically violent scenes such as the Walk of Shame or various 'playful' beheadings inspired by the like of Eddard Stark or deserters of the Night's Watch (fig. 6.23), share many similarities with the folklorist concept of 'ostension', which

describes the playful acting out of legends, particularly in context of the haunted, uncanny, violent and macabre (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983; Fine, 1991; Koven, 2007). Thereby, various actors are taking turns on playing the role of victim, perpetrator and voyeur (which almost uncannily describes the Walk of Shame), as 'an improvised drama in which the players, visiting a site of a haunting or the scene of a crime as they both recreate the storied events and simultaneously expand the tale by adding their experience to the core narrative' (Lindahl, 2005, p. 165). By acting out these place myths, the re-enactors can 'temporarily set aside normal definitions of reality without being considered deviant' (B. Ellis, 1989, p. 33). While Goffman's notion of 'make-belief' implies a certain amount of nontruth, triviality or banality, those who are engaging in ostensive behaviour enter a liminal state and 'enter a world if heightened reality, or fantasy' to authenticate and thus validate the legends attached to place (Bird, 1994, p. 202; J. Holloway, 2010). Ostensive behaviour illustrates that 'not only can facts become narratives, but narratives can turn into facts as well' (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 5). This truthfulness of legends, or, in the case of Game of Thrones, pop-culture fantasies, is further legitimised by the architectural setting and the myriad of likeminded travellers which are not only confirming adequate behaviour but actively participating and thus encouraging it.

Similarly, Cramer (2010, p. 57) in his study of the *Society for Creative Anachronism,* a semi-historical living history group that re-enact the Middle Ages 'as they ought to be', sees 'make-belief' as a constructive notion that literally 'makes a belief come true'. This creates a reality through coded ritual and performance, establishing the 'play realm' as 'a clear alternative to contemporary society' (ibid., p. 58), or in the case of the filming locations, an alternative to the common interpretation and engagement with the heritage space. As the Game of Thrones-induced performances indicate, the territorialisation of these make-belief fantasies and the banal though frequent practice of these playful activities, has created a highly ritualised space and an integral part of the heritage landscapes and those who act within them. De Groot (2016, p. 109), in his description of historical re-enactment and performance within a heritage context states that they 'demonstrate the uncanny, peculiar, odd way in which we relate to the past, and undermine the controlling and disciplining claims of an all-encompassing, authoritative historical mainstream'. While those Game of Thrones performances observed across the filming locations are rather re-stagings than re-enactments in the traditional sense, they are still challenging the way heritage environments 'ought to be utilised', particularly given that

the practices observed have become part of mainstream culture. Indeed, they became part of the habitus of these sites. However, these serve a different purpose than traditional 'historic re-enactment'. While 'historic re-enactment' usually encompasses a holistic embedding into an imagined past, often casting away any modern technology, the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones is, despite its faux-medieval world, defined by its high mobility, digital photography practice and (social) media culture.

6.3. #Winterfell: Social media photography

> Instagram! I always [use it], I have almost 4000 pictures now. […] It's like heaven for me. So many places to see where the series was shot. So obviously, every photo there will be the hashtag 'Game of Thrones'. (Divyashree from India, 28, Dubrovnik 18.10.2018)

As it has already been hinted at by comments of several informants, travel photography in modern days is usually not restrained to the private photo-album for preserving the memories of experiences and serves more complex and social purposes. Increasingly, travel photography has also the function of presenting oneself to a global online audience (Lee et al., 2015; Lo et al., 2011). Reframing the fantasy and posting it online establishes a hermeneutic circle, reinforcing and reproducing the imagined place identities even further, resulting in seeing landscapes through a media filter and play a significant role in 'constituting and sustaining both individual and collective notions of landscape and identity' (Schwartz & Ryan, 2003, p. 6; Crang, 1997; Crang & Travlou, 2009). While the practice of travel photography and the (re-)framing of places is not a new phenomenon, the scale, interactivity as well as the immediacy of social media photography has accelerated and intensified this process (Staab 2019; Zuboff 2019; Nymoen and Schmitt 2021; see Chapter 2). What stands out from previous photographic practices is its 'insta' nature, already illustrated by the name of the most popular online photography platform Instagram itself (fig. 6.24). While previously photographs mostly had the function to preserve memories and had to be physically stored, digital platforms and nearly unlimited availability of 'film' made photographs more common but also much more short-lived, as they either end up on the digital data cemetery of one's own device or buried under the countless similar posts fighting for attention, often only to be dug up again by some researcher trying to make sense of them. Applications like Snapchat serve no archival purpose at all, as the photographs and videos are used for visual communication and will

be automatically deleted after some time and thus lost. However, all this makes these practices very useful in describing how fans are staging, representing and communicating the heritage sites of Game of Thrones filming locations and themselves within the online space, creating and reaffirming the fictional identity of those sites and their own identity as members of the Game of Thrones fan community.

Figure 6.24: 'Real-life' Instagram. A sign that imitates an Instagram post at Lednice Castle (South Moravia, Czech Republic), illustrating that this social media platform has become an integral part of tourism habitus.

Social media platforms such as Instagram are not only essential parts of contemporary visual culture and travel photography but influence how users and places are represented in online spaces, reaffirming and creating certain images (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; S. P. Smith, 2018). With over 1 billion registered users in 2021 (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022, p. 2), Instagram has become one of the most influential examples of global contemporary visual culture and online photography (cf. Leaver et al., 2020). The meanings of Instagram posts are not only conveyed through where and of what/whom photographs were taken, but also additional textual evidence of descriptive hashtags, feelings, attributes of sites, activities as well as georeferenced location data (Dolan et al., 2016; Highfield & Leaver, 2014). 'Digital images very often invite not contemplation, but action' such as 'like', 'comment' and 'share', thus, the boundary between producer and consumer of imagery is very fluid, often termed 'prosumer' (Ritzer et al., 2012; G. Rose, 2016, p. 13; Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 59). However, while such platforms present themselves as spaces that encourage individuality and creativity, they are, indeed, places of conformity in which repetition of trending hashtags and motifs is rewarded by the secretive algorithms (Nymoen & Schmitt, 2021, p. 68). Although individuals have more opportunities to express and emancipate themselves and heritage spaces by using and manipulate places as

they wish, the authority of what will be seen by others still lies with the platform holders and those users with over proportional high-reach, so-called social media influencers. Slavoj Žižek observed in his 2006 documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* that cinema (and media in general) 'doesn't give you what you desire, it tells you *how* to desire'. In the case of modern social media and pop-culture, this desire is not only to visit the places seen online, but to recreate and post the exact same photographs posted countless times before on social media. This has not only been acknowledged in academic analyses but (ironically) exposed on the social media platforms themselves, such as the popular account 'insta_repeat' which posts collages of repeatedly re-staged images of particular places, including some motifs discussed above (fig. 6.25).
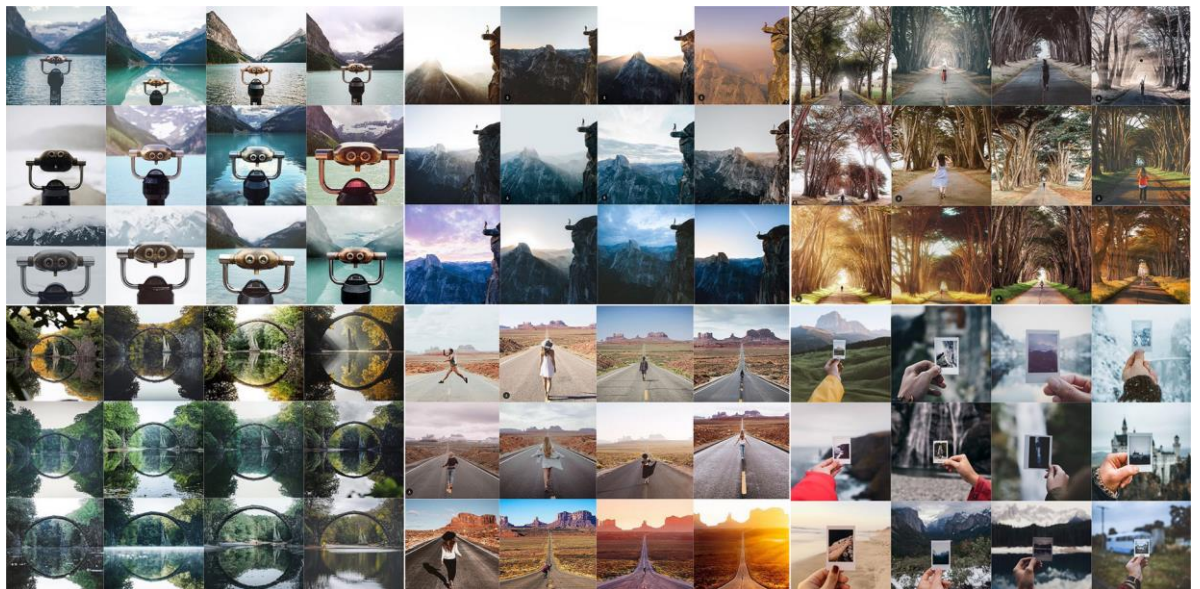
Figure 6.25: Collages by the Instagram account 'insta_repeat' illustrate and satirises various trends in social media photography; https://www.instagram.com/insta_repeat/ (accessed: 06.05.2022)

Therefore, the engagement and framing of these places and spaces are not, even though they initially might seem, bottom-up processes but these behaviours are fostered and utilised by the media and tourism industries which are aware of these social mechanisms. For example, the Croatian Tourist Board has used Instagram to promote Game of Thrones locations during the first few seasons of the series (Šegota, 2018), while Tourism NI has invited social media influencers to Northern Ireland to visit and post about all filming locations online, most notably *Fangirl Quest*, a diegetic tourism influencer who 'specialises' in creating 'sceneframing', photomontages through seamlessly inserting a screenshot into a newly shot photograph of a filming location (Judith Webb, Tourism NI, Belfast 14.09.2018; fig. 4.26). Recreating these images has thus become desirable.

Therefore, Game of Thrones performances repeated on-site and disseminated on-line have become part of the visitors' habitus of the site. Visitors of Game of Thrones filming locations (sub)consciously know that they ought to behave like this at these specific sites and that acting accordingly will grant them privileged status among peers (cf. Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Roesch, 2009, p. 130). It becomes a form of social and cultural capital, resources that 'yield a profit in distinction' through the consumption of cultural, historical, and sensational things and places (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 228; Grodach, 2002, p. 80). Brent accurately described how posting Game of Thrones filming locations on social media accumulates a form of social currency:

Figure 6.26: 'Sceneframing' the acclamation of Robb Stark to the 'King in the North' at Inch Abbey by 'Fangirl Quest'; https://www.fangirlquest.com/ (accessed 05.05.2022)

> You get points because everyone you know, on Snapchat or Instagram, everyone knows Game of Thrones. (Brent from the USA, Castle Ward 30.06.2018)

These 'points' can manifest in the form of 'likes', 'comments', 'shares' or 'followers' and increase popularity among friends and strangers alike who engage with these posts (Dolan et al., 2016; S. P. Smith, 2021). This, on the other hand means, that those who are not posting these images online, do not get any points and thus cannot accrue the social capital. Already Baudrillard (1994, p. 80) concluded that 'socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages' while those who are 'under-exposed to the media [are] desocialized or virtually asocial.' Now it does not only mean that one has to be exposed to the media, for example, to watch Game of Thrones, one also has to create their own content to remain social. In this always connected, participatory world, one could quickly become a digital, and thus social, outcast. Or, more poignantly put: If you do not post your

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holiday pictures online, have you actually been there? Indeed, on several occasions, respondents would show me photographs of what they did, almost as if they wanted to prove it. Sometimes it almost seems that taking photographs has become the sole purpose of visiting places and an end in itself to accrue as much of this 'digital capital' as possible. Even though photographs on social media are treated as a form of visual communication, 'rather than creating communication, *it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication*. Rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 80). Often visitors only seem to be interested in taking 'that one picture' and immediately jump back into the car or move on to the next site. Across many locations, I witnessed people briskly walking to a location, recreating one of the scenes and then immediately turn around and leave. One time at the Dark Hedges, people would not even bother to get out of the car but just take a snapshot out the car window and drove on – even though driving on the road is prohibited (fig. 6.27).

Figure 6.27: Mobile phone photography. Photographic practice at the Dark Hedges.

The local photographer Paul at Ballintoy Harbour lamented the obsession with creating images of places rather than experiencing them when he described how people were engaging with the Game of Thrones interpretation boards in Northern Ireland:

> People are actually only seeing the actual signs and nothing else. They see the sign, and then they go and get into their car. And then they go to the next location to take a photograph again of the sign without admiring the actual beauty around them. [They] only photograph the sign and do not even see the place. I mean, they don't even go over and touch it, there's no other interaction. (Paul from Northern Ireland, Ballintoy Harbour, 01.07.2018)

Ivan, who utilises Instagram and Twitter to promote his work as a photographer and tour guide in Dubrovnik, reports about the omnipresence of those motifs in his feed, also to his dismay to some degree:

> When I open my Instagram, I only see two things: People standing at the Pier and People doing Walk of Shame! […] It's #KingsLanding, it's #GameofThrones. (Ivan Vuković, Croatia, Dubrovnik 26.09.2018)

Ivan's comment about utilising hashtags to reference the fictional toponyms on social media posts is indicative for the now common practice of referring to the filming locations by the names of their counterparts from the world of Game of Thrones. The use of those fictional place names is fostered through both on-site performance, mapping tools and contemporary digital practice and has a significant impact on how those places are perceived.

6.4. 'Westeros is here!' – Naming and Mapping the Seven Kingdoms

These places are not only expressed through visual but also verbal performance. Across Game of Thrones filming locations, a unique soundscape established itself over the past decade. For example, when visiting certain locations, one will overhear the repeated use of catchphrases, such as 'The King in the North!' in front of Inch Abbey, 'What is dead may never die!' on the shore of Ballintoy Harbour, 'Kill the Masters!' in an alley in Split or 'Where are my dragons?' when walking around Minčeta Tower. People will hum or play the theme tune, shout 'Shame!' and ring bells (both analogue and digitally) at the Jesuit Steps. And everywhere, it seems, people are discussing scenes and mentioning characters, describing what happened at these locations and pointing out absences and presences of parts of the built and natural landscape.

While this unique soundscape established by Game of Thrones could make for an entire chapter on itself, for the present research the ubiquitous use of fictional names of places and monuments that has become one of the most significant manifestations within the imaginary geographies of Game of Thrones. Manifesting themselves orally through tours and individual visitors and visibly through signs, advertisement and location maps (e.g. fig. 6.28), and social media, the toponyms inscribed onto Game of Thrones locations impact how those places and spaces are perceived, identified and communicated (Alderman, 2008; Light, 2014).

Figure 6.28: Location map by Castillo de Almodóvar del Río. The map welcomes the visitor to both 'Almodóvar Castle' and 'Highgarden' alike.

6.4.1. 'Come on babe, Dorne is that way!'

Nathalie was excited to tell me about her visit to the 'Haunted Forest' and 'Winterfell' when informing me about visits to the Tollymore Forest and Castle Ward, while expressing interest to see the 'Dragon Pit' in Seville someday (Nathalie from Germany, Castle Ward 21.06.2018). When I asked Brent and Janice if they had visited the Dark Hedges on their Game of Thrones journey along the Antrim Coast, they replied that they had visited the 'Kingsroad', but not the 'Dark Hedges', not realising that those were the same place (Brent and Janice from the USA, Castle Ward 30.06.2018). Jo recollected all the places she and her husband saw on her tour through 'King's Landing', such as 'Blackwater Bay', the 'Red Keep' and the 'Walk of Shame' (Jo from England, 52, Dubrovnik 01.10.2018). James and Hannah tried to figure out the name of Minčeta Tower, however, after some unsuccessful attempts both settled for 'House of the Undying' (James and Hannah from England, Dubrovnik 18.10.2018). Javi, a Spaniard himself, would always say 'Tower of Joy' when talking about Castillo di Zafra (Javier, *Los Siete Reinos*, Seville 16.06.2019). At the

entrance of the Real Alcázar, an American tourist was audibly excited to enter the Watergardens of Dorne, shouting 'Come on babe, Dorne is that way!' to her partner. What they, and many others I encountered, have in common, is the fact that most respondents would, and indeed some only could, refer to the places by their fictional name, highlighting how influential the place identities portrayed in Game of Thrones have become. In countries such as Croatia, the persuasiveness of the new place names is definitely in some part owed to a certain ignorance of how to pronounce those foreign names: Red Keep and House of the Undying just rolls easier off the tongue than Lovrijenac or Minčeta, as it has been confirmed by several respondents including Melania, who said that 'we can't pronounce it and we will never be able to pronounce it' (Melania from Italy, 21, Dubrovnik 19.10.2018). However, even in Northern Ireland many English native speakers I encountered would sometimes struggle to come up with the name of the site they have been visiting, while having little to no trouble to recall the name of the place within the world of Game of Thrones. Even I would almost always think of the fictional names first and had to regularly remind myself to write the 'historically correct' names in my interview protocols and fieldnotes. This was not only because I was repeatedly hearing these names from guides, interview respondents and constantly overhearing it from tourists, as well as studying filming location maps, but because in many cases I was first exposed to the fictional places and thus their names through the screen, connecting them with stories characters and specific scenes, thus having Game of Thrones as my most influential reference point in my memory. However, while several informants have stated similarly that they have first seen and heard of these places through this 'Westeros'-lens, these new toponyms have even taken a hold within local communities. Particularly those involved in guiding and presenting the sites to visitors have started to take over the new names:

> It's a habit […] five times per day you say 'Blackwater Bay' and only one time you say 'Kolorina'. So, Blackwater Bay is gonna stick more than Kolorina, even to you, because this is how big the demand is for Game of Thrones tours. (Josip Crnčević, Dubrovnik 26.09.2018)

While it might not come as a surprise that a super-fan and Game of Thrones podcaster like Javi or guides like Josip would start referring to several places in their own home countries by their fictional name, even those in the heritage sector would subconsciously begin to refer to places they have known all their lives by those new fictional names, sometimes

without even noticing. For example, Valerie Wilson, the curator for textiles at the Ulster Museum, who would repeatedly refer to Castle Ward as Winterfell during our interview:

> Now I honestly think of it as Winterfell. But I just haven't thought of that until you pointed out right there. And now I cannot think about the Dark Hedges except for visualizing that scene where they are marching down on it. Again, I grew up going to all the north coast and to Ballintoy and now, even when I think of Ballintoy, I think of Game of Thrones [laughs]. If it's doing that for me, and I'm a local, you know, what's it doing for everybody else? (Valerie Wilson, NMNI, Cultra 20.04.2019)

These comments confirm that naming, whether by intent and design or through colloquial repetition, can be used to evoke certain images, narratives and memories, create a sense of place and new mythologised spaces (Alderman, 2008; Crang & Travlou, 2001, p. 165; Light, 2014). While there are numerous places that adapted fictional names, such as *Mayberry* (Alderman et al., 2012), *Sleepy Hollow* (Berger, 1996), *Hobbiton* (R. Peaslee, 2010) or St. Abbs in Northumbria that exchanged their official streets signs to 'St. Abbs – Twinned with New Asgard' after 2019s *Avengers Endgame* (fig. 6.29) to profit from diegetic tourism. However, the introduction of new place names from an outside source, even if entirely imaginary, might not be always welcome (discussed in detail in Chapter 8). Re-naming, for whatever purpose, is an entirely dissonant heritage practice that can lead to memory conflicts as it asserts certain narratives, identities and power-relations (cf. Alderman, 2008).

Figure 6.29: 'Twinned with New Asgard'. Street-sign at St. Abbs to their ties with the diegetic heritage of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Other comments indicate that using these names is a way of navigating and communicating these spaces and the travel experiences within them. Tour guide Paula uses, although reluctantly, King's Landing's monuments and toponyms as landmarks for her guests to understand the layout of Dubrovnik and to navigate through the city:

[The tourists] have no idea what the name of the fortress is. That's why I'm always [using those] names because some of the guests are here just because of the Game of Thrones. (Paula, Dubrovnik 24.09.2018)

Many respondents would say that Castle Ward or Dubrovnik would not mean anything to their friends and family back home and spark little to no interest. However, mentioning they had been in Winterfell or King's Landing, that would get their friends excited.

I think, well, at least with my social group, people are more familiar with Game of Thrones than they are with Dubrovnik. They'll be like 'Okay, cool. Somewhere in Europe.' [says it very bored and uninterested] when you say Dubrovnik. Whereas King's Landing it's... more people know King's Landing! (Andria from Singapore, 44, Lokrum 09.10.2018)

Similarly, when asking a German couple at Castle Ward where they would say they had been when telling their friends and family, both, simultaneously would respond 'Winterfell':

Tourist 42: Well, no one knows this place.
Tourist 43: If I'd say Castle Ward, no one would know. So, I'll say Winterfell, because many know it. After that I can show them on the map.
(Tourist 42 and Tourist 43 from Germany, Castle Ward 30.06.2018)

This illustrates that these toponyms, like the other performances described above, are not just a playful way of expressing fandom but they have become a way to understand, read, communicate and navigate through the landscape. Apart from being expressed verbally by various stakeholders, toponyms can manifest themselves tangibly at individual sites or across an entire country, such as destination marketing, mapping and social media practices. At Castle Ward, for example, the site management put up a fingerpost directing

Figure 6.30: Fingerpost at Castle Ward directing visitors to 'Winterfell'.

visitors no longer only to Old Castle Ward and its Farmstead, but to 'Winterfell – HBO Game of Thrones' (fig. 6.30).

In a publicity stunt Belfast Airport was temporarily renamed into 'Westeros Airport' (Belfast Telegraph, 2017) and welcoming visitors with large posters showing filming locations with the tag line 'Westeros is here!' (fig. 6.33).

Figure 6.31: Large poster in Arrivals at Belfast International Airport declaring that Dorne, Winterfell and Westeros in general 'is here'.

Although never realised due to a change in government and tourism strategy, Dubrovnik planned to erect a sign stating, 'Welcome of King's Landing', according to a local guide (pers. comm.; see Chapters 4 and 8). Just like New Zealand became the 'Home of Middle-earth' (Carl et al., 2007), Northern Ireland and the area around Osuna proclaimed themselves as 'Game of Thrones Territory' and 'Tierra de Dragones' respectively, thus adding an additional spatial component that extends beyond the individual sites. The entire surrounding geographic reality is presented under the wings of the dragons, expressing that no space has been left untouched by Game of Thrones – in case of Northern Ireland's filming locations map, this can be taken literally (fig. 4.5). This spatial expression of this imaginary realm is nowhere better illustrated than in the increased presence of Game of Thrones and its toponyms on various maps.

6.4.2. Putting Westeros on the Map

Maps play a central role in Game of Thrones. They provide geographical context in a vast imaginary world and are crucial spatial anchors for the narrative, characters and the countless locations (see Chapter 4). However, maps have also become an important feature across the filming locations and act as navigational tool for the imagination in the real

world. As with many other contexts, tourists are not left to their own devices. Maps, apps, interpretation boards help them understand, name and interpret the sites accordingly. Filming locations maps have been a popular destination marketing tool for a long time and are a common tool for sites to promote themselves and for fans to experience and navigate to diegetic places they had previously encountered on the screen (Busby and Klug 2001; Hudson and Ritchie 2006a). Such maps have also become common across several Game of Thrones filming locations. Official tourist organisations, heritage sites and private businesses created and published several maps that acknowledge and adopt those new names, presenting their sites as 'Winterfell' (Castle Ward), 'King's Landing' (Dubrovnik) or 'Highgarden' (Castillo de Almodóvar del Río) (6.33).

Vignette 6.4: Hic sunt dragones.

Figure 6.32: Destined to become part of Game of Thrones

Standing in the 'Kill the Masters Street' of Split, the tour guide proudly held up the map of Croatia and pointed out that its contours resemble the shape of a dragon, its wings spread wide facing the Adriatic Sea (fig. 6.32). 'Why is it, that Croatia's border looks like this?', she asked the group, only to immediately provide the answer herself. While some might foolishly think that the Balkan nation has been shaped by historical processes, its borders drawn and redrawn through the ages and countless conflicts, the guide provided a much more poetic explanation: Croatia has been destined to become part of the world of Game of Thrones.

In Northern Ireland a nationwide filming locations map has been created, which is displayed and distributed at every tourist information and even has a mobile app utilising GPS. What they all share in common is the strong focus on dual-naming in which both real and fictional place names are presented side by side, making them not only appear interchangeable but also adding official legitimacy to both 'real' and 'imaginary' place (cf. Alasli & Gercsák, 2021), as tour guide Richard describes:

> It's a legitimization of the locations […] marking it as a place that you visit for that reason. You know, it's not just passing information, it's sort of legitimising that spot as Game of Thrones Territory. That's a big thing. (Richard, Bangor 07.05.2019)
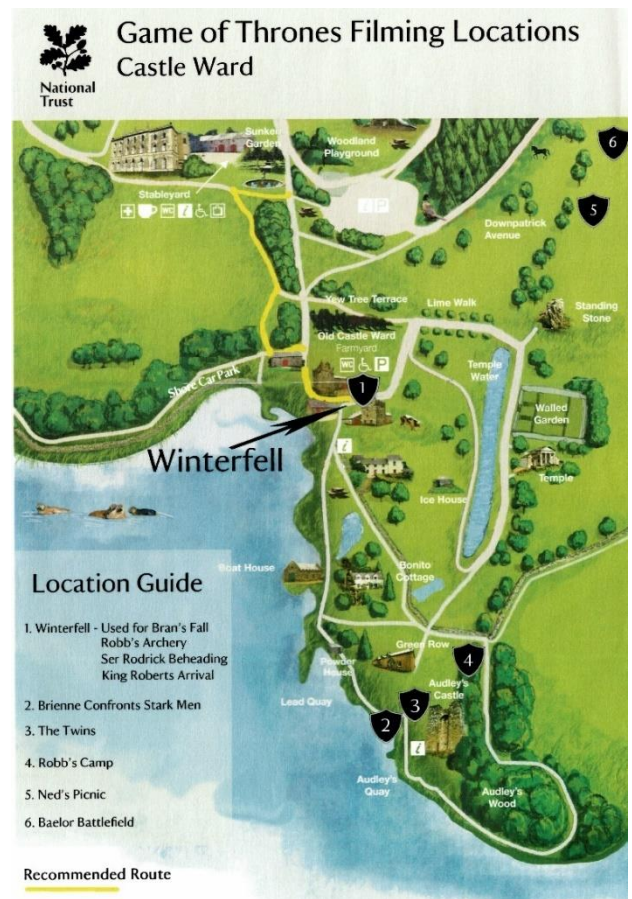
Figure 6.33: Filming location map available at Castle Ward

Some maps, particularly those distributed by tour providers whose first and foremost motivation is to sell the fantasy of Game of Thrones, go even further. The real place names have often been entirely replaced by the fictional toponyms (fig. 4.25).
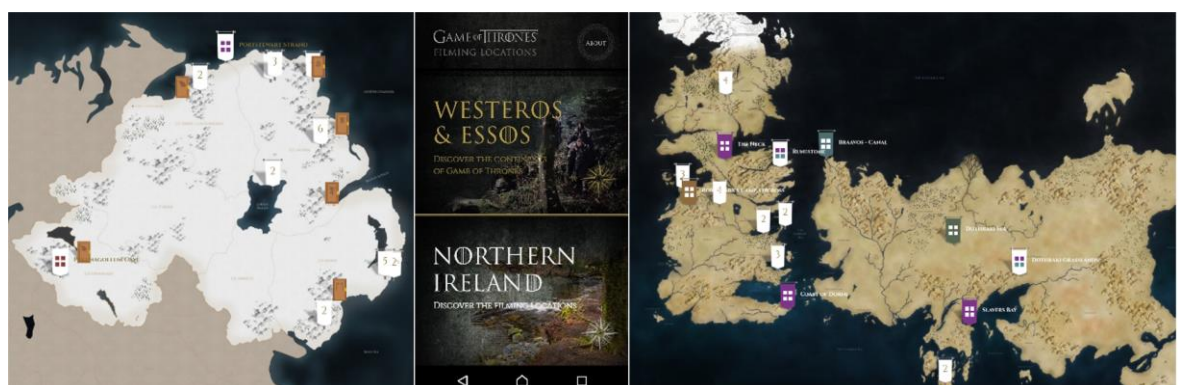
Figure 6.34: Screenshots of official Northern Ireland Game of Thrones Locations App by NI Screen. Game of Thrones' locations within Northern Ireland (left); Northern Ireland's locations in the world of Game of Thrones (right).

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Northern Ireland's official Game of Thrones filming locations app further blurs the separation between reality and fiction. With a simple finger tap, the users can switch between worlds, transporting them from Northern Ireland to Westeros and Essos or the other way around (fig. 6.34). What is significant about this app, is its Google Maps implementation through which the user is guided to the filming location, even when looking for the fictional place name. Through this implementation, Game of Thrones locations are not only displayed on marketing-specific maps but the imagination and its toponyms are georeferenced onto 'real' digital maps which are starting to treat them as real-life places, something that I used to my advantage in past when trying to find a heritage site in Scotland whose name has dropped my mind (see Vignette 6.5).

Vignette 6.5: Finding Castle Aargh.

A few years ago, my partner and I sat in a bar in Oban, making plans for the next day. One of the places, we wanted to visit was Castle Stalker, just a few kilometres north from where we had our B&B. At the time, however, I could not recall the name of the place, but knew that it was used in 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail' as 'Castle Aargh'. Half in jest, half out of desperation, I typed 'Castle Aargh' into the search bar of Google Maps. To my delight, I was guided directly to the location of Castle Stalker (fig. 6.35). The algorithm has recognised its double meaning/naming and made it possible to navigate the landscape through this pop-cultural reference.
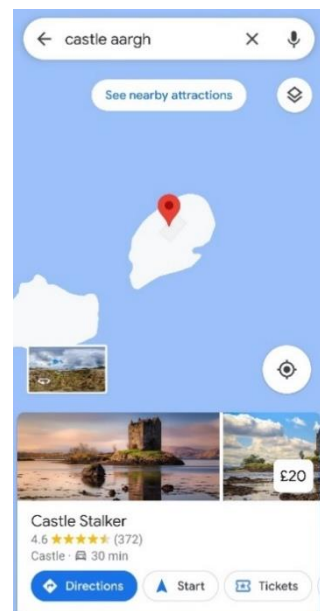
Figure 6.35: Navigating Scotland with pop-cultural knowledge.

This exemplifies how digital maps can add additional layers of information. Similar observations can be made when trying to navigate the landscape of Game of Thrones. While there are dedicated apps like the official Game of Thrones Locations app developed by the Northern Ireland Screen, which also guided my path throughout my field research, many places can be geographically found by simply searching on established web maps. For example, one of my informants reported that Facebook would accept 'King's Landing' as a legitimate and correctly georeferenced place name for Dubrovnik, elevating both her arrival and the place itself by being able to 'officially' travel to a fictional place:

What I actually really love is… I normally don't 'check in', but I wanted to see if I could check in at 'King's Landing' on Facebook. And you can! [excited] So I've checked into King's Landing! […] You can choose [Dubrovnik], but I chose King's Landing [laughs]. I just thought it was cooler because it's a fictitious place. […] I don't think you can do this with many places in the world. (Andria from Singapore, 44, Lokrum 09.10.2018)

Similarly, Instagram photographs can be geotagged as 'King's Landing', 'Winterfell', 'Pyke', 'Meereen' or 'Highgarden' which will in most cases be geographically synonymous with Dubrovnik, Castle Ward, Ballintoy Harbour, Klis and Castillo de Almodóvar del Río respectively within the in-app map. Even specific individual monuments and places such as the 'Red Keep', 'House of the Undying', 'Blackwater Bay' across Dubrovnik will in most cases exactly corelate with the location in Dubrovnik in the in-app map. Apps like Instagram have been identified as a strong tool for place-making not only through the visual framing of space but also the accompanying descriptive hashtags and geotags of locations (Boy & Uitermark, 2017; Budge, 2020). Almost everyone I talked to who planned to post photographs on social media also intended to use Game of Thrones related hashtags, as previously mentioned by Ivan – and countless times observed myself when browsing through Instagram. According to Boy and Uitermark (2017, p. 616), adding georeferenced place tags on social media such as Instagram shows that 'users who tag places are not simply there; they want to show others that they are there. Place tags thus serve as markers of identity and lay a symbolic claim to a place'. The repeated, banal performance of searching for places and tagging the sites by the name of their fictional counterpart has a direct impact on how the territory is displayed and represented in navigational tools, promoting and demoting places through spatialisation of digital behaviour (M. Graham et al., 2013, 2015; Zook & Graham, 2007a). The usually colloquial expression 'being put on the map', which coincidentally I heard on several occasions by various local respondents, can therefore be used literally, as several locations across the fieldwork sites have appeared, disappeared and have been renamed on digital mapping tools. Searching for 'Game of Thrones' on Google Maps will not only highlight many filming locations and related businesses, but places like 'King's Landing Dubrovnik' and 'Winterfell Castle & Demense' have appeared on the online service, among others (fig. 6.36-37). Some will only be shown when looking for the fictional toponyms specifically or

Game of Thrones more generally. Others, like the above-mentioned examples, have become prominent placenames that will always appear as part of the landscape.
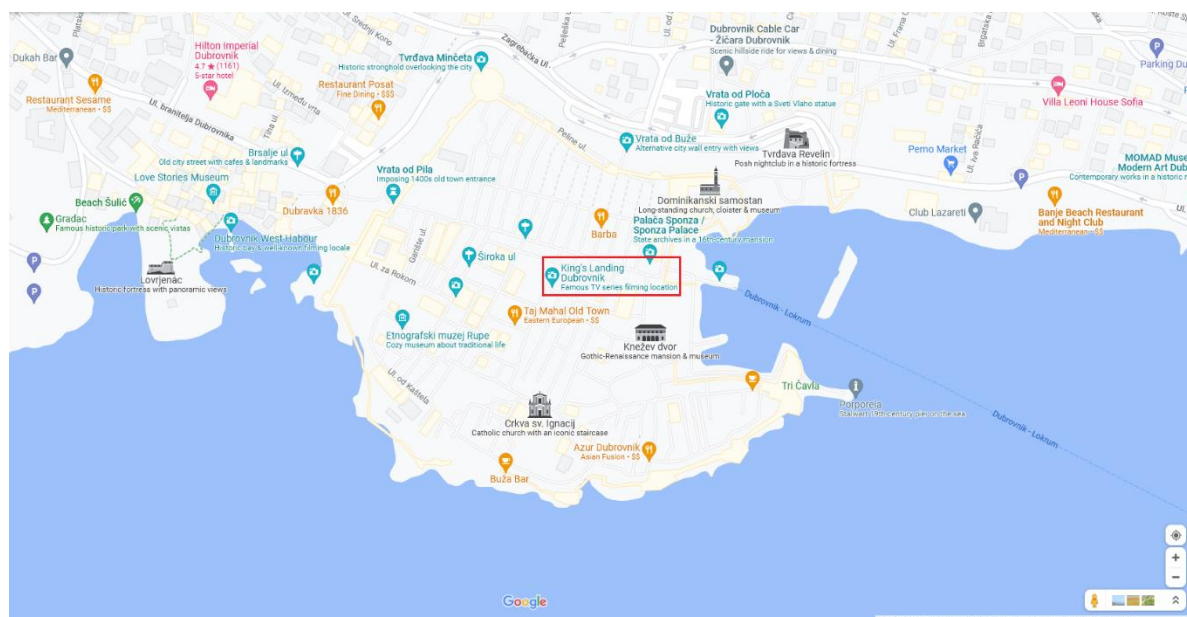
Figure 6.36: 'King's Landing Dubrovnik' on Google Maps in Dubrovnik; https://www.google.com/maps (accessed: 05.05.2022)
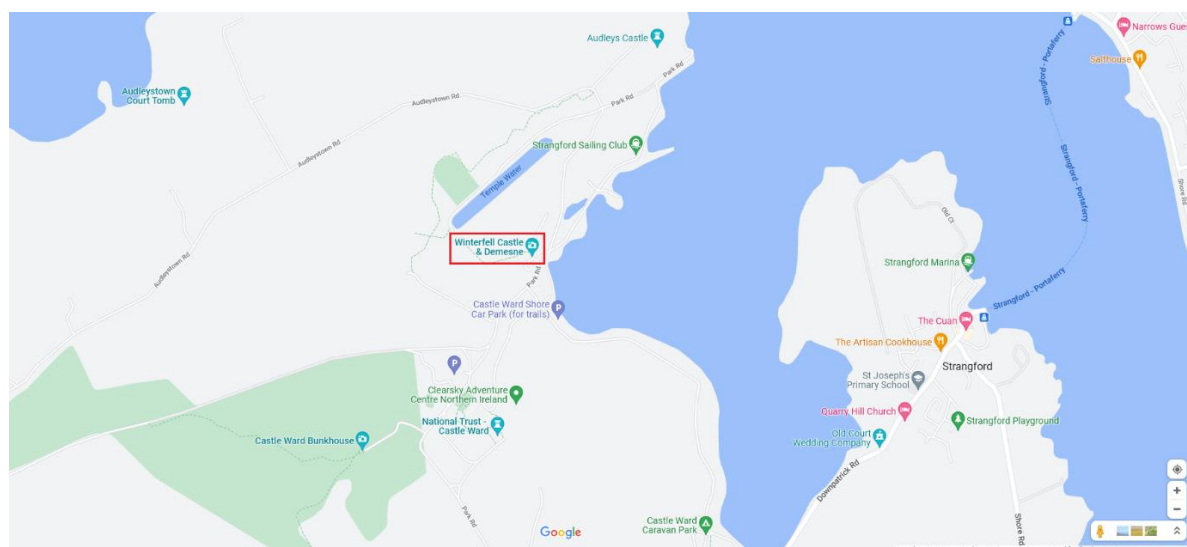
Figure 6.37: 'Winterfell Castle & Demesne' on Google Maps instead of Old Castle Ward. It is described as 'famed ancient castle on scenic grounds'; https://www.google.com/maps (accessed: 05.05.2022)

Places like Ballintoy Harbour, Kolorina Bay and the Jesuit Steps, which did not have markers on Google Maps during fieldwork in 2018, are now described as 'historic harbour and iconic film location' and 'historic stairs' respectively. The fluidity of placenames and descriptors on digital maps is further illustrated by disappearances. A now vanished attraction 'King's Landing' located on Dubrovnik's City Walls, which has been pointed

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out to me by an informant during an interview (Stuart from England, 30, Dubrovnik 07.10.2018), could be found on Apple Maps until at least 2019 (fig. 6.38).

Figure 6.38: Screenshot taken from Apple Maps in 2019. 'King's Landing' has since vanished from the map.

While this user-generated mapping can be seen as growth in digital authorship and cartographic agency, however, one has to highlight, similar to social media, that there underlying biases and power imbalances through platform owners, algorithms and user base (Boulton, 2010; M. Graham & Zook, 2013; Zook & Graham, 2007b). More than just a playful use of this valuable intellectual property, mapping the fantasy onto the real landscape, adding toponyms and calling it 'Game of Thrones Territory' or 'Tierra de Dragones', attributes Game of Thrones an additional spatial component that extends outside the individual sites and presents the entire surrounding geographic reality under the wings of the dragons, expressing that no space has been left untouched by Game of Thrones, in case of Northern Ireland's filming locations map, this can be taken literally. Particularly the use of the word 'territory' by Tourism Northern Ireland has some underlying implications, which can be used representatively for the processes at other filming locations. According to Foucault (1980, p. 68) 'territory' is not only a 'geographical notion' but 'first of all a juridico-political one: an area controlled by a certain kind of power', thus implying that through its rebranding as 'Game of Thrones Territory', Northern Ireland acknowledges the fictional realm as its own spatial entity, another realm within the same borders, created and controlled by the power of imagination and corporate marketing. This imaginary space can only be entered, navigated through and experienced accordingly by those who possess the knowledge of the imagination of the series. Like other interpretations and uses of landscape and heritage, sites featured in Game of Thrones can only be 'owned' by distinct groups of people, in the present case namely the fans (Wertsch, 2002, pp. 41-41. 66; cf. Tunbridge, 1994; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). This reinforces the image that 'Westeros'

is a physical landscape in the real world, with implications that will be further discussed in the following chapter.

6.5. Conclusion

The activities, performances and other manifestations described in this and the previous chapter, such as merging fantasy and reality by introducing various iconographic signifiers, restaging scenes and wearing certain costumes, as well as using toponyms elevate those sites, give those places special meaning, sets them apart as being different and extraordinary – meaning that sites outside of the 'Game of Thrones Territory' do not possess. Therefore, Game of Thrones enables an entirely different and novel way of representing and framing both oneself and the heritage spaces of the filming locations that have not been possible before. The heritage landscapes and the bodies inhabiting these spaces are reinterpreted to fit the imaginary geographies of Game of Thrones. While taking photographs, naming and navigating through (tourist) spaces are not novel, the specific performances inspired by Game of Thrones can only be conducted in specific locations. Only these places and the knowledge of how to interpret and use them, will instruct how to act accordingly, thus assigning an entirely new heritage performance and identity to those landscapes and creating a transnational liminal space bridging the reality of the filming locations and imagination of the realm of Game of Thrones. This is further fostered by contemporary digital photography and mapping practices which encourage the reiterating of this liminal space, as well as providing material anchors such as newly created Game of Thrones artefacts and props.

In the next chapter it will be illustrated how this liminality has a significant impact on how these spaces are experienced by fans, who can immerse themselves into a different world with other like-minded travellers and establish an almost pilgrimage-like, communal experience and a transnational space in which they can act out their fandom. Furthermore, due to the popularity of Game of Thrones and the omnipresence of it at the filming locations, Game of Thrones inspired performances increasingly become the usual habitus at these sites even by those who would not describe themselves fans or have even seen the series, further engraining the imaginary realm into reality.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CREATING A REALM
Liminality, transnational communities, and hyper-traditions

7.1. Introduction: When fiction meets reality

> 'The home of Odysseus? Many things in this picture too would not fit in with the picture that I had from the days of my first reading of Homer.' (Heidegger, 2005, p. 10)

In the past, it had been argued that destinations advertised and portrayed through media may lead to disappointment when the place deviates too much from what has been expected (e.g. MacCannell, 1976). With the emergence of tourism, there were numerous 19th and 20th century literary reckonings with the landscapes of Italy and Greece which could not compete with their imagined and romanticised counterparts (Duro, 2007; e.g. Heidegger, 2005; Nymoen & Schmitt, 2021, p. 156). While Heidegger had to come to terms with Ithaca not living up to the Homeric epics and was 'missing […] the presence of that Greek element' (Heidegger, 2005, p. 11), in the case of Game of Thrones, visitors are often confronted with the ruins of their imaginations when encountering the filming locations stripped of props and CGI: Where there once was the mighty fortress of Winterfell, there is now the lonely tower of Old Castle Ward; the Red Keep and the Great Sept of Baelor, dominating the cityscape of King's Landing in the series, are absent from the panorama of Dubrovnik; and the Great Pyramid of Meereen is reduced to virtual rubble when visiting the fortress of Klis. A tourist from the US was surprised how much was added digitally on her travels through Croatia:

> I knew Game of Thrones was a lot of CGI, but I didn't realize how much until we got here. […] The pyramid [of Meereen], the steps, the Sept of Baelor and everything. That is totally different. Basically, the steps are the only thing that's the same from the show. [chuckles] (Taylor from the USA, Dubrovnik 26.09.2018)

There are indeed those who felt some minor disappointment when encountering the 'real' thing, as exemplified by two German Game of Thrones fans who wanted to see Winterfell:

Yes, we have been rather disappointed, I got to say. Because, well, it looks quite different [laughs]. We looked at it in detail, there has been a lot of stuff built around it, like the towers. We wondered that all the towers were square. In the series, they are round! Those are details where we think, why did they even come here, if they rebuild it entirely? [laughs] (Tourist 16 from Germany, Inch Abbey 22.06.2018)

You can't see anything, it's just the courtyard. […] If I compare it to the photos [on the interpretation board] over there, a lot has been digitally altered. […] Well, I am not entirely disappointed […] but I had thought that there would be more. It is less than I expected. (Tourist 44 from Germany, 60, Castle Ward 30.06.2018)

Some pointed out, that the locations do not measure up to the scale that the series made them look like:

I think it was a wee bit smaller than I imagined in my head. Just because it was on Game of Thrones [laughs]. Telly makes everything look bigger. […] But I think they've captured it pretty well. Like I said, you can recognize it. But it just felt much, much bigger in the film. (Raven from England, 46, Ballintoy Harbour 23.06.2018)

Obviously, it is not as great as it is shown on the TV because there are a lot of other people around and that factor of people wearing costumes that is missing. It doesn't hold up to that, but it's cool. (Tourist 59 from India, Dubrovnik 05.10.2018)

However, demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6 and supported by previous studies, such as with *The Lord of the Rings* tourism (Buchmann et al., 2010, p. 238), it appears that quite the opposite is true for most fans of Game of Thrones. It is not in spite of the invisibility of the imaginary that makes those places so appealing but rather the core reason. Fans do not find themselves in a 'desert of the real' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 1) but a space full of visual and performative signifiers, natural and built reference points and memories through which the fantasy can be accurately triangulated and restored within the landscape. Often enough I would encounter visitors pointing into the nothing and talk about a monument that 'used to be there' or even refer to it as if it still existed. The interplay between absence and presence through physical remains that are visible and digital effects that are not, the performance of tracking down locations, identifying and reconstructing sites by comparing between screen and reality and reframing the fantasy through photography and re-enactment is reinforcing these fictional places (Crang, 2006, pp. 49, 55; Roesch, 2009, pp. 135–136). Urry and Larsen (2011, p. 101) suggest that internalised images can still be

sensed and seen in the 'gazer's mind' even if certain features are not physically present. As exemplified by the on-location performances and photographic practices, these images can also be reinserted by introducing the series' iconography to evoke memories, as illustrated in the previous chapters. Many places have thus become synonymous with their fictional counterparts, becoming part of a new transnational territorial entity built from *pars pro toto* use of various heritage sites across several countries, disregarding the national borders and identities attached to them. This increasingly blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction and granted visitors the opportunity to enter and move through an imaginative, liminal space that creates a new dynamic in how one can engage and interpret the heritage landscape, even creating an entirely new one (Andrews & Roberts, 2012b; cf. M. Robinson & Picard, 2009, 2016).

Firstly, this chapter will discuss the liminality created across the filming locations and how it became a diegetic heritage space in which Game of Thrones fans can experience quasi-religious epiphanies together with fellow travellers (cf. Turner & Turner, 1978). Secondly, we will see how through shared media and on-site practices meaningful relationships of fans with both the imaginary world of Game of Thrones and fellow travellers have been created that have infused the landscape with signifiers, establishing a new heritage space with its very own imagined community and invented traditions (cf. Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). This creates a highly ritualised and communal space in which reality and imagination are converging and are endlessly reproduced, offering a new transnational heritage and homecoming space abroad for those who identify with the imaginary realm and narratives of Game of Thrones. Lastly, the chapter will illustrate that although initially driven by fans of Game of Thrones, these new practices are soon emulated by others who have no personal investment and have been exposed to these visual and spatial references through social media and on-site observations, becoming the habitus and part of the place and further engraining the imagination onto the heritage sites (Billig, 1995; Bourdieu, 1977).

7.2. The liminal spaces of Westeros

7.2.1. Re-enchanting the world

Liminal spaces have been described as the 'borderland between mundane and extraordinary' (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006, p. 764) where ideas of the 'ludic, consumption, carnivalesque, deterritorialization, and the inversion or suspension of normative social and

moral structures of everyday life' take place (Andrews & Roberts, 2012b, p. 6). Tourist spaces have long been considered ordinary places made extraordinary and thus liminal by setting them apart in the minds of visitors as being different (MacCannell, 1973; Rojek, 1997; Urry & Larsen, 2011). However, the omnipresent availability of visual media and the inflationary availability of travel and heritage experiences results in a constant demand for 'new out-of-the-ordinary experiences' (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 115; cf. Hewison, 1987). Boredom, as claimed by Thomassen (2012, p. 31), always lurks around the corner 'in a world where an increasing number of people are in constant search for excitement and stimulation of the senses'. How many Roman bathhouses, medieval ruins and historic city centres can one visit before they start to look, and more importantly, feel ordinary again? The British travel writer Lion Phillimore wrote already in the early 20th century that there was a sense of disenchantment, a lack of imagination and wonder, when travelling the world:

> The land had a worn aspect and there was no freshness in it. England had always been walked over. The footprints of the Romans might still be traced on its fields and woods. There had never been the extraordinary charm of the unknown about it. And beyond England, France, Germany and Italy were all trodden upon and even Africa would soon be covered with cycling roads. The round world and all that dwells therein was being mapped and tabulated and soon there would be no land left to the imagination. (Phillimore, 1912, p. 13)

And already back then, this disenchantment could only be overcome when seeking new shores entirely ruled by the power of imagination, in the case of Phillimore, the at the time seemingly wild and exciting Carpathians of Eastern Europe (cf. Todorova 2009; Goldsworthy 2013; see Chapter 8). Similarly, when discussing science fiction and space exploration, Jean Baudrillard concluded that until the twentieth century 'we have always had a reserve of the imaginary', however, now 'when there is no longer any virgin territory, and thus one available to the imaginary, when the map convers the whole territory, something like the principle of reality disappears' (1994, p. 123). While not exploring the final frontier, Game of Thrones has introduced the strange new world of Westeros and Essos where no one has boldly gone before, superimposing new maps on old territory, thus reclaiming some spaces for imagination. Certain activities and performances such as taking pictures of sites associated with Game of Thrones as well as participating in guided and costumed tours and re-enactments elevate those sites, give those places special

meaning and set them apart as being different and extraordinary – meaning that sites outside of the 'Game of Thrones Territory' do not possess. Indeed, many informants claimed that it was the fact that Game of Thrones had been filmed at certain locations that made sites stand out among countless similar ones. One of the young Chinese women, who were obsessively restaging the scene at Kolorina Bay (see Chapter 6), described how being part of this imaginary realm has bestowed additional layers of appreciation, value and interest onto sites that sets them apart from other, similar places:

> This city is more special than other cities because it is a Game of Thrones filming location. […] There are cities that are probably the same, so Game of Thrones is the reason to come here. (Tingting from China, Dubrovnik 12.10.2018)

There might be many abbeys and tower houses around Northern Ireland, however, only Inch Abbey and Castle Ward can claim to be associated with Game of Thrones. Javi concluded that 'in Spain there are literally thousands of castles like Castillo de Zafra or Castillo Rio Almodovar' but only a select few that have been featured in Game of Thrones and thus particularly special among the fan community (Javier, *Los Siete Reinos*, Seville 16.06.2019). He further stated that through Game of Thrones local heritage is 'becoming part of something bigger – Everyone knows what Dragonstone is. Everyone knows what King's Landing is', elevating its significance from a regional and national level to a transnational sphere. In Dubrovnik, a visitor from India explained that fans 'are looking differently [at the place] because we can recollect [what happened there]. […] Being a Game of Thrones fan, I'm looking a bit more closely at them' (Tourist 59 from India, Dubrovnik 05.10.2018). While even those who are not fans are eager to experience Game of Thrones related attractions, often encouraged by other people's performances and information received at tourist information desks (see below), for fans those sites directly relate to their lived experience and create a link between the visitor, the site and the diegetic landscape of Game of Thrones. Stuart thinks that 'King's Landing is easy to relate to, Dubrovnik, for some people, isn't easy to relate to' (Stuart from England, 30, Dubrovnik 07.10.2018). Malte, who has been on an extensive Game of Thrones road trip across Northern Ireland with his partner, described how fandom is a prerequisite to fully grasp the meaning of the filming locations:

Every ruin has its charm, it is always exciting to see remnants of past centuries. But if you can link it specifically to the series, that's the appeal. Only a fan can really understand that though. (Malte from Germany, 22, Inch Abbey 22.06.2018)

Fans have been described as thriving in such liminalities because they allow them to enter and move through diegetic spaces and playfully transgress the boundaries between reality and fantasy to live out their fandom in real life (M. Beattie, 2016). Filming locations are thus becoming portals into those worlds and result often in quite emotional journeys. During a break in the Direwolves Tour, Lisa could almost not contain her excitement when being asked about her experience so far:

Meeting the direwolves! And obviously the locations as well which just completely adds to the whole experience and… Direwolves obviously! – And to be at Winterfell! It was actually quite emotional when I got here. (Lisa from England, Castle Ward 16.06.2018)

Jo, who participated in a private walking tour across Dubrovnik, described the multi-sensory experience of 'standing there and hearing the story, listening, looking around' the filming locations as 'quite magical'. For those moments she was indeed in King's Landing rather than Dubrovnik – an admission that made her instantly blush 'because it's not real', even though it absolutely felt real to her in the moment:

If you're a fan of the show and you're listening to somebody saying the stories of the particular place that you're standing in, then it's easy to feel like you're in King's Landing, even though, you know, it's not reality. You can be transported there. (Jo from England, 52, Dubrovnik 01.10.2018).

Similarly, James, an American visitor, saw the fantasy of Game of Thrones as a re-enchantment of an otherwise disenchanted 'reality':

I think it brings a little bit of fantasy into the real world. Being so enthralled with the show and just being so addicted to it. Catching the new episode when they come out, following the story, knowing all the characters and being able to step out of real life and step into that world, for me is pretty cool. To live a little bit of fantasy for a few days. (James from the USA, 32, Dubrovnik 26.09.2018)

Thus, Game of Thrones has not only created an emotional connection between its filming locations and its viewers. Where Baudrillard saw the secularisation of history through

media (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 48), media is capable to re-enchant and create new, exciting perceptions, thus elevating the act of travelling to places affiliated with the imaginary worlds like Game of Thrones into almost spiritual spheres (cf. J. Holloway, 2010).

7.2.2. On a pilgrimage to Westeros

Visiting such liminal spaces shares attributes with religious pilgrimages, which often entail a 'release from mundane structures' of daily life, a shared sense of community, specific dress and behaviour, 'ritualized enactment of correspondences between religious para-digms and shared human experiences' and 'movement from a mundane centre to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an axis mundi of his faith' (cf. Thomassen, 2012; Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 34). It has been long acknowledged within tourism and heritage research that modern mass-tourism is a secular successor of religious pilgrimage that 'involves a considerable degree of ritual behaviour', particularly in heritage contexts (Urry & Larsen, 2011, pp. 5–6; Adler, 1989; Franklin, 2003). Heritage and tourist sites have been gradually 'sacralised' through interpretative activities and formalised behaviours such as the above-described performances (E. Cohen, 1985, p. 26; Lowenthal, 1998; MacCannell, 1976, pp. 44–45). Like religious pilgrimage, the act of visiting heritage sites is both self- and place-authenticating (H. Silverman, 2015, p. 81). Therefore, it is not a coincidence, that processes of diegetic tourism have also been compared with religious pilgrimage (e.g. Couldry, 2005; Goh, 2014; Reijnders, 2010; Tzanelli, 2014). In his work on television set tourism, Couldry (2005, p. 72) defines 'media pilgrimage' as 'both [a] real journey across space, and an acting out in space of the constructed "distance" between "ordinary world" and "media world"' in which 'media pilgrims' are in the search for the reality of the media product. All these descriptions can also be observed within the fan community and their on-site practices when travelling to Game of Thrones filming locations to find the 'real Westeros'.

Incidentally, this parallel to pilgrimage has also been drawn on numerous occasions when speaking with local tour guides who describe the experience of their guests almost as a religious epiphany and for whom Game of Thrones has indeed become, as already MacCannell (1973, p. 589) postulated about tourism, a 'modern surrogate for religion'. Indeed, religious analogies have been used several times by informants. For Anne-Femica, a local tour guide in Dubrovnik, Game of Thrones is 'like a new religion' for fans and going on a 'Game of Thrones tour is like heaven for them' (Anne-Femica from Croatia,

Dubrovnik 23.09.2018). Drawing a direct link between Dubrovnik as a site of pilgrimage due to the 200 relics housed in the city's cathedral and Game of Thrones fandom, she concludes that 'now, instead of relics, they come for Game of Thrones'. Similarly, Ana, who works in one of Dubrovnik's many Game of Thrones merchandise shops, dubbed Dubrovnik the 'Mecca for Game of Thrones fans' (Ana from Croatia, Dubrovnik 10.10.2018), a description also used by Javi for Osuna for housing the first permanent Game of Thrones exhibition (Javier, Seville 16.06.2019). Helen agrees with these assessments of Dubrovnik being a particularly special place, not only for her, but the Game of Thrones fan community as a whole:

> Because King's Landing, I think, is the key to the whole story, isn't it? Most of the stories happened in King's Landing. So, King's landing is most important in this series. I think everybody thinks so. So, we love to come here to see what the real King's Landing is like! (Helen from China, Dubrovnik 03.10.2018)

It is indicative that Helen is switching from first person singular to first person plural, emphasising the communal experience of these places as a collective 'we'. While no one I encountered drew direct parallels to important pilgrimage centres, Castle Ward's almost spiritual status has been similarly highlighted by several informants, particularly those operating within the tourism industry:

> Castle Ward is such a focal point, because this is the birthplace of Game of Thrones. This is where it all started (General Manager Winterfell Tours, Castle Ward 30.06.2018)

Even though only utilised for the first season, Castle Ward has become Winterfell and thus the epicentre of Game of Thrones' imagination, not only in Northern Ireland but across all locations, remaining an important focal point for the fan community to come together, as illustrated by the countless tours, activities and even annual fan festival and visits from the author himself. While in religious travels one might seek out places associated with the myth of a saint's presence and workings, Game of Thrones fans try to find the aura of the

now missing CGI and the characters. In one instance, an informant even reported a *montjoie*-like[13] moment:

On the bus when we saw Dubrovnik, I did shout 'King's Landing!' quite loudly. (Joshua from England, Dubrovnik 05.10.2018)

While there have been countless informants who had visited several countries to almost religiously track down every single filming location, nowhere does the parallel to a pilgrimage become more apparent than when examining the sheer determination of a Texan tourist who made it his mission to complete the 'Journey of Doors' in Northern Ireland and fill his passport with all ten stamps (fig. 7.1), as reported by the manager of the 'Blake of the Hollows', the pub in Enniskillen that houses the fourth of the ten wooden doors (see Chapter 4):

I had one guy from Texas [who] got onto the Bus 261 in Belfast down here to get his book stamped. One pint of beer and back onto the bus to Belfast. That's a roundtrip of five hours, just to get a stamp. (Mark, pub manager, Enniskillen 20.06.2018)

Figure 7.1: My completed 'Journey of Doors' passport, a pop-cultural pilgrim's pass.

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[13] A *montjoie* (*mons gaudii*, Mount Joy) is commonly referred to 'the hill from which the first view of a holy place is made' and 'traditionally marks the emotional high point of a pilgrimage' (Rudolph, 2009, p. 40; Slater, 2014, p. 216).

Similarly, to a non-religious person probably struggling to fully grasp religious epiphanies, it can be quite difficult to understand the emotional resonance experienced by fans of Game of Thrones. This lack of understanding has been reflected in the bemusement and bewilderment of various bystanders and interviewees when commenting on the numerous manifestations in performance and material culture of this phenomenon they have been witnessing but are not feeling part of. Kevin Kearney, a local newsagent turned Game of Thrones merchandise seller in Strangford, reports how many locals in County Down react to the daily fan-processions:

> [Locals] look at the crowds wandering around in their cloaks and they are going 'are they alright in their head?' [laughs]. I think that there is a mixture of sort of bemusement and intrigue, you know, they do find it interesting that people should choose to come here to see Game of Thrones. (Kevin Kearney, newsagent, 56, Strangford 18.06.2018)

Equally, the identity of these imaginary places is so etched onto the minds of some of those 'Game of Thrones pilgrims' that they themselves are baffled when reactions deviate from what they expect when visiting one of their 'sacred places'. A group of Indian tourists were ecstatic when realising that they just discovered the 'House of the Undying' on top of Dubrovnik's city walls and could not believe when another person just shrugged and dismissively replied with 'whatever you say' when they tried to point out the importance of this tower. Truly, they expected, everybody *must* know what this place meant and rejoice in the same way they did! But, as Malte's comments above illustrate, 'only a fan can really understand' the aura that is emitted from Game of Thrones filming locations and the associated attractions and practices. Although, as we will see later in this chapter, there have been countless reports of not only those who have been 'converted' to the fandom of Game of Thrones after accompanying (others might say being dragged by) a loved one to a site:

> The amount of people who leave my busses who say 'You know what, I never watched the show. She watched or he watched it, or they watched it. I'm going to watch it now.' – And I love that. I love spreading the love of Game of Thrones. I love including people into it, you know. The more fans I convert, the better for all of us. (Richard, Bangor 07.05.2019)

While in Jerusalem, Christian pilgrims walk down the Via Dolorosa holding crosses, Game of Thrones pilgrims hold up Stark banners at Inch Abbey (fig. 7.2); like travellers along the trail to Santiago de Compostela, Game of Thrones fans will collect stamps at each of the wooden doors, as evidence of their pilgrimage; instead of touching holy relics, one will put their hands on the Khaleesi's horseshoe; others may say prayers, Game of Thrones fans will utter catchphrases and call 'Shame! Shame! Shame!' while retracing the steps of Queen Cersei's Walk of Atonement; instead of purchasing icons of their chosen saints, one buys a t-shirt with the sigil of their favourite house.

Figure 7.2: Processions of pilgrims. Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem (top); Inch Abbey/Robb Stark's Encampment in Northern Ireland (bottom).

7.3.Coming Home to Westeros: Transnational Communities and Hyper-Traditions

> When an individual enters an imaginary realm, he typically finds himself in a place where he is not alone. (Caughey, 1984, pp. 28–29)

As with pilgrimages, travelling to Game of Thrones sites and engaging in site-specific activities is not only meant for one's own personal enrichment but also for public display and shows a strong communal component (cf. Turner & Turner, 1978). Like pilgrims, Game of Thrones fans are likeminded people who go on meaningful journeys to sites that hold special meaning to them, have specific rituals and objects tied to those places and can sense layers that are not physically present. The participatory and repetitive nature of these rituals creates a communal dynamic, as bystanders are recognising and reacting to the performances and often join in — people who had never seen each other before exactly knew what is being done at this very spot and why. More than once, I would observe that someone would ask another tourist – which sometimes meant me – to take *the* picture of them at specific location, be it someone's back staring down the Jesuit Steps, staring at the horizon at Kolorina Bay or looking up Minčeta Tower before walking around it like Daenerys. There was a silent understanding what picture they meant, what the intention was and what frame they are aiming for.

7.3.1. 'Finding your own kind' – Transnational Imagination Communities

Game of Thrones performances repeated on-site and disseminated on-line have become part of the visitors' habitus of the site but also acts as a connective tissue between fans across the world. Visitors of Game of Thrones filming locations (sub)consciously know that they ought to behave in a specific manner at those specific sites and that acting accordingly will grant them privileged status among peers or avoid the negative effect of losing pop-cultural and digital capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Chapter 6). Other studies on diegetic tourism have already highlighted the felt sense of comradeship of participants on themed tours to filming locations and the importance of shared fandom for the travel experience (Buchmann et al., 2010; Reijnders, 2011a; Roesch, 2009). Responses from numerous informants across fieldwork locations confirm the significance of this shared sense of community with those they know, or even only assume, to have travelled to the filming locations for the same purpose as they have. Anne-Femica sees Game of Thrones fans as a 'family' who are the 'same people, the same group, with the same passion'

(Dubrovnik 23.09.2018). Megan points out that travelling across these imaginary landscapes with others 'makes you realise how popular it is and you want to feel like you are part of what everyone else is doing […]. You just feel like you are not the only one […] You see so many people you share this with' (Megan from England, Castle Ward 16.06.2018), which her two fellow tour participants enthusiastically confirmed. Saskia and Malte, who have encountered numerous other likeminded travellers across several sites, have been amazed to see people from all over the world sharing their passion and how it brought people from around the globe together for one specific reason:

> **Malte**: There have been no reservations to engage with others because everyone is
> here for the same reason. That means that there are also no linguistic barriers. We all
> agree on all those impressions and stories from the series that we shared and all those
> spots we have visited. It is great, yes!
> **Saskia**: To see that people from different countries still all want to see the same places
> and share the same interest for the series. I know we had people from LA, Australia
> and Taiwan in the group.
> **Malte**: There were also some from Italy and China. And everyone just comes
> together! Everyone comes together to see this. That is a great thing!
> (Malte and Saskia from Germany, Inch Abbey 22.06.2018)

Similarly, Madhav and Ashit, two travellers from India, claimed how amazing it was to be able to 'find some of [their] own kind', who 'came for the same purpose' to Dubrovnik as they did and with whom '[they] feel like [they] are connected' (Madhav and Ashit from India, Dubrovnik 05.10.2018). Giada, a young Italian woman, who has travelled to Game of Thrones locations across several countries with a friend, felt that there are almost primordial features one can sense in likeminded travellers:

> I mean, you clearly recognise people that are here for the same reason as you, because they
> all have the same face! (Giada from Italy, Dubrovnik 19.10.2018)

Sometimes, this mutual feeling of a deeper connection goes beyond mere silent recognition or spontaneous participation in chanting catchphrases but can even lead to impromptu formations of new fellowships. Gytha reported of two previously unfamiliar fans who found each other in Dubrovnik, one dressed-up as Daenerys Targaryen, one as Jon Snow, who decided to continue their journey across Croatian Game of Thrones locations together (Gytha, Split 14.09.2019). Malte and Saskia have encountered not only fellow fans across

several sites who they would spend time with (including myself, as we would grab a drink after our interview and stayed in contact to this day) but also ended up following a guided tour several times across the same day, as they were following the same path. At Inch Abbey, where I met them, they would therefore be offered to join the tour in their staging of the acclamation of King Robb Stark even though they were not paying participants (fig. 7.3).

Figure 7.3: Malte and Saskia (right) are joining their fellow fans at Inch Abbey.

The imaginary realm of Westeros seemingly became a space where people, who have never met each other, come together, project meaning onto it and share a common identity, no matter the nationality, race or creed. The similarities between Anderson's 'imagined communities' (1983) and Jenkins' definition of fandom (Jenkins, 2006, 2012) are quite striking, as both describe a shared sense of 'who are we'. According to Anderson, the 'nation' is an 'imagined political community […] composed of individuals who will never encounter all the other members of the nation but nevertheless believe they share something with them', share a 'deep horizontal comradeship' but 'otherwise have little in common' (1983, pp. 6–7). On the other hand, fans are 'sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 41). Finding one's own kind, as Madhav put it, does not refer to fellow Indians, Germans, Italians or Brits but to those who consume the same media, travelling to, utilising and experiencing certain spaces in a specific way while reproducing signifiers for others to recognise and interact with. Thus, Game of Thrones filming locations become the territorialised expression where this transnational imagined community of fans comes together and communicates with its own unique invented

traditions and places of importance. The act of travelling itself territorialised the imagination, gave it a tangible home and anchored it in certain spaces, thus creating a transnational space with monuments, visual language, geographical frame of reference, and ultimately, a new imaginary realm on the soil of real-life nation states. Thereby, visiting those sites of importance for Game of Thrones is not dissimilar to the role of domestic tourism which has long been seen as a means to foster national identities and belonging.

7.3.2. Tourism and Identity

According to Light (2012, p. 13) 'there is no better way to appreciate the significance of a national place than by travelling to it'. Tourism, in its essence, is not only a highly profitable industry, but also a tool to foster, reiterate and export national narratives domestically and abroad. From the inception of mass-tourism in the 19th centuries to this very day, tourism remained an important means of nation-building, promoting, reproducing and renewing national identities and foster patriotism and allegiance to one's home country (Franklin, 2003). There have been countless studies examining the relationship between domestic tourism and the making of national identity, such as Croatia (Goulding & Domic, 2009), England (Palmer, 2005), Scotland (Edensor, 2002), Sweden (Löfgren, 2001), Korea (Park, 2010), China (Scott et al., 2011) or Indonesia (Adams, 1998). These mechanisms could be observed during the current COVID-19 pandemic in which many governments promoted 'holiday at home' not only as allegedly 'safe' (thus, simultaneously painting 'the abroad' as potentially unsafe) but an inherently patriotic act to strengthen the struggling economy, often accompanied by imagery that advertised the national narrative to its citizens (cf. Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). Tourism is 'one of the defining activities of the modern world, shaping the ways in which one relates to and understands self and other, nation and nationness' (Palmer, 2005, p. 8). Thereby, heritage, both tangible and intangible, takes a crucial role in this process as it has taken on the character of secular sanctuaries of the nation, its identity and narrative. Sites of 'national significance', such as monuments, statues, landscapes and battlefields, and 'traditions', such as music, costume and folklore, are created, selected and presented as *lieux de mémoire* to offer citizens an opportunity to discover, 'perform' and subsequently confirm their national identity and strengthen the connection between oneself and the nation, thus, creating a symbolic landscape as a distinctive home place in which heritage represents dominant beliefs, ethnicities and discourses (Edensor, 2002; B. Graham et al., 2000;

Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Koshar, 1998; Nora, 1989; A. D. Smith, 1989). Therefore, according to Nuryanti (1996, p. 254), heritage sites, while usually attracting a mix of domestic and international visitors, are supposedly more meaningful to domestic tourists due to their identification with the history and culture of the places. However, this fails to understand, that 'emotional and cultural links to heritage that people may hold are not *necessarily* or only determined by geographical proximity', as L. Smith (2006, p. 74) suggests, questioning if a binary differentiation between 'domestic' and 'international' visitor is an adequate qualifier in understanding the numerous and complex ways in which different people and interest groups can identify themselves with heritage sites or spaces they encounter (cf. Orr, 2018).

It has been long acknowledged that in a world where national and religious narratives have begun to crumble away and globalisation and shared media is dissolving space and fragmenting identities, new communities of interest groups that are constructing their own identities and traditions on a transnational scale are emerging (Bhabha, 1990; B. Graham et al., 2000; cf. Harvey, 1989). Although these developments have been accompanied by a societal backlash and a resurgence of nationalist and protectionist tendencies, particularly over the last decade, something Harvey (1989) already anticipated when writing about these processes, certain aspects of globalisation and interconnectedness of media and their societal impacts cannot be reversed. In his 'Theory of the Novel', the philosopher Georg Lukács described the loss of a metaphysical homeland in modernity resulted in a 'transcendental homelessness' (Lukács, 1920). This loss can only be expressed by the fiction of epics – in Lukács' theory the novel, which, according to him, is an expression of 'transcendental homelessness' like none other (ibid. 1920, p. 32). Similarly, Szakolcai (2016) defined modernity as a form of 'permanent liminality' in which traditional boundaries are broken down and a loss of being-at-home became the new normality. Subsequently, those who have found themselves transcendentally homeless through the dissolution of the old roots and identities, have found new homes in post-modernity, such as in the global collective narratives we consume through various forms of mass-media and fan culture (cf. Jenkins, 2006, 2018; Nymoen & Schmitt, 2021). Through wearing particular items of clothing, repeating certain verbal, visual and performative vocabulary and partaking in certain rituals to disclose one's identity to others, one is able to express belonging to these narratives and communities. Even a banal action such as walking down

the street wearing a Game of Thrones shirt, is an act in which one reveals oneself as a member of this transnational fan community (cf. Billig, 1995).

Therefore, pop-culture, and thus, Game of Thrones are more than just entertainment but a new identity offer and can act as a 'coming home space' to the transcendentally homeless. However, while this community itself is deterritorialised, it does not suggest that physical places become irrelevant. Places evoke a 'sense of belonging' and 'provide an anchor of shared experiences between people and continuity over time' (Crang, 2013, pp. 102–103). Places such as Game of Thrones filming locations 'stand for a set of cultural characteristics' that through 'continued repetition of particular sorts of behaviour' – such as the on-site performances documented at various filming locations – 'binds people and places together' (ibid.). The experience of a Game of Thrones fan is therefore not unlike that of the above-described domestic, national tourist, who brings their own cultural knowledge and identity with them to be confirmed and even further fostered. The heritage sites at the filming locations are the physical embodiments of imagination. They bear value because of the fictional narratives, events and characters seen on screen. Like memories, fantasies constantly seek confirmation from physical experiences (Malpas, 1999). Through those heritage sites and associated performances, Game of Thrones fans have their own *lieux de memoire*, or, as Reijnders (Reijnders, 2011a, p. 14; cf. Nora, 1989) calls them, 'places of imagination', as 'memory […] is nothing more, or less, than

Figure 7.4: 'Belfast – Home of Thrones' t-shirt, available at the 'Visit Belfast' tourist information centre.

the imagination of an event from the past', which can act as a foundation on which they can build and sustain their fictional realm in the real world. However, while national identity is typically performed and fostered 'at home' through domestic tourism, those who feel like they belong into the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones must go abroad to 'come home'. It is not a coincidence that both New Zealand and Northern Ireland market

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themselves as 'Home of Middle-earth' (Carl et al., 2007) and 'Home of Thrones' (Judith Webb, Head of Screen Tourism NI, Belfast 17.09.2018) respectively to attract its diasporic fan community (fig. 7.4). Visiting those fantastical sites of Winterfell and King's Landing provides the possibility to become, even if it is for just one day, a citizen of Westeros.

7.3.3. Invented Hyper-traditions

Game of Thrones' fan community is not dissimilar to other diaspora communities that have to go abroad to come home. Nowhere has this sense of homecoming felt more apparent than at gatherings of fans at or in close proximity to filming locations. When attending the 'Winterfell Festival' at Castle Ward or even the academic conference 'Game of Thrones – A View From the Humanities' in Seville, one is reminded of Scottish Highland gatherings where people, who have oftentimes been centuries and thousands of kilometres detached from Scotland, are finally 'returning back' to their imagined native homeland (Basu, 2006). Similar to the Scottish diaspora who is showing up in the now considered 'traditional' tartan of the Highland Clan they are descendants of (Basu, 2006; cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), Game of Thrones fans will appear in apparel that showcases their allegiance to one of the Great Houses of Westeros, or even arrive in clothing and costumes they deem to be authentic representations the Westerosi fashion. There is an instant feeling of belonging and community when walking among other attendees who might be from somewhere else but can only 'authentically' live out their lives as Game of Thrones fans abroad with other likeminded individuals. Sometimes, the finding of one's own roots and living out their fandom has even become intertwined. In Northern Ireland several tourists from the anglophone world have been on a quest to both find the ancestral home of House Stark as well as their own (e.g. Julia, 34, Australia, Dark Hedges 24.06.2018).

The creation of such elaborate imagined communities and coming home spaces abroad also raises the question if 'visitor' might be the appropriate term to use for those engaging in Game of Thrones activities and are 'coming home' to this realm. Indeed, Smith (2006, p. 34) argues that using this term 'facilitates the construction of passivity and disconnection', rather than seeing them as stakeholders, or, as she calls them, 'heritage users'. They are not merely 'passing through' (ibid., p. 72), they live, breath, feel the world of Game of Thrones around them and utilise the space in a way meaningful to them while simultaneously infusing them with meaning themselves. Therefore, Game of Thrones fans

who are travelling to filming locations do not only form an imagined community but more specifically a 'heritage community' that is connected through shared heritage and cultural practices. 'Heritage communities', as defined by the *Council of Europe Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, often just called *Faro Convention* (Council of Europe, 2005, Article 2), 'consist of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations', while heritage is being described as 'a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, *independently of ownership* [my emphasis], as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions'. These definitions suggest that it requires neither cultural nor historical ties to a specific heritage to be able to consider oneself part of a heritage community, only a desire to utilise, disseminate and value certain aspects, all of which Game of Thrones fans are pursuing through their on-site performances.

Therefore, new cultural practices and heritages, contrary to common beliefs, do not require a 'deep past' but can be invented and re-invented, both purposefully or unintentionally, and become meaningful almost instantly (cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Silverman (2015, p. 75) pointed out that the 1966 invented African American celebration of Kwanzaa is no less authentic for its community than the centuries-old pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela for countless Catholics and fulfils the criteria of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003) such as being created and transmitted by a community and provides them with a sense of identity, memory and continuity. Similarly, the Inti Raymi celebration in Cuzco, Peru, is an Inca inspired invented tradition since 1944 yet plays an important role among local population, tourists and in national tourism policy (H. Silverman, 2013, 2015). How quickly something portrayed in pop-culture can turn into tradition, can be illustrated by the carnivalesque *Día de Los Muertos Parade* in Mexico City, which, ever since it has been invented by the 2015 James Bond film *Spectre*, has since become a permanent part of the annual cultural calendar (Agren, 2019). Especially in times where traditional authorities such a state, church or family have lost their significance and influence due to a rapid progression of globalisation, previous notions of heritage have become increasingly untenable, as AlSayyad (2006, p. 10) describes with his concept of 'hyper-tradition':

> [Globalization] has intensified the process of de-linking identity and place, and, by extension, intensified the de-territorialization of tradition. This process has challenged

the idea of tradition as an authentic expression of a geographically specific, culturally homogeneous and coherent group of people. […] Perhaps as a response to the perceived 'end of tradition' or 'loss of heritage,' hyper-traditions emerge in part as references to histories that did not happen, or practices de-linked from the culture and locations from which they were assumed to have originated [and] raise fundamental questions about subjectivity in a globalised world.

Even though many Austrians would disagree, but *Sound of Music* fans from across the world who are coming to Salzburg to chant and dance around the famous gazebo for now almost sixty years might have become an authentic expression of Austrian heritage and an example of a newly invented, transnational hyper-tradition made from fusing local landscape with global pop-culture in which a heterogenous group of people find themselves united in expressing their appreciation of this synergy (cf. Graml, 2004; Roesch, 2009). Similarly, yet even further rooted in global media and imagination, *Lord of the Rings* fans from all over the globe have sought out and performed the imaginary landscape of Middle-earth in New Zealand since the early 2000s, while the fantasy of Game of Thrones has been inscribed into the landscape of its filming locations for over a decade. In both cases, even with the lukewarm reception of The Hobbit trilogy and Game of Thrones' finale by fans, the interest remains, to utilise the motto of Game of Thrones' House Martell, 'unbend, unbowed, unbroken' (see Chapter 9). Across these imaginary geographies' numerous newly invented hyper-traditions of performing the fiction within the landscape, such as tracking down locations and participating in guided and themed tours, the restaging of scenes and their photographic documentation and dissemination, have been established by both fans and private businesses. While having not originated from these locations, having no historical or cultural ties and performed mainly by non-locals, those practices are now closely connected to these places and for many have become an authentic way of experiencing and performing these heritage landscapes. So much so, that these new hyper-traditions and accompanying signifiers became omnipresent and culturally engrained into those landscapes that they turned into site-defining features, and even those who have never seen a single episode would start engaging with and even participating in these performances and fan-rituals out of their own volition.

7.4. When in Westeros, do as the Westerosi do: From Fan Performance to Spatial Meme

Vignette 7.1: Observing traditional Westerosi rites.

If one visits the small historic fishing harbour Ballintoy on Northern Ireland's Antrim Coast, one can witness a quite peculiar display: Iron Islanders, or Ironborn as they call themselves, from around the globe return to their ancestral home in Westeros, wearing their traditional garment and celebrate their shared heritage on this beach where Theon and Euron Greyjoy have been baptised under the eyes of the Drowned God. At the height of this ceremony, like a battle cry, they shout the sacred words, 'What is dead, may never die!'

Figure 7.5: Tourists recording the traditional Ironborn gathering at Ballintoy Harbour photographically.

This spectacle has become a daily occurrence and intrinsic part of this place's intangible heritage for now almost a decade. Every day it is observed by other visitors in a blend of wonder, bemusement and even envy while documenting this now traditional ritual photographically (fig. 7.5). Capturing these moments, bringing them back home and sharing them on social media, they are fusing Northern Irish landscape with Westerosi traditions. They turn from observers into actors themselves, confirming and reinforcing the creation of this diegetic space made of fantasy and reality. In absolute accordance with

Tourism NI's homonymous marketing campaign, Northern Ireland has truly become 'Game of Thrones Territory'.

All the above of the present and the previous chapters has been explicitly written about those who identify themselves as part of a Game of Thrones fan community and expressed deep, meaningful relationships with both the imaginary realm and other fans alike. However, the cultural and performative manifestations of Game of Thrones do not operate in a vacuum and have become an intrinsic part of the cultural landscapes which they have infuse with countless signifiers. As described, these signifiers became so omnipresent and engrained in the landscapes surrounding the filming locations, that they have become significant features even for those who have no emotional investment and have never seen the series. Due to Game of Thrones being a global mass-phenomenon, many who are unfamiliar with the series are still able to recognise and read the landscape and signifiers accordingly. Oftentimes, people, even though clearly not fans of the series, are correctly identifying not only that certain performances and places are Game of Thrones related but indeed can even attribute them to particularly (in)famous scenes and characters, illustrating how widely known the iconography and the place-myths are. Even engaging more 'passively' by 'just' taking photographs of various tangible and intangible occurrences have lasting impacts, as described by Richard, who confirmed that situations like that have become a common occurrence when showing him the above photograph:

> I love that. I guess that's part of the inclusivity of it. I always say to the guys [the guests] as well, 'Look, embrace this! All these people taking your photograph, these are Americans, Europeans and further afield who are doing "the Ireland trip". And in 20 years' time, when they're boring the relatives with their slideshow of the trip to Ireland 20 years ago, they're going to get to that photograph, and go "Look at these lunatics that we met in Ballintoy! How cool is that?" And all their friends are going to go "Wow, you got to see that? That's brilliant!"' So, I say, 'Look, you're going to be a star forever in some family circles!' [looking at the photograph again] That's class! (Richard, Bangor 07.05.2019)

There are numerous reasons why those who are not fans want to engage with Game of Thrones related activities. There is a certain appeal and curiosity in this 'out-of-the-ordinary' phenomenon which encourages further engagement with it. Ingrid and her husband were fascinated by the group of dressed-up fans posing on the beach as Ironborn

which we observed together during our interview. As quite passionate Pokémon Go players, they both could understand the appeal, given that they 'really like this kind of fan communities, having the same interests and identifying oneself with it' (Ingrid from Germany, 49, Ballintoy 01.07.2018). They would 'love to join immediately!' and expressed interest in watching an episode of Game of Thrones as soon as they arrived at their hotel. Similarly, a group of senior citizens, who were also captivated by the tour and debated whether this had anything to do with 'the Game of Thrones', would approach one of the dressed-up tour participants and ask if he could have a closer look at the sword he was wielding (fig. 7.6).

Figure 7.6: Non-Game of Thrones fans engaging with Game of Thrones fans.

However, apart from such almost coincidental, observational engagements with Game of Thrones within the landscape, there are countless travellers who have not seen a single episode yet very actively, often even enthusiastically, engage with the imaginary realm, specifically travelling to filming locations, participating in tours and re-enacting scenes, as the following section will illustrate.

7.4.1. 'I've never seen Game of Thrones but…'

First and foremost, there are countless people who are, to quote a few of my informants, 'dragged' there by their Game of Thrones-loving partners. One informant's clearly bemused wife (Tourist 44 from Germany, Castle Ward 30.06.2018) recalled that tracking down Game of Thrones locations with her husband reminded her of their journey through New Zealand where their son wanted to see 'some forests where some horses galloped through at some point' because of *The Lord of the Rings*. However, accompanying a fan has a significant impact in how the heritage is experienced and consumed. For instance, because Darren not only accompanied his wife Jo on a Game of Thrones tour through Dubrovnik but had been the one who booked it, the fictional has become an integral part of his perception of the space:

> So, I would, even though I've never seen it – the first time I've seen the Red Keep was in photos [screenshots] today – refer to the St Lawrence, the fort, as the Red Keep, because that's how I've researched it. I didn't research Dubrovnik, I researched Game of Thrones and the tours of Game of Thrones. (Darren from England, Dubrovnik 01.10.2018)

Even though he has not seen any episode before, during the tour Darren demanded that Jo had to pose for the Walk of Shame because friends back home told him to look out for this particular spot. He knew, even before participating in the tour, what this place was and what he ought to do there. Similarly, Gytha reported of a tour participant 'who was not a fan of Game of Thrones, [but] he forced his own wife to lay down at the place where Barristan was killed, play dead. […] He was messaging, live-chatting, sending pictures' (Gytha, Split 14.09.2019). A man from Germany offered a quite prosaic explanation why he was eager to visit 'Winterfell' and take photos of himself in front of it:

> I want to say that I have been where they filmed Game of Thrones [laughs]. Particularly to my son who didn't want to come with us. He is 20 and doesn't want to go on holiday with his parents anymore. But this would have interested him and that's why I want to rub it in. That's certainly part of the motivation [laughs] (Tourist 44 from Germany, Castle Ward 30.06.2018)

'Bragging rights' has been an expression used multiple times across numerous sites and played a significant part of much of the non-fan engagement. The subheading above, of

which I have heard countless variations, is indicative of how often non-fans are engaging in what would usually be described as 'fannish behaviours' (see Chapters 5 and 6). As illustrated in previous chapters, these practices, although initiated through fans who wanted to immerse themselves into the fantasy of the imaginary world, have become iconic motifs attached to specific spaces they have been produced in through their photographic and digital repetition and replication on social media. Even if Game of Thrones itself has no intrinsic emotional value for oneself, they know of the popularity of the spatial practices, the iconography, and how they bear significance in the pop-cultural discourse and that they generate interest and engagement on social media. How culturally engrained Game of Thrones has become around its filming locations and how it impacts both performances and experiences of filming locations is best illustrated in an encounter with Jessica from Australia.

Figure 7.7: Response Photo-Questionnaire #8: '[These] are photos I tried to recreate from the Game of Thrones TV show, this was one of the many things I aimed to do while there, as I'd seen so many others do it, but it was now my chance. Although never seeing an episode it was great to compare the scenes and know that I was once in the exact place it was once filmed, and also great to show friends who had seen the show.' (Photos and comment: Jessica Langguth 24.05.2019).

She had never seen a single episode of Game of Thrones and was not planning on doing so in the future, but was determined to visit every location she could find in Dubrovnik and accurately re-enact all scenes that she had seen on social media (fig. 7.7):

> I only did it because I've seen many other people [online] recreate the exact same photos. […] I've never seen Game of Thrones. But I know that I've got friends that will see these exact same photos. And they'll be so excited for it, and they will be jealous. (Jessica from Australia, 21, Dubrovnik 08.10.2018)

On numerous occasions, I overheard conversations or conducted interviews in which visitors had mentioned that they would take a photograph of something Game of Thrones related or themselves at a filming location for either friends, colleagues or children at home. Particularly the Iron Throne, a seat so iconic that even those only vaguely familiar would know of its significance was a much-desired object to be photographed on for those left back home, whether it was located in the Game of Thrones exhibition on Lokrum Island or in one of the Iron Thrones in merchandise shops found in Split or Dubrovnik:

> Sometimes, when I have a historical tour, I also tell them that at the end we can go to the Iron Throne […] And even when they're not fans, they have friends who are fans of Game of Thrones. So, I always tell them, 'Okay, if you want to make them jealous, let's go to that place, you take a picture and share it with them!' […] And I tell them, 'At least let me show you where some important locations were. So, take a picture and just tell your friends that you were here, and you will see how jealous they will be!' […] And in the end, they say, that they might start watching Game of Thrones. Again, you have new people who discover the Game of Thrones just because they're on location. (Gytha, Split 14.09.2019)

Particularly the last sentence of Gytha's comment illustrates the hermeneutic circle in which the phenomena created by the series reproduce and reinforce each other. Similarly, in Northern Ireland the high engagement of non-fans with Game of Thrones can be attributed to the fact that its locations and imagery is front and centre in the destination marketing strategy by Tourism NI which never fails to mention Northern Ireland being 'Game of Thrones Territory' (see Chapters 4 and 6). For example, the tourist information office at Portaferry, as instructed by Tourism NI headquarters, recommends Game of Thrones related attractions as the highlight of County Down by default, something I can confirm from my own experience as well as being pointed out by a visitor at Castle Ward:

In the tourist information, they said that everything interesting here is connected to Game of Thrones. […] I've already seen the doors that are connected with the sixth season of Game of Thrones, one is in Portaferry, and one is in Strangford. […] I collected the stamps [for the Journey of Doors passport]. And now I'm here because it's worth seeing. But honestly, I am not a fan of Game of Thrones. I haven't seen any episodes. I just know it's very popular and, in each season, a very important character dies [laughs]. (Agata from Poland, Castle Ward 21.06.2018)

Due to the growing popularity of both the series and its iconography, and the subsequent social (media) and (pop-)cultural capital that can be acquired by reproducing the same imagery of the filming locations, Game of Thrones performances became part of the usual habitus of those sites. Game of Thrones, both as a television programme and a spatial practice became a pop-cultural perpetuum mobile that is reiterating itself through a cross-media feedback loop (see Chapters 1 and 5). While Game of Thrones' imaginary world has provided the initial impetus, these bodily and visual performances became so substantially rooted in these landscapes and the acknowledged habitus through continuous repetition and imitation, watching Game of Thrones or being a fan can ultimately be taken out of the equation. They became 'spatial memes'.

7.4.2. Spatial Memes

These location specific activities referencing Game of Thrones in a specific manner and characterised by strong formulaic performances and repetition focussing on visual, mainly photographic, reproduction are something that can be described as 'spatial memes'. One of the most famous of such spatial memes is the Leaning Tower of Pisa where countless tourists try to frame themselves in a photograph as if they were preventing the tower from toppling, a practice so common that photographing people engaging in it became a spatial meme itself (fig. 7.8). While nowadays mainly associated with (more or less) funny, viral imagery on the internet, the concept of 'memes' has been originally described by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins as the cultural equivalent of genes and 'units of cultural transmission' that 'propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation' (Dawkins, 1976, p. 206). As Dawkins described, '[t]he phenotypic effects of a meme may be in the form of words, music, visual images, styles of clothes, facial or hand gestures' (Dawkins, 1982, p. 109) or, in the case of the present study, places and spaces. Spatial memes, particularly in

the tourism context are not a novelty but have a long tradition, although, as previously indicated in Chapter 6, they have become more prevalent due to the increased speed and immediacy of modern communication technology and social media that reward repetition of certain motives through the currency of engagement.

Figure 7.8: Meme-ception – Memifying spatial memes;
https://www.reddit.com/r/funny/comments/yzirj/thriller/ (accessed 06.05.2022)

Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the repetition of Game of Thrones motives has become particularly popular. As one of the most successful televisions series of all time, with its memorable acoustic and visual iconography, it is a treasure trove for 'memification' and thus among 'the fittest cultural genes' in pop-culture to be absorbed into the general societal consciousness. Game of Thrones locations thus became spatial memes, specifically framed snapshots of the landscape in which certain performances referencing the series is continuously repeated and shared. They are ways of understanding space through communicating with visual references and citations. However, it is not necessary to have experienced or consumed the original source of the reference as the reference becomes is own entity which can be understood and communicated with others

by itself (cf. Baudrillard, 1994), as exemplified by the countless informants and anecdotes of tourists who have engaged in Game of Thrones specific performances without having seen a single episode of the series yet still possess detailed knowledge of the iconography and how to act within those spaces. Recognising, utilising and most importantly recreating these 'spatial memes' became desirable because it bestows social and (pop-)cultural capital in form of social media engagement (see above; see Chapter 6).

7.4.3. Game of Thrones – Just do it!

The connection of visual mass media and its impact on the bodily habitus of people has been known for a long time. In the late 1920s, anthropologist Marcel Mauss noticed that women in both New York and Paris had begun to walk with the same particular gait (Mauss, 1973, p. 72). After going to the cinema, he realised that this has been the way of walking portrayed in American films, illustrating that bodily performances on screen leave an imprint on the living realities of the viewers and their surrounding society on a transnational level. He called this phenomenon 'techniques of the body', describing it as 'the ways in which from society to society men [sic!] know how to use their bodies' (ibid., p. 70). In a similar fashion, certain bodily and other behaviours are now taught through television and social media, as exemplified by the present phenomenon. Even if many visitors do not have any emotional connection or affiliation with these liminal spaces, hyper-traditions and customs like most fans do, Game of Thrones is now not only part of the landscape but also how the landscape is performed. Re-enacting the Walk of Shame, staring at the horizon at Blackwater Bay or walking around the House of the Undying have therefore become a staple, if not the quintessential experience of Dubrovnik. Encountering dressed-up groups across County Down and County Antrim became a daily part of the heritage landscape for people to observe – or even partake. Sitting on the Iron Throne, visiting Game of Thrones exhibitions or collecting stamps of the Door of Thrones has become an authentic 'out-of-the-ordinary' experience of these heritage landscapes. It has become impossible to have the 'full experience' if one only engages with Northern Ireland, Croatia and Spain and omits what Westeros and Essos have to offer. How can one have a complete touristic experience if one had not seen at least some of the attractions associated with Game of Thrones, sat on the Iron Throne, re-enacted the Walk of Shame and posted a photo at one of those iconic locations on Instagram? Especially when not only everyone else seems to do that but even local sites and destination marketing organisations think that

Game of Thrones is *the* thing to do? All this has normalised the imaginary realm in the landscape making it almost impossible to distinguish its fantasy from the reality of the filming locations – even for those who are not 'formally' initiated through fandom. Game of Thrones, both as a series and a spatial practice, has become so commonly known and understood that even those who have not seen a single episode can correctly read and perform the imaginary landscapes of Game of Thrones. Even more so, knowing about these ways to engage with those heritage sites has become mandatory to 'be a good tourist' at those sites (cf. Crang, 2011, p. 210). Like the performance of culture and nation, performing the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones has entered the stage of banality, in which certain customs and behaviours are taken for granted and are reiterated unquestioned (cf. Billig, 1995). First 'sacralised' by a fan community that felt a deep emotional relationship with the imaginary world and their fellow likeminded travellers, it became virtually an inevitability that these spaces became 'desacralized' almost immediately by becoming a spatial meme. When visiting places like Dubrovnik, Castle Ward or Split, performing Game of Thrones became 'just what you do'.

7.5. Conclusion: The transnational heritage landscape of Game of Thrones

By looking at the impact of the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones on its filming locations, the thesis thus far illustrated how contemporary pop-culture can successfully emulate both territorialities and deep pasts onto landscape, (re-)invented and (re-)structuring heritage landscapes, establishing new communities that inhabit and engage with them in a novel way almost instantaneously. As it has been illustrated numerous times, heritage and identity are not fixed but fluid cultural processes, created and asserted through human action and embodied performance and practice (Coleman & Crang, 2002; Haldrup & Bærenholdt, 2015; L. Smith, 2006). However, especially when deep pasts of national narratives are elaborately constructed and fostered over centuries, the artifice of these identities become often unquestioned and the narratives accepted as facts (cf. Gellner, 1996), exemplified by an anecdote told by the local guide Paula:

> Richard Lionheart shipwreck[ed] on Lokrum Island, that's a legend. But everybody keeps saying [it] as a historical fact that he gave money […] for the cathedral. They say, 'Richard Lionheart gave money for our Cathedral.' […] So, it's not a myth anymore. (Paula, 24.09.2018 Dubrovnik)

Therefore, imaginary realms such as Westeros provide a unique opportunity to examine how with relative ease, and even without intent, an elaborate landscape of signifiers can establish itself, including inventing new traditions, forming new communities and heritages. The case of Game of Thrones has shown that nation-building and world-building can be almost indistinguishable. The plethora of fan performances and their adaptation by non-fans, as well as the marketing and economic use of Game of Thrones for tourism has made this realm, in true hyperreal fashion, more real than real for countless people (cf. Baudrillard, 1994). The territorialisation of Game of Thrones' diegetic heritage onto its filming locations and the highly ritualised nature of the showcased on-site performances create a transnational liminal heritage space in which Game of Thrones fans can find meaning, community and ultimately a 'coming home space' abroad in an increasingly deterritorialised global world in which personal and place identities are constructed and restructured through a shared media culture.

Although all the values, identities and heritages invented by the writers of Game of Thrones were imposed onto the filming location and fandom was fostered through marketing, there was no intention by the broadcaster to create any effect on the real-world locations that now embody their creation. People travelling to the filming locations, re-enacting scenes, using the fictional names for monuments and places, posting their experiences online – all this was a mere unintended, though welcomed, by-product. If the producers intended their world to jump from screen into reality, they would also have implemented a tourism-scheme from the very start. While the processes described in this and the previous chapter have not necessarily been a simple bottom-up phenomenon, as big media and tech companies have significant influence on how we engage with the world (Nymoen & Schmitt, 2021; Chapter 6; cf. Staab, 2019; Zuboff, 2019), the intention was never, as with nations, to create a spatial entity and heritage sites in reality. At no point was there such moment where somebody said 'We have made Westeros. Now we must make Westerosi'.[14] While the communal day to day performance and assertion of identity and creation of heritage through actions, reactions and phrases has been explored in-depth on a (sub-)national level (Billig, 1995; L. Smith, 2006), the case of the imaginary territories of Westeros and Essos shows that these processes can also occur on a transnational scale on

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[14] After Massimo d'Azeglio's "We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians." (1866), in Killinger (Killinger, 2002, p. 1).

the basis of fantasy fiction rather than a deep past and national narrative. People from across the world start using the same easily identifiable performances to communicate and show that they are part of a larger group. Indeed, what can be observed are heightened, transnational expressions of processes observed in liminality and nation- and heritage building in a globalised, through internet decentralized, digital world: Game of Thrones fans have formed an imagined community with shared values, ideas and visual language, and are now almost pilgrim-like flocking to the lands and monuments they have not only seen on the screen but feel a deep emotional and communal connection with (Anderson, 1983; cf. Turner & Turner, 1978), reinforcing the newly assigned spatial and heritage identities through newly invented (hyper-)traditions (AlSayyad, 2006; cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Subsequently, they are normalising them through banal on- and off-line performances that turned from fan-performance into common practice and making it the established habitus of these spaces (Billig, 1995; cf. Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). What newspapers and the railway have done for the formation of the nation in the 19th century (cf. Anderson, 1983), Instagram and budget airlines did for the creation of the transnational realm of Game of Thrones.

While these seamless transitions of previously established territorial identities into new imaginary realms can be seen as an opportunity to expose various certainties about the nature of heritage and reveal that identities are always both imagined and real, we will see in following chapter that this might also contest the established heritage landscape and stand in direct opposition to the hegemonic AHD, causing memory conflicts (L. Smith, 2006). Although some might seize such an opportunity to rebrand themselves as a desirable tourist destination, others might label these assertions as de-sacralising, banalising or 'Disneyfying' of heritage and identity (see Chapter 4 and 8). Nevertheless, the fantasy of Game of Thrones became part of the heritage of its filming locations and surroundings while simultaneously de-nationalising the filming locations' heritage, thus dissolving both regional and national nature of monuments and landscapes featured in the series by closely connecting them with sites across Northern Ireland, Croatia, Spain, Malta, Morocco and Iceland, which in turn are all becoming part of the same spatial entity. Several respondents would show me photographs or tell me stories from filming locations they visited in countries hundreds, if not thousands of kilometres away, illustrating these newly established geographical relations across national borders through the imaginary realm. Furthermore, although this is a transnational space, it is not necessarily a coherent

space. It is a space of specific references that can be entered and exited instantly in a playful and spontaneous way, creating a permanent, ludic liminality across those sites. Turning around a corner in Split and Dubrovnik will instantly transport you to Meereen or King's Landing; those who drive across the lush landscapes of Northern Ireland, or the arid plains of Andalusia can find themselves ending up in Winterfell or Highgarden.

However, all these phenomena described throughout this thesis have not occurred in a vacuum and have been imposed on established heritage landscapes which have not only their own identities, communities, and traditions, but also previously established global perceptions and misconceptions attached to them. This is particularly relevant for two of the main filming regions, Northern Ireland and Dubrovnik, which are post-conflict contexts and constitute complex memory spaces for both local identities and global perceptions. Therefore, the final chapter of this thesis will examine how the new transnational heritage of Game of Thrones is negotiated within these heritage landscapes and how asserting new narratives and identities, even though entirely fictional, can both overcome and create dissonant heritage as well as resolve and evoke memory conflicts in these contexts.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BEYOND FIRE AND BLOOD
Overcoming and creating dissonant heritage through pop-culture

8.1.Introduction

One of the most well-known aspects of Game of Thrones is its portrayal of violence and a narrative that is driven by military, political and personal conflict. Brutal, gut-wrenching scenes such as the 'Red Wedding', the gruesome 'Trial by Combat' between Prince Oberyn Martell and Ser Gregor Clegane and the 'Battle of the Blackwater Bay' have become staples of the series and a large part of its appeal. Coincidentally, two of the main regions used for filming this series, Northern Ireland and Croatia, have recently experienced military conflict and violence, during the Northern Ireland Conflict, the so-called Troubles, and the Yugoslav Wars. However, unlike the bloodshed in the series, these conflicts gave those regions a rather unwelcome reputation. These conflicts as well as the long tradition of extensive stereotyping the Balkans and (Northern) Ireland portrayed those landscapes and the peoples that inhabit them as rustic, romantic and idyllic yet simultaneously as innately poor, violent and chaotic throughout history and across popular culture (Geoghegan, 2008; Goldsworthy, 2013; Hatzopoulos, 2003; e.g. Jones, 1971; Kelly, 2019; Longinović, 2011; Maguire, 2009; M. N. Todorova, 2009; Williams, 2008). This has shaped the images of these regions for outside observers for decades, if not centuries, and bestowed those landscapes with a distorted reputation, often due to excessive reiteration of these perceptions through various kinds of media. However, ever since Game of Thrones became a global phenomenon, these dark aspects increasingly stepped into the background in the public perception, as for Western audiences those landscapes have become associated with the grand architecture of King's Landing and Meereen and the beautiful landscapes of Westeros rather than car bombs exploding in Belfast and mortar shells hitting Dubrovnik.

These regions have experienced a surge in tourism over the last decade, something that has been often attributed to Game of Thrones (cf. Bolan & Kearney, 2017; Tkalec et al., 2017), thus indicating that the global gaze has been directed away from previous negative perceptions and transforming these once undesirable locations into attractive tourist

destinations. As it will be illustrated in the following chapter, this shift in perceptions can be partly explained by the persuasive nature in which Game of Thrones has reimagined these heritage landscapes and the increased exposure that those landscapes experienced by being transformed into Westeros and Essos. Inscribing Game of Thrones' world onto the heritage sites of its filming locations in all its forms has enabled an entirely novel way in which these spaces are now encountered, seen and experienced, creating new place-myths and identities that have become associated with them. Even more so, as illustrated throughout this thesis, the fantasy of the series is now regarded as part of the local heritage by tourists as even those who are not fans of the series are engaging with the landscape and monuments through the fantasy. In some cases, this heritagisation of Game of Thrones' fantasy is even acknowledged and reinforced by numerous local heritage sites and their surrounding communities as they have integrated Game of Thrones, its imagery and narrative into their heritage canon (see Chapter 4). This is best illustrated by the selling of Game of Thrones inspired souvenirs side by side or, in some cases, in lieu of the usual 'traditional', 'authentic' keepsakes, creating exhibitions in museums and commemorating its impact through site interpretation and newly created artefacts and monuments. However, the assertion of this new diegetic heritage has not only significantly impacted the perceptions of these landscapes and provided a lucrative business but are evoking certain responses from local communities. Particularly post-conflict communities see themselves confronted with new additional, sometimes even perceived as competing layers of heritage identities. While Northern Ireland has welcomed and even fostered this phenomenon to take hold within its local heritage as a strategy to reimagine their troubled landscapes, Croatia has shown more reluctance towards the impact that Game of Thrones has in the perception of their monuments and heritage landscape as it stands in direct competition with the desired national imaginaries and narratives, something that has already been implied on several occasions throughout this thesis.

The following chapter examines how a diegetic heritage created through fantasy fiction enables a reimagination and retelling of landscapes that were previously associated with conflict, civil unrest and negative stereotypes, as well as how local communities have responded to such reinterpretation of their home. It will be illustrated that the newly inscribed imaginary realm of Game of Thrones facilitates overcoming conflict narratives and stereotypes but in turn also creates new heritage dissonances by asserting new place identities from an outside source. Thereby, this chapter will present two case studies, one

focussing on Northern Ireland, the other on Croatia. Particular attention will be paid on how heritage and identity are negotiated through the (post-)conflict contexts of Belfast and Dubrovnik. Belfast as one of the centres of the Troubles and its associated conflict heritage as well as being the headquarters of Game of Thrones' production; Dubrovnik due to its symbolic role for Croatian identity and independence in the past, particularly during its siege 1991/1992, as well as becoming globally reimagined as King's Landing. While there will be an overarching theme of how Game of Thrones has impacted, supported or interfered with both contexts' post-conflict tourism and heritage strategies and own reimagining efforts, the very different receptions and responses of the Game of Thrones phenomenon necessitated a stronger spatial and thematic split between fieldwork sites to focus on the dominant patterns observed in each context.

Figure 8.1: Overtourism in Antrim and Dubrovnik. Crowds on the Dark Hedges, Northern Ireland (left) and the Stradun Main Street of Dubrovnik's Old Town (right)

The chapter does not aim to discuss the origins and nature of these conflicts and stereotypes nor what lasting impacts and inequalities they might still cause, instead focussing on the reception and altered perceptions of the reimaginings through Game of Thrones. Furthermore, the issue of overtourism, which has affected sites both in Northern Ireland and Croatia, most notably the Antrim Coast and Dubrovnik which have seen unprecedented numbers of tourists, often regarded as a direct result of Game of Thrones, will not be subject of discussion as they are separate from the issues of heritage narrative (fig. 8.1-2).

Figure 8.2: 'Why call it tourist season if we cannot shoot them.' Anti-tourism graffiti, Dubrovnik City Wall.

Firstly, the context of Northern Ireland and its rebranding as 'Game of Thrones Territory' will serve as a case study to illustrate how the reimagining of the Northern Irish landscape through the lens of pop-culture has impacted its image and perception, previously predominantly shaped by the heritage of the Troubles, something that has been inadvertently further fostered through the promotion of dark tourism since the late 1990s (Brunn et al., 2010; cf. Lennon & Foley, 2001; Light, 2017), it will be illustrated how this enables the creation of an imaginary, yet unifying narrative that is not built on single-identity heritage and sectarian conflict. Secondly, the case of Croatia will showcase how Game of Thrones' imaginary realm is a continuation of centuries of Western imaginations asserted onto the Balkans and Eastern Europe, a process that has been described as 'imperialism of imagination' (cf. Goldsworthy, 2013). For some, reimagining a symbolically important memory space such as Dubrovnik as King's Landing is regarded as a depreciative and unwanted interpretation of the cradle of Croatian language, culture, and independence, as well as directly competing with the own desired imaginary of Dubrovnik, the great Merchant Republic of Ragusa.

8.2. Overcoming the Troubles in Westeros

> People ask what made these Irish people turn against each other – because we are all Irish. And really, it was all one incident. It was one incident of violence that just divided the whole country. This one incident of violence was so horrific, it split families, it set house against house, town against town and caused wave after wave after wave of violence to come in its wake. And that one original horrific act of violence was of course, when Joffrey Baratheon cut off Ned Stark's head. (Richard, Iron Island & Rope Bridge Adventure Tour, 16.06.2018)

Everyone who participates in Richard's Iron Island Tour along the Antrim Coast will hear this joking anecdote. It usually brings the jolly mood of the passengers on the bus to a sudden halt as the passengers expect some profound truth to be told, only to be followed by a burst of laughter after this expectation is subverted, something Richard admits enjoying quite a bit. Playing with the preconceptions that visitors might have of Northern Ireland, Richard not only negotiates the troubled past but also the present of his home country. It demonstrates that the memory of the Northern Ireland conflict, the so-called Troubles, is still very much present in the minds of people within and outside the British Isles and inseparably tied to the narrative and perception of Northern Ireland. On the other hand, it illustrates the recent change of narratives, as this particularly dark episode of Ireland's past almost seamlessly transitions into the story of Game of Thrones, which has significantly impacted the perception of Northern Ireland over the last decade.

8.2.1. Post-conflict Tourism and the Heritage of the Troubles

> History […] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake. – James Joyce, Ulysses, (Joyce, 1922, p. 34)

Before Northern Ireland became 'Game of Thrones Territory', its perception was intrinsically shaped by over three decades of sectarian violence. For example, in the 1997 *The Simpsons* episode 'Homer vs. the 18th Amendment' (S08E18), the news anchor Kent Brockman is aghast when witnessing an alcohol-induced riot in the streets of Springfield during its annual St. Patrick's Day Parade:

> Ladies and Gentlemen, what you are seeing is a total disregard for the things St. Patrick's Day stands for. All this drinking, violence, destruction of property. Are these the things we think of when we think of the Irish?

Immediately after this comment, the Union Flag-bearing 'John Bull's Fish & Chips' shop explodes. This short satirical scene of this classic episode exemplifies how deeply engrained the negative perceptions and stereotypes associated with (Northern) Ireland, its sectarian conflict and its people, have been and to some extent continue to be in pop-culture.

The Northern Ireland conflict, commonly known as 'The Troubles', was an ethnoreligious and political armed conflict between Catholic Irish Republicans and Protestant Loyalists that cost over 3,600 lives and lasted from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, officially ending in 1998 with signing of the Good Friday Agreement (McKittrick et al., 1999; McKittrick & McVea, 2002). Particularly in the cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, the Troubles left behind a heritage landscape full of remnants and imagery of this conflict, such as the infamous 'peace-lines' that separated Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods, as well as political murals and memorials, the latter significantly increasing in number since the Good Friday Agreement in both loyalist and republican areas (Viggiani, 2014), creating a lasting 'traumascape', a space transformed through physical and psychological suffering (Tumarkin, 2005, pp. 11–13). Not only are those monuments still shaping the landscape, but through their heritagisation they became both sources of local identity and popular tourist attractions that keep the memory of the Troubles tightly anchored in the local and global perception of Northern Ireland (fig. 8.3).

While there are other divided cities shaped by political and religious conflict, Belfast, according to Brunn et al. (2010, p. 89), is unique in that there are efforts to actively 'create a post-conflict image by promoting tourism in areas of previous sharp sectarian conflict'. This is done for a good reason. A 2001 Belfast City Council Report claimed, that 43% of tourists came to Belfast out of curiosity over the Troubles (Wiedenhoft Murphy, 2010, p. 542), confirming Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, p. 94) who argued that 'atrocity [is] one of the most marketable of heritages'. Already in 1998, The Independent titled 'The Trouble is, Tourists are Not as Interested in the Peaceful Side of Ulster', illustrating the great appeal the heritage of the Troubles had very early on (Atyah, 1998). Northern Ireland wanted to capitalise on this demand for 'dark tourism', an increasingly popular sub-category of heritage tourism 'which encompasses the presentation and consumption of real and commodified death and disaster' (Foley & Lennon, 1996, p. 198). Under several, often synonymously used terminologies such as 'thanatourism' or 'atrocity tourism', the concept

of 'dark tourism' has since gained relevance within the academic discourse (for an overview see Light, 2017). Promoting the heritage of the Troubles also became part of the post-conflict regeneration strategy, hoping that the reconciliatory properties that are ascribed to both heritage and tourism could be utilised for 'conflict transformation' (cf. Crooke & Maguire, 2019). Indeed, heritage and tourism have often been front and centre in reconciliatory efforts for emotional, cultural and economic healing for post-conflict societies. The past and its representation through heritage is often regarded as something that adds value, something that individuals and communities can be proud of and built onto as a common foundation.

Figure 8.3: Monuments of the Troubles in Belfast. 'Peace-line' at Cupar Way (top); Bobby Sands Mural and Black Taxi, Falls Road (bottom left); Bayardo Memorial, Shankill Road (bottom right).

Various organisations have subscribed to the post-conflict 'healing-heritage model', using the '"good" deep past' to mend the '"bad" recent past and present' by 'creating social cohesion and economic development' (Giblin, 2014, p. 509). For example, it is the UNESCO's position that 'in situations of conflict or post-conflict' cultural heritage can act

'as a "vehicle" for reconciliation' (UNESCO, 2008, para. 100). Heritage has been called 'therapeutic' (Meskell & Scheermeyer, 2008), 'conciliatory' (Lehrer, 2010) and the fostering and rebuilding of heritage after conflicts has been described as a part of a healing process and overcoming national trauma (Doppelhofer, 2016, 2018). In what Causevic and Lynch (2008, 2011) call 'phoenix tourism', they argue that using conflict heritage for tourism can be part of conflict transformation. Naming post-Troubles Belfast and post-Yugoslav War Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) as prime examples of 'phoenix tourism', Causevic and Lynch claim that employing conflict heritage can assist in social and economic reconciliation, regeneration and reimagining, as well as rebuilding a sense of pride and community after long-term political conflict (although one might consider 'phoenix tourism' a poor nomenclature to apply to the Northern Irish context, given that this mythical bird is the chosen symbol of the IRA). However, using the term 'post-conflict' is in itself a problematic description as it suggests that said conflict has ceased to exist. One must be aware that even in 'post-conflict' societies conflict is often anything but resolved (Giblin, 2014, p. 503). What if the heritage of a country and its communities is the cause of the conflict and employing said heritage is prolonging and entrenching these dissonances? This, according to Giblin (2014), remains largely unrecognised. Therefore, it has been increasingly questioned whether the strategy of using tourism and heritage to transform 'swords into ploughshares' – and thus help to rebuild societies – can actually be achieved (Cochrane, 2015, p. 52), or whether it further entrenches the image of divisions of sectarianism that caused the conflict in the first place. Already in the early 1990s, Hall (1994, p. 91) described how the presumption of tourism as 'a force for peace is [a] gross simplification of the political dimensions of tourism' and 'may serve to provide a platform for politicians and consultants to launch nice-sounding statements, but it does little to improve our understanding of tourism's position in the political environment'. Similarly, the idea that heritage is a force for good and peace is also an overly simplistic, if not naïve, assumption. Heritage is a marker of identity and thus by its very nature is intrinsically dissonant as it divides between 'us' and 'them' (cf. Tunbridge, 1994; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). This becomes particularly apparent in intra-national conflicts when both heritage communities continue to live side by side, best illustrated in the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland.

8.2.2. Troubles Tourism and the Perpetuation of Conflict

Rather than resolving and leaving the conflict behind, the heritagisation and commodification of the Troubles through erecting ever more monuments and presenting them through tourism further reproduces and entrenches the territoriality and symbolically perpetuates the conflict, transforming them into a conflict through other means (McDowell, 2008; McDowell & Braniff, 2014). While the creation of murals, memorials and the hoisting flags across Northern Ireland, the promotion of Irish and Ulster-Scots, as well as various festivities are shared heritage practices of both Republicans and Loyalists respectively, they stand in a direct cultural competition for asserting identity and territoriality. Those memorials and commemorations are not meant for reconciliatory purposes but to demarcate territorial claims and to express and reify competing identities, even to actively provoke, and thus continue and transform the violent conflict into a symbolic conflict (Crooke & Maguire, 2019; McEvoy, 2011; Viejo-Rose, 2011). Rather than growing together, two mutually exclusive parallel heritage landscapes have established themselves side by side. The so-called 'peace-lines', unlike the Berlin Wall, have never been torn down and remain a dividing feature between neighbourhoods (Brunn et al., 2010, p. 91). Crossing them still feels like a transgressive act one should not dare.

This conflict is also transposed into Troubles tourism. The images created through decades of media coverage of the conflict and subsequent promotion of Troubles tourism inadvertently created and, more importantly, has sustained the perception that the Northern Ireland conflict is yet to be resolved. McDowell (2008, pp. 412, 415) noted rather than overcoming the divisions there is an 'eagerness of both Republican and Loyalist communities to compete for the attentions and sympathies of the tourist', trying to direct the tourist's gaze 'upon conflict heritage through a carefully mediated lens that frames a particular narrative' to compete for hegemony over victimhood and moral high ground, refuting their respective roles at the expense of the other (B. Graham & Whelan, 2007, p. 493). Presenting murals, monuments and plaques are used as evidence to develop blame-narratives and to 'promote one-sided and deliberately partial memories of the conflict that reflect longstanding and ongoing segregation' (McAtackney, 2015, p. 116). When being guided by an outspoken Republican through West Belfast, I could not escape siding unequivocally with his side of the narrative. Against my own better judgement and even my guide's self-admitted bias, his personal stories told in front of the Clonard Martyrs

Memorial, murals and the Milltown Cemetery left not a shred of doubt in me that there was only one side to blame and only one community was the 'real victim'. The infamous Black Taxis, once the 'people's taxis' in lieu of the suspended public transport in West Belfast, now have become one of the main attractions through which tourists can 'experience' the landscape of the Troubles (Wiedenhoft Murphy, 2010, p. 551). Often manned by former ex-militia and convicts of both sides, they have become literal vehicles through which conflict heritage is produced, manipulated and sold to tourists. This commodification for tourist consumption is keeping the conflict alive by presenting a divided streetscape, the conflict is sustained by the construction of symbols of division and by reminding the visitor 'the conflict is never far away' (McDowell, 2008, p. 419). Reproducing the collective memory of conflict through tourism and perpetuating it symbolically both abroad and at home, Troubles tourism is fostering the perception that the conflict is incumbent, requiring but a spark – say, a hard border post-Brexit – for an immediate and inevitable return to violence of the 'powder-keg Northern Ireland'.

Figure 8.4: 'Titanic Belfast'. Popular tourist attraction that takes the visitor through the history of the eponymous ship through an immersive experience and centrepiece of the maritime landscape of Belfast's Titanic Quarter.

Due to this 'single-identity work' and the economic dependency of sustaining each community's conflict heritage spaces and narratives, divisions are reified and formalised,

thus failing not only to improve inter-community relations but inadvertently selling tourists the perception of the Northern Irish landscape as a series of mutually exclusive Republican and Loyalist spaces and heritages. Graham and Whelan (2007) conclude that the heritage of Northern Ireland is largely irreconcilable as it is inherently dissonant and unfit as a unifying force, something indirectly acknowledged in the *A Shared Future. Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland*, which states the need for the facilitation of 'the development of a shared community where people wish to live, work, play and learn together' (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005, p. 10) while avoiding any direct references to the past and following the path of 'constructive ambiguity' to not alienate any identity group (B. Graham & Nash, 2006, p. 256). Local authorities have since attempted to re-imagine Northern Ireland through the creation of new heritage spaces, focussing on the de-politicisation of the landscape by 'replac[ing] ethnocratic or ethno-nationalist markers of identity with those of "normal" capitalist material space' through extensive gentrification, most notably the Titanic Quarter (B. Graham & Nash, 2006, p. 261; N. C. Johnson, 2014; fig. 8.4; cf. Ramsey, 2013). Nevertheless, prior to Game of Thrones, the popularity of Troubles tourism as one of the main way of experiencing Northern Ireland remained unwavering and thus the image of the conflict and its divided communities still dominated the public perception (e.g. De Sola, 2011; R. Hall, 2019).

However, in 2011 the world was introduced to a new and exciting perspective to view the Northern Irish landscape. The soon to be global pop-culture phenomenon Game of Thrones took a previously unknown side of Northern Ireland and showed it to the world. The mighty Winterfell, the stormy Iron Islands, the vast grasslands of the Dothraki Sea and the icy lands beyond the Wall, all could be found within the confines of Northern Ireland. The diegetic heritage of Westeros and Essos – ironically a world famous for its violence and conflict – finally enabled a reimagining of the previously troubled landscape of Northern Ireland by presenting a new, unifying heritage narrative detached from the burden of history.

8.2.3. From West Belfast to Westeros

> People come here all the time and go 'Is the Troubles still on?' and I'm like, 'That was like 30 years ago!' […] We're probably one of the safest countries that you can imagine! But with our past people have labelled us unsafe. You don't go to Germany

and expect World War Two. […] I feel like Game of Thrones has offered a new aspect for people that feel that we're still in a war-torn country – which we are definitely not, and we have not been for the last 20 or 30 years! But that persona, people watching this on the news, even though it was 30 years ago, people still have that persona of us. (General Manager Winterfell Tours from Northern Ireland, Castle Ward 30.06.2018)

Even years after the ceasefire and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, there are still security concerns due to the negative image through three decades of violence. This perception has been reinforced through Brexit and still unresolved issues surrounding the border with the Republic of Ireland. Sarah Sharp, originally from England and now working for the National Trust in Northern Ireland, remembers:

If you heard Northern Ireland, all you ever saw was balaclavas, guns, bombs. When I first said to my friends and family [that] I was even coming over here on holiday over 16 years ago, they were like 'why would you want to go there? They'd just kill you!' (Sarah Sharp from England, Visitor Experience Manager, Castle Ward 14.06.2018)

A young Irish man from Dublin admitted that until recently the 'bad image of fighting going on up there' has 'put [him] off from coming to Northern Ireland – especially with a Southern accent you might just get in trouble' (Oisin from Ireland, 32, Dark Hedges 21.06.2018). However, even though growing up with these images in mind, being now exposed to the reimagined landscapes of Northern Ireland via Game of Thrones, transformed this negative perception, and enabled him and many others to look beyond the dark heritage of the Troubles, showcasing the beauty and peace that were previously hidden behind a curtain of violence undistorted from negative coverage:

It lets you see how beautiful the actual country is, all the different locations. I think when Northern Ireland was publicised with all the bombings and fighting and stuff, you don't get to see the beauty of the actual country. (Laura-Lee from Australia, 34, Castle Ward 21.06.2018)

For Gareth and Rona from Scotland, it signalled the end of the conflict and the realisation that there are other aspects to this country:

Gareth: Game of Thrones has exposed me and a lot of other people to find that it is safe to travel to Northern Ireland. It's a beautiful country.
Rona: [I am] a bit more aware that the Troubles have ended […]. And now you realise

it's a peaceful place with all these big Hollywood productions here. (Gareth and Rona from Scotland, Belfast 13.06.2018)

This change of perception was even more pronounced by most locals I met. When talking with locals about how they feel about Game of Thrones' impact on Northern Ireland, I was almost always met with a sigh of relief and they would instantly highlight 'the fact that Northern Ireland is being talked about for something other than the Troubles' (Moyra Lock from Belfast, Head of Marketing Northern Ireland Screen, Belfast 19.06.2018). It was pointed out on numerous occasions that 'after all the problems that Northern Ireland had, it's marvellous that something good came along so tourists actually want to come and see the place' (Jennifer from County Antrim, 64, Ballintoy Harbour 24.06.2018). Helen, who I met at the Winterfell Festival, even more explicitly expressed Game of Thrones' role by stating that 'it took away the Troubles' (Helen from Northern Ireland, Castle Ward 17.09.2018). For some, it provides a new basis to finally move away from the negative image of the Troubles, as has been described by a young couple from Antrim who themselves had visited the Dark Hedges for the first time due to the increased interest from Game of Thrones. They thought that this new perception might enable new perspectives not only for other people to see Northern Ireland, but also to move forward as a society.

> **Louis**: Obviously a lot of things are about the Troubles and black tourism in Northern Ireland. I think it's really nice to have something fresh. Because obviously that's all we are known for.
> **Megan**: It's a new perspective for people to see us.
> **Louis**: Moving on, away from that dark period of people being angry. You know, moving into a more mixed society, different perceptions.
> (Louis and Megan from County Antrim, both 23, Dark Hedges 24.06.2018)

The shift from Troubles to Game of Thrones can even be illustrated by Northern Ireland's most iconic of tourist offer, the Black Taxis. In recent years, many Black Taxi tour providers expanded their offer along the Antrim coast and other points of interest connected to Game of Thrones. While remaining an integral part of the political landscape of Northern Ireland and Troubles tourism, by loosening their territorial ties from their original context of West Belfast to the imaginary land of Westeros, they too have been increasingly depoliticised and a taxi for all of Northern Ireland, presenting the whole landscape rather than a narrow, political snapshot. This depoliticising of the Northern Irish landscape and its heritage has also been emphasised by Caroline McErlean. The owner of

The Cuan in Strangford near Castle Ward, an inn that is not only the holder of the first of the Doors of Thrones, but also exhibits replicas from the series, offers medieval-style 'Winterfell Feasts' and advertises which actor of the main cast has been accommodated in what specific room during filming, points out how Game of Thrones created a unifying, depoliticised narrative that 'crosses boundaries' of old entrenched divisions:

> It's a common denominator that the people in Northern Ireland talk about now. You know, it's another focus. It's not political. And everybody knows about it. Everybody has somebody who's been involved in it at some level. Our two boys were extras in the show. And this year, our youngest fellow was body double of Gendry. […] There's employment now, there's diversity, there's a story, there's excitement around it. (Caroline from County Down, owner of The Cuan, Strangford 18.06.2018)

One of the key words utilised when asking locals about their feeling towards Game of Thrones was 'pride'. Pride for the 'recognition' of their home by the world (Damien from County Derry/Londonderry), Limavady 20.06.2018), pride that 'such a big phenomenon […] has been filmed here' (Kevin from County Down, NI, Strangford 18.06.2018), and pride that their country is 'famous for something so positive' and Northern Ireland is now able to 'show it off' to the world (Richard from County Down, Bangor 07.05.2019). This pride and newfound confidence about their home country has been enthusiastically expressed by Moyra Lock, Head of Marketing at the NI Screen:

> It's a complete transformation. That is no exaggeration. You know, 10 years ago, Northern Ireland was not the second cousin. We were the third, fourth, fifth, two times removed. We weren't talked to, too far away, regional, parochial, too small, couldn't do this, couldn't do that. […] We can do anything now! […] We're as good as anybody else! (Moyra Lock, Belfast 19.06.2018)

Several local informants were particularly proud how Game of Thrones enabled Northern Ireland to once again live up as to its legacy as a proud industrial heartland, now as a centre of new screen and media industries, however, without the discriminatory employment policies of old. Where once the Titanic had been built and linen mills produced cloth, there are now studios in which large-scale Hollywood productions are made – in many cases literally, as the old factories have been repurposed for building sets. This has even been monumentalised by placing the sixth and final 'Glass of Thrones' window at the end of the Titanic Slipway with Samson and Goliath, the monumental

yellow gantries of the old shipyards, and the Titanic Experience in the background, as well as exhibiting the Game of Thrones Tapestry in the National Museum (cf. fig. 4.18-19). Valerie Wilson, the textile curator of the NMNI, who grew up in Belfast and witnessed the decline and rebirth of Belfast's industry described her feelings towards the change Game of Thrones brought to her home:

> What it has done for Northern Ireland is incredible. Because, when I was growing up in Belfast, from where my bedroom window was, I could look down where those big cranes are and where the shipyard was. And then during the Troubles sort of all declined. And I just think it's fabulous now, I drive down to work and what I'm seeing is the Painthall [note: the new film studios on the site of the shipyard] and this kind of phoenix rising from something that was very bad. So, it has done so much good for everyone. And I feel if it has opened people's eyes to come into Northern Ireland. (Valerie Wilson from Belfast, Curator of Textiles at NMNI, Cultra 30.04.2019)

Although the so-called 'Game of Thrones effect', the knock-on effect the screen industry supposedly has on the economic growth of Northern Ireland, has recently been critically scrutinised and deemed overstated (Ramsey et al., 2019; cf. NI Screen, 2018), the local population's perception of its effect has been mostly positive and seen as a way forward. Richard described the economic impact as 'unfathomable' when talking about how many people have financially profited from Game of Thrones either through working on the production itself or the subsequent screen and tourism industry:

> There has been a running joke for a lot of years now, that there's not a person left in Northern Ireland that hasn't benefited a pound of Game of Thrones some way, shape or form. […] It's certainly helped with just letting everything filter away. There's better things to do. It certainly can be part of what propels us forward, you know. (Richard, Bangor 07.05.2019)

From my own experiences in Northern Ireland, this does not sound like an exaggeration. Wherever I went, I encountered people who proudly proclaimed that they had been involved in the production of Game of Thrones, such as being extras, worked in costumes, props, make-up or catering, or profited from the increased interest, from selling their photographs of filming locations as postcards to offering Game of Thrones experiences. For many, Game of Thrones was life-changing (cf. East, 2019).

The only issue about the reimagining of Northern Ireland that has been raised repeatedly by many informants was overtourism that was directly attributed to the additional exposure of Game of Thrones and that the infrastructure of the Antrim Coast could not support. Any other 'complaints' about Game of Thrones remained trivial at best. For example, a geologist I met, unsurprisingly, was disappointed that everyone appears only to have eyes for Game of Thrones when the rock formations and geological features of the Antrim Coast are so much more interesting. Damien, owner of Owens' Bar in Limavady wished the house a few metres down the street would get as much attention as his Door of Thrones – it is the place where the famous song 'Danny Boy' was written.

8.2.4. 'Views to die horribly for': *Game of Thrones* as Constructive Amnesia?

> What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it. – Tyrion Lannister (S08E06)

Creating a new place-myth such as Game of Thrones' imaginary realm can do more than supplement previous (mis)conceptions; it can reshape them. Judith Webb, head of the newly established department of Screen Tourism of Tourism Northern Ireland highlights how Game of Thrones has been a game changer for the perception of Northern Ireland:

> It's telling the story of Northern Ireland, our history, our heritage, and allowing people to appreciate and enjoy them. […] It's not dodgy black dark alleyways, it is spectacular scenery, as you've seen on your tours, and it is showcasing the beauty of Northern Ireland. […] So, for many years, people think of Northern Ireland as being a troubled area, and not necessarily there are things to do. So, it changed the narrative, people are talking about Northern Ireland as Game of Thrones Territory. And it's giving us that stand out on the international stage. (Judith Webb from Northern Ireland, Belfast 14.09.2018)

The reimagining of Northern Ireland through the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones and the resulting screen and tourism industry could indeed be the necessary shift from 'destructive remembrance to constructive amnesia' (Longley, 2001, p. 253) that is required to move on as a society and create a new, unifying narrative. It has been argued that the process of heritage- and community-building is often 'as much about forgetting the past as commemorating it' (B. Graham, 2000, p. 77). Game of Thrones could provide a heritage narrative that is not tied to the Troubles or any other dissonant heritage that might be

engrained in the Northern Irish landscape, even if it is even one that is entirely based on fiction:

> If it is taking a TV show, a made-up, fictional land to highlight the beautiful areas here that aren't peace-walls and graffiti and bombs and all of that, then I am all for it. […] Because it is showing some of the best and most beautiful things that we have in Northern Ireland. (Sarah Sharp from England, Visitor Experience Manager, Castle Ward 14.06.2018)

This wish for such 'constructive amnesia' has been highlighted by several informants. While this 'constructive amnesia' should not be confused with forgetting past wrongs and present-day inequalities resulting from them, but as new basis for a cross-communal narrative and an alternative identity so that the Troubles are not the defining feature. Perpetuating and sustaining the divided past and its sectarian heritage of the Troubles into the future is seen as holding back Northern Ireland's society. This amnesia, to some extent, has already been practised at various locations that have not been primarily associated with the Troubles before Game of Thrones, most notably for this research at the Winterfell filming location Castle Ward, where on 10 February 1973 a bomb prematurely exploded and killed two members of the IRA (McKittrick et al., 1999, p. 330). Neither site interpretation nor staff during my many conversations about the history of Castle Ward throughout the centuries mentioned this event.

Paul pointed out that 'there's a whole generation who doesn't have any historical memory of [the Troubles]' (Paul from County Antrim, Ballintoy Harbour 01.07.2018), while Richard quoted his son and his friends who see a hinderance in clinging on to this past conflict, as it is 'ancient history that has nothing to do with [them], that stops [them] being European, global people' (Richard, Bangor 09.05.2019). For most of those who grew up post-Good Friday Agreement, the Troubles appear to be almost as mythical and fictional as the world of Westeros, rather being an obstacle to their identity than being part of it.

Figure 8.5: Destination marketing poster photographed in Belfast.

The reimagining of Northern Ireland is distilled in one particular destination marketing poster. It shows a picturesque vista of the rocky coastal landscape of Larrybane and a tag line written in the iconic Game of Thrones font, reading 'Views to die horribly for' (fig. 8.6). Who would have thought just a few years ago that Northern Ireland could ever be promoted with such a slogan without immediately evoking memories of the Troubles? Previously, marketing any part of Northern Ireland in such manner would have been unacceptable and unthinkable, too deeply engrained were the images of the Troubles in the global and local consciousness. While one could still not imagine seeing the slogan superposed onto an image of Falls Road or Shankill Road, it has become perfectly acceptable for the rural landscape of Northern Ireland. Although this could be perceived as entrenchment of a dichotomy of the Northern Irish landscape between the troubled urban and scenic rural, also Belfast's perception has benefitted from this shift in focus, thanks to its role as production headquarter of Game of Thrones and the creation of new, historically unburdened public monuments such as the 'Glass of Thrones' windows and the 'Game of Thrones Tapestry' in the Ulster Museum. Some might argue that the reimagining of the Northern Irish landscape through pop-culture might overshadow and trivialise its 'real' heritage or, worse, that this depoliticising, neoliberal commodification and 'constructive amnesia' might be whitewashing the troubled past and present-day issues (cf. Ramsey, 2013; Ramsey et al., 2019). However, this could be countered with the response that the heritage of the Troubles – the murals, the peace-lines, the memorials, the violent and sectarian heritage narratives – and their political and economic exploitation narrowed down the perception and dominated the narrative for the entirety of Northern Ireland to this day, making this dissonant heritage the only defining feature of a landscape that is much richer, more diverse, and far removed from any non-imaginary conflict. The heritage of the Troubles is, as all heritages are, constructed through its deliberate proliferation through

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repetition and tourism and political exploitation, and are casting their shadow over everything else, obfuscating the view. Quite on the contrary, the reimagining through Game of Thrones and experiencing Northern Ireland through a 'Westeros lens' has opened its heritage landscape for multiple readings, showcasing its plurality and beauty, rather than perpetuating the conflict in multiple ways. Or, as a young American man I encountered at Castle Ward and who had both partaken in a Black Taxi and a Game of Thrones tour describes:

> Before I thought of the Troubles, which was kind of reinforced because we took a Troubles tour too. But no, now it's like beautiful castles and scenery. And the people are pretty nice. (Brent from the USA, Castle Ward 30.06.2018)

While Game of Thrones has not brought peace to Northern Ireland it is out of the question that its strong presence within global pop-culture and its visual and narrative fantasy that has been projected onto the landscape, has enabled a global reimagining of a conflict space. Indeed, Game of Thrones successfully replaced the expectation of randomly encountering someone with a balaclava and a Molotov cocktail next to a burnt-out car with the image of someone wearing an ill-fitting cloak and plastic sword, pretending to be a Westerosi Lord or Lady somewhere next to a picturesque ruin. Winter might have come for tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic and the production of the prequel series 'House of the Dragon' has changed its headquarters from Belfast to London, however, as Richard pointed out, 'the words Belfast, Game of Thrones, Northern Ireland will always be linked. And that's a very positive thing.'

8.3. Imagining King's Landing: Dubrovnik and the imperialism of pop-culture

> Many other places in Croatia suffered far worse fates than Dubrovnik. […] But people never heard about those places. They heard about Dubrovnik. And the fact that Dubrovnik was on everybody's TV screens on daily basis helped us achieve our independence. It changed public opinion in the world [about] what was going on here. So, I do believe that [through Game of Thrones], again, Dubrovnik is spreading the word around the world about Croatia. And I think that's a positive thing. And I think the most important thing that Dubrovnik got out of the Game of Thrones is change of label. In a lot of people's minds, until a few years ago this was 'Dubrovnik where the war was'; right now it's 'Dubrovnik where they filmed Game of Thrones' (Davor from Croatia, tour guide, Dubrovnik 25.09.2018)

Dubrovnik, just like its fictional counterpart King's Landing, has been under siege and threatened with destruction and death. Between October 1991 and May 1992, it was not dragonfire that rained down onto the city, but mortar shells launched by the Serbian and Montenegrin 'Yugoslav People's Army' in the early phase of the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995; part of the Yugoslav Wars 1991–2001), or 'Homeland War' as it is commonly referred to in Croatia (Jović, 2012; cf. Pavlović, 2005). The Siege of Dubrovnik has become one of the most prominent and defining events in the city's history, being broadcasted all over the world and causing outcry by the international community, not least due to the damages and the threat of destruction of the World Heritage Site. Although, as Davor elaborates, these images rallied international support and became a significant symbol within the national narrative of Croatia, the omnipresence of the violence committed against Dubrovnik in global media also revived and fostered old stereotypes of the 'savage' and 'war-torn' Balkans from which the once thriving tourism industry only slowly recovered (Bellamy, 2003, p. 126; Wise, 2011; Wise & Mulec, 2012). After the Yugoslav Wars, Croatia not only tried to utilise tourism for economic regeneration but also as a means of nation-building and promoting the identity and heritage of this young nation to its own citizens and the world. This is particularly apparent with Dubrovnik and its historic imaginary as the Merchant Republic of Ragusa. Although the Republic of Ragusa was abolished over two centuries ago, ideas of freedom, identity, and nation are still strongly tied to this harbour town, both locally and nationally (Harris, 2006; Racusin, 2012; Rivera, 2008).

However, since 2012, a deliberately fostered and promoted national imaginary of Ragusan and Croatian identity has been increasingly over-shadowed, especially from outside Croatia, by a new, more profitable global imaginary – that of Game of Thrones and the city's role as King's Landing. While this has significantly improved the reputation and perception of this region that has previously been mainly associated with war and Balkan stereotypes, this reimagining is not only continuing a common practice of asserting Western imaginaries onto the Balkans but also directly competes with the local heritage, creating a dissonance between the historic imaginary of Ragusa and the fantasy imaginary of King's Landing.

8.3.1. Balkanism and the Imperialism of Imagination

In his description of the countries and regions of Europe, German philosopher Hermann Keyserling wrote that 'si les Balcans n'existaient pas, il faudrait les inventer [if the Balkans had not existed, they would have been invented]' (Keyserling, 1928, p. 337), illustrating the perceived relationship between imagination and reality that has defined this region for centuries. For a long time, the Balkans had the reputation of Europe's powder keg. When writing about the Yugoslav Wars, a series of separate yet related wars and conflicts resulting from various independence, ethnic and nationalist movements that occurred on the territory of the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2001 (Baker, 2015; Ingrao & Emmert, 2009; cf. Jedlicki, 1999), the former US Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke of 'ancient ethnic hatreds reignited' in a 'thousand-year-old hornets' nest' (Powell & Persico, 1995, p. 291). Powell's description prominently illustrated and reiterated long-held Western beliefs of the innate savage nature of the Balkans and its peoples that predate those recent conflicts. Particularly after World War I, ethnic conflict and violence established itself as the *leitmotif* and ordering principle in Western understandings and imaginaries of this region, something that has been further asserted through the above-mentioned recent wars (cf. Hatzopoulos, 2003; Longinović, 2011; M. Todorova, 1994, p. 476). However, the perception of a savage Balkans predates 20th century conflicts, as there has been a long tradition of projecting various Western-created imaginaries onto this region, due to its peripheral 'in-betweenness' and being perceived as the 'Other' in Europe. Although often equated as merely a subcategory of 'Orientalism' (cf. Said, 1978), Todorova (2009, p. 20) describes 'Balkanism' as its own distinct category which 'evolved to a great extent independently from orientalism from the 18th century onwards and, in

certain aspects against or despite it' due to its historical, religious and geopolitical differences to traditionally 'Oriental' contexts. Indeed, as a transitional, multi-ethnic space in-between Western and Eastern Empires, its peoples and cultures have neither been considered Orient nor Occident, and subsequently regarded both culturally and racially inferior to either, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries (M. Todorova, 1994, p. 476). To this day, the Balkans evoke negative associations and are utilised as a derogatory anti-thesis of stability and civilisation through which the West puts itself into contrast to construct its own positive 'European image' (Volić-Hellbusch, 2018, p. 166). The Balkans have been described routinely as the 'savage Europe' as recently as 1906 (Goldsworthy, 2013, p. 9), thus implying the existence of a 'civilised Europe' (i.e. Western Europe). Thereby, the 'Balkans' is not a strictly geographical descriptor, as these imaginaries are also projected to a large extent onto East-Central European territories and beyond while Greece, the 'cradle of Western civilisation', and the European parts of Turkey, already part of the 'Orient', are considered separate although geographically belonging to the Balkan Peninsula. In fact, Slavoj Žižek concludes that the Balkans have an almost 'spectral status' with constantly shifting geographical delimitation as no one seem to be able to provide a definitive answer to the simple question 'Where do the Balkans begin?' (Žižek, 1999, 2001):

> For the Serbs, they begin *down there*, in Kosovo or in Bosnia, and they defend the Christian civilization against this Europe's Other; for the Croats, they begin in orthodox, despotic and Byzantine Serbia, against which Croatia safeguards Western democratic values; for Slovenes they begin in Croatia, and we are the last bulwark of the peaceful *Mitteleuropa*; for many Italians and Austrians they begin in Slovenia, the Western outpost of the Slavic hordes; for many Germans, Austria itself, because of its historical links, is already tainted with Balkan corruption and inefficiency; for many North Germans, Bavaria, with its Catholic provincial *flair*, is not free of a Balkan contamination; many arrogant Frenchmen associate Germany itself with an Eastern Balkan brutality entirely foreign to French *finesse*; and this brings us to the last link in this chain: to some conservative British opponents of the European Union, for whom – implicitly, at least – the whole of continental Europe functions today as a new version of the Balkan Turkish Empire, with Brussels as the new Istanbul, a voracious despotic centre which threatens British freedom and sovereignty. (Žižek, 2001, pp. 3–4)

Žižek illustrates that the Balkans are always considered as the 'Other' not only within but of Europe, they always appear to be somewhere else, always a bit further Southeast – until

we 'magically escape' them and reach Greece, which, although firmly located on the Southern end of the Balkan Peninsula, cannot be part of 'the Balkans' as it is the cradle of our western civilisation (Žižek, 1999). Although Žižek's argument leads almost inevitably to the conclusion that 'the Balkans' can be rendered entirely imaginary and thus ultimately non-existent, this does not mean that these imaginaries have no impact on the real world.

These Balkan imaginaries inevitably found their way into literature, film and other forms of media. Due to the above described in-betweenness and ill-defined cultural and geographical boundaries, this region lends itself perfectly as a canvas onto which a vast array of various Western-created imaginaries could be projected over the centuries. Particularly tales of 'eastern barbarities' enjoyed great popularity and are omnipresent in Western travel literature and popular fiction, which further kindled imaginations of the Balkans and East-Central Europe as a parochial wilderness full of savagery such as the apparently 'common' punishment of impalement that both evoked horror and excitement (Goldsworthy, 2013; M. Todorova, 1994, p. 476; M. N. Todorova, 2009). This is most famously illustrated by Bram Stoker's portrayal of Transylvania and its ruler Vlad Tepeş 'The Impaler' whose fictionalised alter ego 'Dracula' has been immortalised in his eponymous vampire novel (Light, 2012). Although Stoker never visited the South Carpathians himself, his descriptions and imaginations have been highly influential in how this region is imagined to this day. Bram Stoker's fiction 'turned a real place into a fantasy', making it 'impossible now to hear the name [Transylvania] without thinking of vampires' and all the associated images and prejudices that accompany these landscapes (Gelder, 1994, p. 1). A more recent example is the 2006 satirical film *Borat*, which, although meant to portray the Central Asian Kazakhstan, a non-Balkan country, was filmed in Romania while also making heavy use of every imaginable Balkan stereotype (Wallace, 2008). This makes 'Borat's Kazakhstan' not only, as Wallace describes it, a 'Baudrillardian simulacrum' that entirely replaced the real Kazakhstan for Western audiences (2008, p. 38), but also a prime example of Balkanism outside the Balkans by creating a new 'Balkan-Kazakhstan'. One of the most infamous consequences of this reimagining was the accidental playing of the films fictional anthem – which, among other ludicrous claims, celebrates that Kazakhstan's prostitutes are the 'cleanest in the region' – for the Kazakh gold medal winner at the Arab Shooting Championships in Kuwait in 2012 (Neild, 2012). Furthermore, not only have historic and contemporary regions and countries such as Transylvania or Kazakhstan been (re-)imagined, but entirely fictitious countries

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have also been invented and inscribed onto the Balkan and Eastern-Central European region that have never existed. When consulting the 'List of fictional European countries' on Wikipedia, one will find that the vast majority of them is indeed inspired by and located in the Balkans and Central-Eastern Europe, most of them reiterating stereotypical motifs of Balkanism to this day.[15] Anthony Hope's *Ruritania*, Agatha Christie's *Herzoslovakia*, *Vulgaria* in the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *Sokovia* in the highly successful Marvel film franchise and many others are figments of Western literary and cinematic imagination which 'represent pastiches with varying degrees of Balkan plausibility' (Goldsworthy, 2013, p. xiv).

One of the most important works on this phenomenon of asserting various imaginaries through fiction onto the Balkans and Central-Eastern Europe is Vesna Goldsworthy's concept of 'imperialism of imagination' (Goldsworthy, 2013). 'Imperialism of imagination' describes how culturally and economically dominant, outside groups 'conquer' the perception of foreign cultures, peoples and countries by asserting their own visual and narrative fictions onto them. Thereby, fictional creations can become substitutes for real territories, influencing how consumers and producers of media view and represent places, countries, and societies in real life. Rather than colonising physically, the meanings and identities of heritage landscapes, peoples and cultures are invented, imposed and disseminated globally through media, often regardless or even diametrically opposing the actual realities of the portrayed and invented landscapes. Goldsworthy (2013, p. 220) concludes that there is an 'insidious strength born out of western entertainment industry which dominates the market of imagination'. These imperialistic tendencies of simulated realities have already been described by Baudrillard who wrote that the 'imperialism of present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all the real, coincide with their models of simulation' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2). While Goldsworthy is primarily focussing on pre-20th century British literary representations of the Balkans and East-Central Europe, the (re-)imagining of this and indeed many other regions has become even more pronounced with the increasing dominance of the American film and media industries from the second half of the 20th century. While pop-culture can act as a great cultural equaliser on a trans- and international level – notably in the fantasy and sci-fi genres as imaginary worlds do not necessitate loyalty to one's own nation – there are still power imbalances in place due to

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the inequality in distribution of the means of media production (see Chapter 7). Having become the main producer and thus the global hegemonic power of global imagination and pop-culture, Hollywood's assertion of their visual and narrative imaginaries onto foreign territories can be regarded not only as a confirmation but also as a direct, even more impactful continuation of Goldsworthy's observations. Although Hollywood's cinematic land-grabbing has become increasingly global, the Balkans remain an important and popular place to be imagined and Balkanism one of the favourite ways of Othering. Even though based on works of fiction, many of these imaginations of real spaces and the fabrication of entirely fictional ones have had and indeed continue to have a significant impact on how heritage landscapes of the Balkans and beyond are perceived. One could argue that these landscapes have been subject to re-imagining for so long that one might not be able to see anything, but a fantasy landscape shaped through depictions in literature and on screen.

Due to power imbalances, this, as with all forms and expressions of imperialism, leads to more tangible consequences for the colonised than the colonisers. Those who are reimagined have usually little to no say in how they or their heritage is portrayed, whether they like to be part of those fictional narratives or not. Often, they 'are forced to adapt to any number of templates thrown at them in the process' and arrange themselves with the new circumstances (Goldsworthy, 2013, p. 224). This may include offering tourism experiences and services directly related to the new fictional identities. In some case, this can even lead to a degree of 'self-Balkanisation' in which imposed narratives and myths are taken over and reiterated, almost as if locals feel the need to live up to the clichés imposed on them from abroad, partly ironically, partly to give tourists what they expected (Dragićević-Šešić & Mijatović, 2014; cf. MacCannell, 1973; Pavičić, 2010). For example, when asking a tour guide in Dubrovnik about the omnipresence of unlicensed usage of copyrighted material for promoting and conducting Game of Thrones tours, I was met with a guffawing 'Welcome to the Balkans!', playing with the stereotypes of the almost intrinsic black marketeering attributed to its inhabitants.

Several studies have illustrated that the imaginaries and identities imposed from abroad are often seen as being in conflict with the image that locals, heritage and tourist authorities want to be associated with, however, the economic benefits are often too tempting to not try to capitalise from them. Although there is a popular and profitable subsection of

Dracula tourism, many Romanians are still not sure how to feel about the portrayal of their country and their national hero (Light, 2012). Kazakhstan, which initially banned the film *Borat* as an act of public protest against the portrayal of their country, started to use the character's catchphrase 'Very nice!' in their 2020 official destination marketing campaign after realising the positive effect the film had on its tourism industry (Brito, 2020; cf. Pratt, 2015). Similarly, while most Austrians look down on the 'inauthentic' depiction of their culture, tradition and Nazi past in *The Sound of Music*, Salzburg is still catering to and profiting immensely from an estimated 300,000 Sound of Music enthusiasts annually (Graml, 2004; Roesch, 2009; pers. comm. Tourism Board Salzburg 2018). Such dissonances between tourist expectation, local self-perception and financial prospect can be perceived as a choice between heritage identity versus economy (Tunbridge, 1994).

One of the places currently facing this conundrum is Croatia, particularly Dubrovnik. Dubrovnik's reimagining as Westeros' capital King's Landing is one of the latest and probably most powerful imaginaries asserted onto the Balkans within the last decades.

8.3.2. The many imaginaries of Dubrovnik

Even by Balkan standards, Dubrovnik has always been a place that was particularly defined by its in-betweenness. Located on the southernmost part of modern-day Croatia, Dubrovnik, the former mercantile Republic of Ragusa, has been wedged between large empires for centuries in a constant state of territorial, political, and ideological negotiation (Harris, 2006). The most tangible relic of its past geopolitical position is the Neum Corridor, a narrow stretch of land given to the Ottomans in 1699 to create a buffer between Ragusa and their archenemy and naval competitor Venice, to this day physically separating the Dubrovnik-Neretva province from the rest of Croatia (Pešalj, 2010). Dubrovnik has been a place that embodies both idyll and catastrophe, a perception that has been explored, reiterated and utilised throughout its historic, literary and cultural reception (Erstić, 2020). On the one hand, it was the mighty aristocratic Merchant Republic of Ragusa, a centre of art, literature and culture, and since the 19th century the so-called 'Pearl of the Adriatic' has been a popular destination for mass tourism; on the other hand, it has been besieged and on the brink of destruction many times, through natural disaster, such as the earthquake of 1667, the conquest by Napoleon in 1808 and subsequent absorption into the Austro-Hungarian Empire 1815, and the Siege of 1991-1992 by the Serbian Army during the Yugoslav Wars. It is in a constant state of liminality, existing between East and West,

Europe and the Balkans, Croatia and Ragusa, Dubrovnik and King's Landing, paradise and calamity, reality and fantasy. Even in the imagination of Game of Thrones, Dubrovnik is split between West and East. It stood in for both King's Landing, the capital of the Western continent, as well as (although in a very limited capacity and only during the second season) Qarth, the place furthest east that has been visited in the series and the books. Because of this in-betweenness, Dubrovnik provides a perfect canvas onto which various imaginaries can be projected. The most prominent imaginaries that are currently dominating Dubrovnik are the Republic of Ragusa, its role for within the Croatian independence movement, and King's Landing.

The role of Dubrovnik within the Croatian narrative has always been a 'baffling paradox' (Harris, 2006, p. 416; cf. Bellamy, 2003; Kirchner Reill, 2012). There has been a distinctive, recurring ambiguity about the national character of Dubrovnik since the early days of the Croatian national movement in the 19th century (Harris, 2006). For many Croatians Dubrovnik is often considered the cradle and safe haven of Croatian culture, language, and identity and a template for independence (Harris, 2006, pp. 418–419; Pátrovics, 2007). Liberty and independence have even been enshrined in Ragusa's official motto, '*Bene Pro Toto Libertas Venditur Auro* [Freedom is not to be sold for all the treasures in the world]' (H. T. Riley, 1866, p. 274). While it must be noted that the common narrative of an 'independent' and 'sovereign' Republic of Ragusa is an anachronistic oversimplification as the Republic only remained quasi-independent through paying bribes and tributes to the dominant neighbouring power, Dubrovnik's past independence is highly important for both the local and national identity (Harris, 2006, p. 424). Some interview respondents, such as tour guide Davor Majić, echoed this sentiment. Due to the circumstance of 'Dubrovnik being free, it became a place where our culture was preserved' while referring to Dubrovnik as 'the soul of Croatia' (Davor, Dubrovnik 25.09.2018). This perception was particularly reinforced in 1991–1992, when the Serbian army laid siege to the old town, as remembered by Davor who was devastated when he saw the images of destruction on the television back in the day:

> When I saw the news of Dubrovnik being attacked, I couldn't believe it, I was in shock. [...] I felt a little bit worse about the news of Dubrovnik being attacked than my own hometown. (Davor, Dubrovnik 25.09.2018)

For him, it was not rock and mortar that were under attack, but Croatian identity itself. However, he also added, that due to 'the fact that Dubrovnik was on everybody's TV screens on a daily basis helped us achieve our independence' by becoming a symbol for the Croatian struggle for freedom and fostering sympathy and support worldwide (Bing, 2017; de la Brosse & Brautović, 2017). Thus, Dubrovnik was not only the embodiment of Croatian culture and liberty but became an important, global symbol to fulfil what the first Croatian President Franjo Tuđman called the 'centuries-old dream of the Croatian people' of independent statehood (cited in Bellamy, 2003, p. 32).

After the Yugoslav Wars, Croatia tried to revitalise its image as an attractive, Adriatic tourist destination by culturally reframing and repositioning itself 'as being identical to its Western European neighbors' in contrast to the 'Balkan' or 'Eastern Europe' (Blanuša, 2015; D. Hall, 2002; Rivera, 2008). 'The borders of Croatia are the borders of Western Europe', Tuđman declared (cited in Goldsworthy, 2013, p. 9; Razsa & Lindstrom, 2004). Although significant efforts have been undertaken to purge any notion of 'Balkan-ness' (D. Hall, 2002, p. 328), its global perceptions and subsequent images associated with Croatia remained firmly tied to typical stereotypes of Balkanism until its recent reimagining through Game of Thrones. Even now, interview respondents confessed their 'Balkan bias'. One American visitor I encountered in Northern Ireland admitted that before seeing Game of Thrones they thought 'Croatia […] was just like an Eastern European country. But it looks very pretty' and now were eager to visit as soon as possible (Castle Ward 30.06.2018), revealing that this region and beauty have been incompatible features within foreign perceptions. This apparently changed with the global reimagining of Dubrovnik as King's Landing. Indeed, Game of Thrones constitutes the first time since the Siege of 1991–1992 that Dubrovnik appeared on the screens on a global scale. Even more so, for many people around the globe, King's Landing was the first and thus most formative contact with Dubrovnik and Croatia. While King's Landing is an incredibly violent place full of murder and treachery, sieges and conquest, it ironically rather distracts from the same features that would usually also be associated with the Balkans, and even more specifically Dubrovnik itself as one of the most devastating symbols of the Yugoslav Wars. By becoming King's Landing, Dubrovnik and to a wider extent Croatia could unlink their landscape from stereotypical depictions and images of the Balkans and the Yugoslav Wars, showcasing their heritage and changing the global imagination of the place.

For the Croatian tour guide Anne-Femica, 'Game of Thrones was like a phoenix for Dubrovnik after the war' (Anne-Femica, Dubrovnik 23.09.2018), constituting a true new beginning for the city's reputation (see above 'phoenix tourism'). Similarly, Ivan Vuković, tour guide and self-proclaimed initiator of the local Game of Thrones tourism industry (by supposedly being the first who offered themed tours), saw this shift in perception as a major opportunity for Dubrovnik and, of course, for his business:

> It's funny because Dubrovnik was always recognized as Dubrovnik. And now you only see people [labelling us] as King's Landing. But I'm pretty glad, because of one reason: they're labelling us as Game of Thrones, [while] 15 years ago, they'd been labelling us as a war zone. […] I'm glad they talk about Game of Thrones. It's a huge hit, we get some free marketing – better than to be recognized for something bad, which happened in the past. […] For me, this is great because a lot more young people come from all over the world, who will tell everyone what an amazing place Dubrovnik is. People were calling it hidden gem, *now […] people know that we are in Europe*. (Ivan from Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik 26.09.2018; my emphasis)

However, this leaves many locals, particularly heritage and tourism officials but also those who economically benefit significantly from Game of Thrones, in a dilemma. On the one hand, the fantasy of King's Landing has not only wiped away any reservations Western travellers might still have had to visit a Balkan country, especially after the recent conflict, but also shows off some of the most beautiful aspects of the heritage while simultaneously being highly profitable for the local tourism industry. On the other hand, tourism is meant to foster the national narrative and promote the local memory of the Republic of Ragusa. This predicament has been best summarised by Bogdan, a Romanian citizen who has made Dubrovnik his home for many years and runs a local Escape Room Experience – one of his rooms being King's Landing-themed, the other Ragusa-themed:

> I think Game of Thrones kind of fits Dubrovnik. It's medieval-ish, it's like high class and aristocratic. […] The only problem is that people know Dubrovnik as King's Landing, not as Dubrovnik and for what it stands in real life. […] They don't know Dubrovnik for the small mighty Republic that it was. They know it because of King's Landing! […] You have no time to learn about the culture because everything is just Game of Thrones. And that's what sells the best. Of course, the advantage is that it's the easiest way to make money. [But] so, the culture of Dubrovnik is lost, and the

culture of Game of Thrones is built. (Bogdan from Romania, owner Escape Room Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik 16.10.2018)

Even though entirely fictional, King's Landing has become a competitor for the local imaginary of Dubrovnik as the Merchant Republic of Ragusa, symbol of Croatian independence and defiance of outside intruders, and cradle of its culture, creating a dissonance between those two heritage identities. These dissonances manifest themselves most prominently in the absence of any official endorsement or even acknowledgement of Game of Thrones' impact on the heritage landscape from local heritage and tourism authorities, as well as the common practice of utilising fictional toponyms that have established themselves through tourist performance (see Chapter 6).

8.3.3. Renaming Dubrovnik: The Dissonance of Toponyms

As illustrated in Chapters 5 and 6, the re-naming of places and spaces creates new geographical imaginaries and realities. The imaginary cities of King's Landing and Qarth have left their mark on Dubrovnik's monuments in many ways, including the fictional toponyms that have now become synonymous with many locations. Various heritage sites across Dubrovnik are now commonly referred to by their fictional name. Kolorina Bay became Blackwater Bay, the Jesuit Steps turned into the Walk of Shame, and Fort Lovrijenac and Minčeta Tower are now referred to as the Red Keep and the House of the Undying respectively. Even Dubrovnik itself has turned into King's Landing on digital maps and on social media through geotagging and the use of hashtags that have a direct impact on how these spaces are represented digitally. Just the fact that many of my respondents would, and indeed could only, refer to them by their fictional name, as well as local tour guides using them colloquially, highlights how quickly and thoroughly the new imaginary places have become reality. However, this ubiquitous use of fictional names of places and monuments has ushered in a new phase of contested heritage in Dubrovnik, as toponyms not only impact how we perceive and identify spaces and places but also lay claim to them (Alderman, 2008; Light, 2014; Rose-Redwood et al., 2017).

Alderman (2008, p. 196) describes that 'renaming represents a way of creating new connections between the past and the present' and that the 'practice of naming, like all heritages, is inherently dissonant and open to multiple and sometimes competing interpretations' (L. Smith, 2006; cf. Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Re-naming of places

and spaces and asserting new narratives is usually associated with geopolitical motivations by governmental elites such as nation building and the creation of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983; Helleland, 2012; Milo, 1997), or to assert power and create territorial claims in conflict and post-conflict as well as colonial and post-colonial contexts, as countless case studies illustrate, including Romania (Light, 2004), India (Breymaier, 2003), Singapore (Yeoh, 1996), Ireland (Nash, 1999), Nairobi and Dakar (Njoh, 2017), or the tragic current example of the war of Russia against Ukraine, where placenames such as Kyiv and Kiev, Kharkiv and Kharkov are as fought over as the cities themselves. Toponyms allow dominant groups to impose meaning and draw attention to certain identities of places and spaces while simultaneously distracting or taking away attention from other narratives (Berg & Kearns, 1996).

Croatia, like many other post-conflict and post-colonial societies, is aware that renaming 'has the power to wipe out the past and call forth the new' (Tuan, 1991, p. 688). After declaring independence and fighting the Yugoslav Wars, Croatia put significant efforts into crafting new heritage narratives and a cohesive national identity. This was, in part, enforced through 'a purified or rewritten version of history which is based largely in the exclusion of the "other"', attempting to create an ethnically homogenous nation of Croats (Goulding & Domic, 2009, p. 91; Jović, 2012). One of the most prominent measures was to 'cleanse' Serbian toponyms and monuments from the landscape and replace them with Croatian ones to avoid any contestation of its national character (Goulding & Domic, 2009, p. 96; Rihtman-Auguštin, 2004). The policy of re-naming as a means to create a new national identity and to erase any trace of former oppressors has been a prominent phenomenon across post-Communist Balkans and Eastern Europe (Light, 2004; Milevska, 2016). Therefore, the introduction of new place names from an outside source, even if entirely imaginary, might be received, and even if only subconsciously, as a contestation of newly realised identity claims and thus reopening the still fresh wounds of a recent memory conflict.

When asked about the common use of fictional place names for individual places and Dubrovnik as a whole, some reactions range from bemused scepticism to rejection. Tour guide Josip expresses that a constant referral to his home as King's Landing has become a nuisance:

> Around Dubrovnik, in the streets and side streets, you're gonna hear the names of King's Landing dropped on a regular basis. […] They probably don't even care that the country's called Croatia. You have people that do not care that they're in Dubrovnik, for them it's only King's Landing and nothing else. So that's the part that gets a little bit over the line sometimes. (Josip from Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik 26.09.2018)

However, he later admits that 'the impact of Game of Thrones is so big, that even us locals at certain points, let's say, call Kolorina Bay the Blackwater Bay. […] Doing it on a day-by-day basis, like through work and everything, the name kind of sticks'. It is here where the insidious nature of the above described 'imperialism of imagination' is best illustrated, as the local population must utilise the new toponyms on a daily basis, as visitors expect those places presented and referred to by those names, until these place names become reality (see Chapter 6). Almost as an act of resistance against the imaginary take-over, Davor refuses to use the fictional place names exclusively without also mentioning the actual name, thinking it would be 'problematic' and 'disrespectful' to the place, particularly in regard to the significance for the culture and identity of Dubrovnik and Croatia:

> I think that [local] people would find it maybe even a little bit insulting if they hear that that wonderful fort that guaranteed our freedom for so many centuries will be referred to as something from a TV show. I think that a lot of people would actually have a bit of a problem with that. (Davor, Dubrovnik 25.09.2018)

Paula goes even further, expressing strong disdain for those who exclusively utilise the fictional name of her beloved hometown:

> I hate when they call Dubrovnik King's Landing. Oh, I really hate it. […] 'King's Landing! King's Landing! I'm in King's Landing!' – I hate it. When I hear that on the street I just... I get mad. Because I love my city. […] Dubrovnik was here even before King's Landing. We have a far more interesting history than just Game of Thrones. No, we're not only King's Landing. We're much more! (Paula from Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik 24.09.2018)

'We are much more' in an expression that has been used by several informants throughout my fieldwork in Dubrovnik. Ivan Vuković once printed 'Dubrovnik is much more than King's Landing' on a t-shirt and wore it on his tours (see Chapter

5). It articulates both frustration and a sense of pride. Frustration, because they feel Dubrovnik is reduced to its on-screen representation; pride, because the people of Dubrovnik have a close and deep relationship with their city and want to safeguard the history of the glorious Merchant Republic of Ragusa. And like Ragusa itself, its history and heritage must be defended against any invader that tries to capture it, real or imaginary.

8.3.4. 'We are much more': (Official) Narratives of Dubrovnik

'[T]oday, more than thirty years after their fall and impoverishment, we see how these nobles prance along like horses, convinced that they possess a high and inherited culture which is the gift of their families […] Even the little people and the craftsmen live in the conviction that they are something greater and special, because they are *Dubrovčani*.' (Heinrich Stieglitz, 1850; cited in Harris, 2006, p. 414)

Figure 8.6: Photographs and information about the destruction during the siege on the wall of the reconstructed baroque palace in which the local artist Ivo Grbić (1931-2020) lived and worked.

Figure 8.7: A mortar hole enshrined in the Franciscan monastery.

Unlike Belfast, where the recent conflict is enshrined within the local heritage landscape itself through countless memorials, and indeed a part of the identity and utilised for tourism (see above), the conflict that occurred in Dubrovnik remains largely absent, both physically and narratively. Apart from a very few preserved mortar holes and photographs on the wall of one reconstructed baroque palace in a side alley there is little to no trace of this conflict for the untrained eye throughout the old town of Dubrovnik (fig. 8.6-8). While there are several museums within the city walls that celebrate various aspects of Dubrovnik's culture and history during the time of the Republic of Ragusa, the Homeland

War Museum is located on the top of the 412 metres high Mount Srđ, which either takes an exhausting hike or an expensive cable car ride to reach. It is located within the partly boarded up, almost dangerously ruinous looking Napoleonic Fortress and an easy to miss entrance, almost as if it ought not be found. And unlike all museums about Ragusa, the Homeland War Museum is not included as part of the 'Dubrovnik Card', a special ticket that, according to its booklet, 'is the key to opening all doors to the city'. Throughout the cultural and touristic offers and promotion it is almost as if history ended in 1808 simultaneously with the Republic of Ragusa.

Figure 8.8: Napoleonic Fort Imperial on the top of Srđ Hill that houses the Homeland War Museum.

Similarly, while there is an overwhelming presence of Game of Thrones throughout the city, manifesting itself through tours, countless merchandise shops, tourist performances and even a Game of Thrones exhibition with an Iron Throne on Lokrum Island (which, however, is a relic from a previous government without any further development or advertisement; see Chapter 4), it is the absences of Game of Thrones in certain spaces that are revealing. Throughout my fieldwork, cracks became apparent in the façade of this Game of Thrones-saturated frontstage, allowing a glimpse into a much more complex backstage. Unlike many other places visited, there is no official acknowledgement of Game of Thrones throughout Dubrovnik such as destination marketing or site

interpretation. Information about Game of Thrones has been difficult to find on any of Dubrovnik's online platforms and if available only minimal. Filming location maps, although created, were out of print for the duration of my fieldwork in 2018 (fig. 8.9). When explicitly asking for them at any of the tourist information desks, most of the staff were not even aware of their existence. However, these absences have since been substituted by maps found on walking tour websites (fig. 4.25).
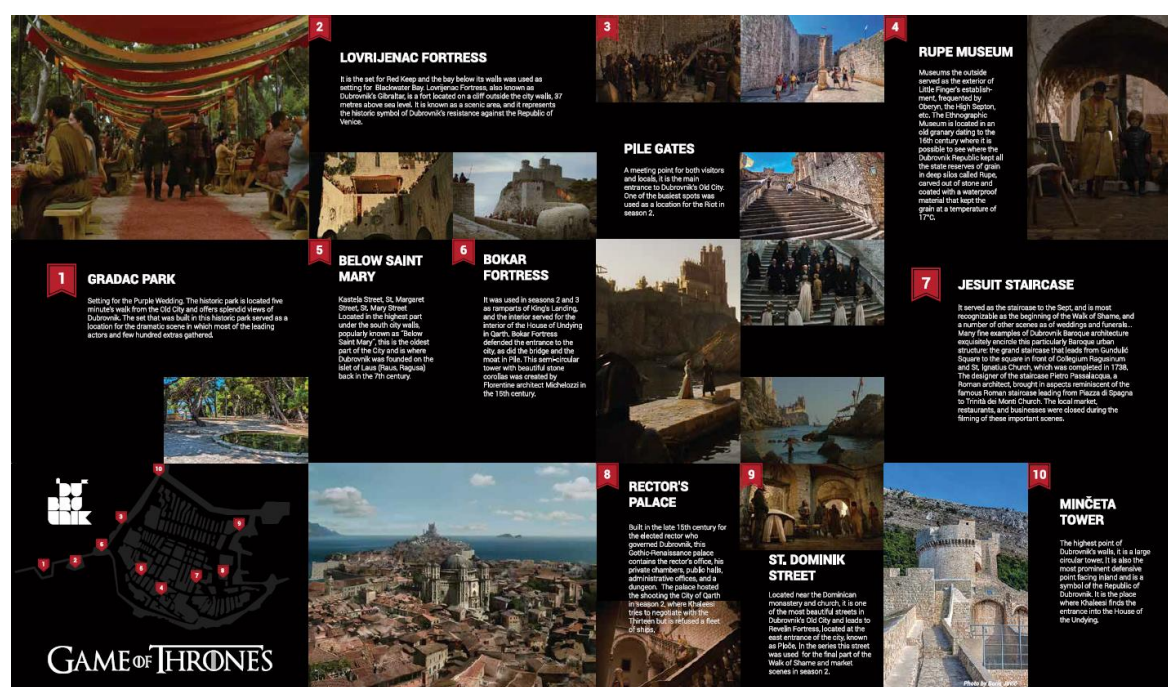
Figure 8.9: Official filming locations map by Dubrovnik Tourist Board. Out of print during my fieldwork and difficult to find on their website; https://tzdubrovnik.hr/user_files/matija/got_map_opt.pdf (accessed: 25.04.2022)

Although there are countless souvenir shops that almost exclusively sell Game of Thrones merchandise, none of the shops of museums or attractions, even if they have been prominently featured on the series such as the Rector's Palace, the Rupe Museum or the city walls, stock any products related to Game of Thrones, in contrast to Castillo de Almodóvar del Río, Osuna, Castle Ward or the Ulster Museum, all of which prominently offer a vast array of books and merchandise to, if nothing else, profit financially from the hype surrounding Game of Thrones.

These absences cannot only be explained as merely part of the re-framing strategy of Croatia, which purposefully tried to avoid any association with recent conflict and thus 'Balkan-ness' (D. Hall, 2002, p. 328; Rivera, 2008, pp. 624–625) or, in the case of Game of Thrones, with concerns about overtourism (see Chapter 4), but to some degree also with local self-perception, a 'Ragusan exceptionalism' that has been described by outside

observers and fellow countrymen both past and present (Harris, 2006, p. 414; see quote above). The people of Dubrovnik are proud of their local heritage and will let everybody else know at every possible occasion. Ivica Grileć, Director of Lokrum Island Nature Reserve until 2020, described how for centuries, Dubrovnik existed as an 'island on land', acknowledging that this might not only have led to a distinct local identity but also 'has influence on [their] attitude':

> If you spend some more time in Dubrovnik [you will see] how proud people of Dubrovnik are of their heritage. […] Game of Thrones is really a good base to earn some money for everyone here – but they will never ever let [any] film, including Game of Thrones, [outshine] the city of Dubrovnik. Because if you talk to any citizen of Dubrovnik, they will tell you the stories of how Dubrovnik was built, how the Dubrovnik Republic was trading and their diplomacy skills, how they survived on the edge of the Ottoman Empire. At one moment [in time they had] the biggest trade navy in the Mediterranean, they were one of the first states that recognised the independence of the United States of America. (Ivica Grileć from Dubrovnik, Lokrum Island Nature Reserve, Lokrum 09.10.2018)

Indeed, like in Northern Ireland, one of the reoccurring feelings highlighted by locals when asked about the connection of Dubrovnik and Game of Thrones was 'pride'. However, the sense of pride described by most respondents in Northern Ireland is in regard to the impact of the fantasy on their landscapes, how it gave their heritage not only well-deserved recognition, but even taking ownership and adopting Game of Thrones as part of it. The responses received in Dubrovnik usually express their pride in opposition to the new imaginary.

As Ivica Grileć stated and immediately confirmed by his own divagation into Ragusan history, conversations about the impact of Game of Thrones on Dubrovnik would often quickly digress into historical excursions and highlighting the exploits of the Republic of Ragusa. When asking Ana Hilje, Head of the Department of Culture and Heritage, why Dubrovnik is not acknowledging and using Game of Thrones in a similar fashion like other sites or at least financially profit by selling products at attractions used for filming, she responded the following:

> Because that's maybe the difference between Dubrovnik and other small sites which are not well known for their culture or heritage […] They want to embrace Game of

Thrones [so] they will be recognised. But I think Dubrovnik has lots of things, lots of programmes, lots of culture, lots of heritage, monuments; everything is very well known in the whole world […] We are the city of culture in Croatia, Dubrovnik is very well known in the whole world. [For] example, through the Dubrovnik Republic we had the first orphanage, we had the first pharmacy. We had lots of things as first in the world, so I think that's something that we need to put a highlight on, not just momentary things. (Ana Hilje from Dubrovnik, Head of Department of Culture and Heritage, Dubrovnik 25.09.2018)

Dubrovnik and its people pride themselves to have been the first on many occasions. Apart from the firsts stated above by Ana Hilje and Ivica Grileć, during my stay I also learned that during the 'Golden Age of Ragusa' (14th to 18th centuries) it was one of the many ingenious sons of Dubrovnik who laid the groundwork for Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and it was here where double-entry bookkeeping and, particularly relevant in a time of a pandemic, the quarantine was invented. While this study does not aim to verify, refute or debate the accuracy of these claims – which are in some cases true, many vastly overstated and others not verifiable – it illustrates the local self-perception. While this is often out of genuine pride, sometimes, as illustrated by Ana Hilje's comment, it appears to be utilised to downplay the impact of Game of Thrones on their city. The tour guide Anne-Femica confirms this assessment, describing that Game of Thrones 'is far bigger than anyone wants to admit [and] they talk it down because Game of Thrones does a better job in attracting tourism than them' (Anne-Femica, Dubrovnik 23.09.2018).

This is further illustrated by some local authorities, including the Deputy Mayor and the Head of the Department of Tourism, who were quite quick to dismiss the impact on Dubrovnik and its perception globally by always being eager to point out that Dubrovnik has been a popular destination for tourism since the 19th century, the share of Game of Thrones tourism is 'maybe 5%' at best (although interviews revealed that there are no official numbers or studies on visitor motivation available that could either refute or confirm these assumptions), and that the city has been utilised for many other films and television programmes past, present and future, including huge Hollywood productions:

The filming didn't start with Game of Thrones, it started in 1918. There were several films and very many known Hollywood people coming here in the '50s and '60s. (Jelka Tepšić from Dubrovnik, Deputy Mayor, Dubrovnik 18.10.2018)

There was not only Game of Thrones, there was Robin Hood. We had the announcement that James Bond will be filmed here as well. There was Star Wars at the Stradun Main Street. So, it's not only Game of Thrones. […] Maybe Star Wars is more popular somewhere [else]. (Marko Miljanic from Dubrovnik, Head of Department of Tourism, Dubrovnik 28.09.2018)

However, no other production would come close to the popularity, cultural and financial relevance that Game of Thrones had and still has on Dubrovnik. Further, Dubrovnik was ultimately not featured in the new James Bond film *No Time to Die* (2021); *Robin Hood* (2018) was a massive box office flop that will even struggle to be a footnote in cinematic history; and *Star Wars Episode VIII* (2017) would not leave a lasting mark on Dubrovnik, although not for a lack of trying as local vendors and tour providers tried to replicate Game of Thrones' success. By the time I arrived in Dubrovnik, a mere ten months after the film's release, only one dedicated Star Wars tour remained (which would cease by November 2018) and shops sold their Star Wars merchandise at 40% off (fig. 8.12) – while Game of Thrones tours and merchandise remain popular even in 2022 and persists as one of the first points of association with Dubrovnik (if posts on social media and walking tour schedules online can be believed).

Figure 8.10: The Force is weak with Star Wars. Throughout Dubrovnik Star Wars merchandise was offered on a -40% discount, while Game of Thrones merchandise was sold full price.

Nevertheless, even though being dismissive over the impact of Game of Thrones, there seems to be genuine concern by both local officials and Croatian academics that Dubrovnik could be outshone by the imagination of King's Landing. While praising the resilience of the local identity, Jelka Tepšić would rather not take any chances by promoting Dubrovnik through Game of Thrones' imaginary:

> I think [Dubrovnik's] identity is very strong. […] So, we'll never actually allow Game of Thrones to take over the identity of Dubrovnik. […] So, it's very important that we never market Dubrovnik as King's Landing. […] People sometimes don't understand that we are a UNESCO World Heritage Site and that people actually live here. We are not a Disneyland. (Jelka Tepšić, Dubrovnik 18.10.2018)

Being asked to present the case of Dubrovnik and Game of Thrones at a cultural heritage conference in November 2018, Ana Hilje was particularly concerned with the negative impact the fantasy could have on Dubrovnik's identity, something that must be avoided at all costs:

> It is crucial to prevent Dubrovnik from becoming known as the backdrop for the popular series rather than *an important historical European centre for culture, science and diplomacy*. […] Uncontrolled promotion could harm Dubrovnik's identity. [Tourism experts] fear that instead of being perceived as the Pearl of the Adriatic carrying a message of sustainability and flourishment *in the face of historical adversities*, it could become a mere movie set. (transcript provided by Ana Hilje, 16.10.2018, my emphasis)

This excerpt reflects both the importance of the above-mentioned reframing of Croatia as returning back to Europe and being perceived as such (cf. Blanuša, 2015) as well as the complexity of Dubrovnik as a memory space that defines itself mostly through its opposition to and defiance of outside forces. Whether these forces are mercantile competitors, bordering empires, invading forces, or imaginary realms appears to be of little import. Game of Thrones and the imaginary city of King's Landing is inserted into a list of 'historical adversities' that Dubrovnik has had to defend itself from.

Although the above views represent mostly the official heritage and tourism discourse of Dubrovnik, the rather ambivalent relationship between local identity and foreign imaginary can be felt even with those whose business and livelihood depends on presenting King's Landing to Game of Thrones fans. Several locals who work as tour guides or in shops that

mainly sell Game of Thrones merchandise disclosed their conflicted feelings and almost hoped that the Game of Thrones craze would soon end. This is not only revealed when explicitly seeking their opinion on the matter through interviews, but also is publicly displayed, as the cases of Ivan's 'Dubrovnik is much more than King's Landing' t-shirt and the previously mentioned 'Meet the Guides' blog by Dubrovnik Walking Tours illustrate (see Chapter 5). In said blog, all guides present themselves through a series of questions, eleven of fifteen being directly related or in reference to Game of Thrones. However, some questions posed to the guides and their subsequent responses mirror the comments made by various heritage and tourism authorities above, downplaying the impact of Game of Thrones (in a questionnaire dominated by Game of Thrones), and reiterating the perception that King's Landing's and Dubrovnik's narratives stand in direct competition with each other:

- People have been saying the Game of Thrones had a huge impact on Dubrovnik when in reality, the number of guests coming solely for GOT is smaller compared to cruise tourism, how does it look from your perspective?
- What are your thoughts on some people being vocal that doing just Game of Thrones tour diminishes the importance of the heritage of this historic town?
- Do you prefer talking about the history of Dubrovnik or Game of Thrones fiction? (Questions from 'Meet our Guides' on the website of Dubrovnik Walking Tours; https://www.dubrovnik-walking-tours.com/dubrovnik-guide/meet-our-guides; accessed: 06.05.2022)

These reactions regarding an erosion of Dubrovnik's cultural identity through an outside reimagination have already been raised by Croatian researchers at a time when Game of Thrones tourism was still in its infancy:

In Game of Thrones, Dubrovnik is turned into a fictional city, so additional efforts are needed to remind the viewers of the real locations [and] Dubrovnik's identity […] to make sure that the race for attention or profit does not take away any of the unique aura that Dubrovnik has managed to preserve throughout history. (Skoko, 2014, p. 188; translation by Dubrovnik Department of Culture and Heritage)

Interviews with various policymakers as well as my own personal experience of Dubrovnik's heritage offer reveal, however, that years after Skoko's assessment, there are no or only half-hearted strategies in place to counter these unwanted narratives. Oftentimes

it seems, that they prefer to let 'Dubrovnik speak for itself', something that has been noted by both tourism researchers and somewhat disgruntled tour guides (Kesić and Pavlić 2011; Šuta and Kuznin 2016; Pivčević et al. 2018; see Chapter 4). Bogdan, although being slightly concerned about King's Landing's influence himself, thinks that the sentiments from heritage and tourist authorities of Game of Thrones taking over is 'hypocritical' as they have 'failed to promote their own culture', referring to a lack of site interpretation and effort put into presenting the local narrative (Bogdan, Dubrovnik 16.10.2018). Similarly, Denis Orlić, the secretary of the Society of Friends of Dubrovnik Antiquities (the charity tasked to conserve the city walls), critiques the lack of vision and certain double-standards but also thinks that Dubrovnik's identity is as solid as its city walls, being one of the few respondents who are seeing Game of Thrones as adding, rather than taking away from the historic value of the place:

> If they have reservations about this story, about Game of Thrones' story, then they should have some good alternative, and I don't know if they [do]. […] And those people are really hypocritical because one way or the other, we earn money with it, let's be frank [chuckles] […] Nobody can change our identity. Of course, it's up to us whether we want to keep our identity or forget about our identity. […] Probably most of these people who say so have not the faintest idea what our history was […] they have some Romantic vision of history. […] We must remember what came before, but definitely this can or should be incorporated in our history because obviously Game of Thrones is today's worldwide phenomenon. And if this phenomenon took [place] in Dubrovnik, Dubrovnik became part of this phenomenon. (Denis Orlić from Dubrovnik, Society of Friends of Dubrovnik Antiquities, Dubrovnik 11.10.2018)

While Denis Orlić remains one of the few respondents that would go as far as explicitly describing Game of Thrones as a part of Dubrovnik's history, most tour guides still regard Game of Thrones as an opportunity beyond financial benefit. Josip, like several other tour guides I spoke to, although regarding Game of Thrones 'not quite part of heritage or history' of Dubrovnik as this would require it to have 'spawn[ed] from here directly and hav[ing] roots in our culture', he acknowledges that it can still provide an excellent platform to generate interest in and thus promote Dubrovnik's heritage (see Chapter 5):

> The heritage is here, the heritage is not gonna go away. Obviously, Dubrovnik existed before Game of Thrones, it is going to exist after the Game of Thrones, but why not use Game of Thrones as a medium to showcase that beautiful city? […] People are

going to get in contact with our heritage. Game of Thrones is going to attract history buffs, Game of Thrones is going to attract fantasy buffs. Why not get both? (Josip. Dubrovnik 26.09.2018)

This pragmatic approach, although remaining largely unendorsed publicly since 2017, seems to be the status quo under which Dubrovnik has been operating since the inception of Game of Thrones. While Dubrovnik and King's Landing have a somewhat difficult and at times dissonant relationship, its reimagination as the capital of Westeros spread the word of its heritage across the world. Once, 'a war zone' and 'a hidden gem' on the Balkans, now, a capital of global pop-culture and recognised as part of Europe.

8.3.5. A Tale of Two Imaginary Cities

The reimagining of Dubrovnik as King's Landing has created a space of contestation, conflict and contradiction. This case study has not only revealed that long-established patterns of power-relations between those who re-imagine and those who are re-imagined are not only still in place but have even been intensified due to the dominance of global mass-media. The new imaginary of Game of Thrones might have lifted Dubrovnik out of tropes of Balkanisms and preconceptions of war, yet this was achieved through the mechanisms of 'imperialism of imagination' and at least to some degree at the cost of the historic imaginary of Ragusa.

For the first time since the outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars, Dubrovnik appeared on global screens, thus, finally changing the global imaginary associated with the region. The city was deemed Western enough, not only to become a major place of Western-produced and consumed pop-culture, but indeed to be reimagined as the capital of the fittingly (some might say uncreatively) named western continent Westeros. However, like most cases of 'imperialism of imagination', it was also considered Eastern enough so the fantasy can largely disregard the cultural identities of the filming locations, and globally replace them with the reimagination (Goldsworthy, 2013, p. 224). The 'imperialism of imagination' that is affecting Dubrovnik shows how a culturally dominant power can assert narratives globally while local narratives can be easily overwritten. What chances do the narrative and identity of a small harbour town in a relatively young, small nation, with a language spoken by only a few million and a largely unknown culture and heritage stand when competing with an easily accessible and entertaining fantasy imposed by the world's most

popular and successful television programme that dominated the global pop-cultural landscape for almost a decade, backed by a multinational media and tourism industry and English as the 21st century lingua franca? Whether the recipients of the newly established imaginary geographies like it or not, it is often beyond their influence. Many, especially when presented with opportunities as profitable as Game of Thrones, arrange themselves with the new circumstances in an act of 'self-Westerosation', such as offering products catering to the new fictional identities, thus further contributing to engraining it into the landscape.

However, reimagining post-conflict nations such as Croatia, which only recently regained the authority to declare what is their community, heritage, and identity, and, more importantly, what is not, may invoke recent memory conflicts, especially in a complex and symbolic memory space such as Dubrovnik in which deep pasts are elaborately have been constructed and fostered over centuries (Bellamy, 2003; Harris, 2006). Although the Republic of Ragusa has ended over two-hundred years ago and is now almost as mythical and imaginary as King's Landing for anyone who visits Dubrovnik, it remains alive and omnipresent for the people of Dubrovnik through its grand architecture, its ancient history, and a shared identity as Ragusans who defied all outside competitors and enemies for hundreds of years.

By imposing the imaginary of King's Landing onto Dubrovnik and repurposing its heritage landscape entirely or *pars pro toto* as a 'coming home space' to live out their fantasy, the transnational community of Game of Thrones fans, at least on a symbolic level, have taken ownership of certain aspects of the heritage landscape of Dubrovnik (see Chapters 5 and 6). Although created entirely through fantasy fiction, this diegetic heritage, like all heritages, is inherently dissonant, particularly in complex memory spaces like Dubrovnik. Even if this process seems 'unintentional, temporary, of trivial importance, limited in its effects and concealed' (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996, p. 21), by providing a different lens through which the heritage can be read, named and experienced, it can be regarded as a contestation and questioning of the established heritage narratives and AHD (cf. L. Smith, 2006).

On a final note, it must be said that Dubrovnik is of course 'much more than King's Landing' – observant viewers and readers of the series will indeed see more parallels between the history and culture of the Republic of Ragusa and the city state of Qarth that

Dubrovnik portrayed during Game of Thrones' second season. The independent mercantile city state of Qarth, ruled by a consortium of thirteen aristocrats (Ragusa, in comparison, was ruled by eleven elected aristocrats), unimaginably wealthy through trade, at the crossroads between continents, and, as if the parallels were not apparent enough, its walls have been lauded to be one of the architectural wonders of the world. The following self-description of the Qartheen Pyat Pree to Daenerys Targaryen sounds oddly familiar to anyone who has spent extensive time with any proud Ragusan:

> Qarth is the greatest city that ever was or ever will be. It is the center of the world, the gate between north and south, the bridge between east and west, ancient beyond memory of man and so magnificent that Saathos the Wise put out his eyes after gazing upon Qarth for the first time, because he knew that all he saw thereafter should look squalid and ugly by comparison. (George R. R. Martin, A Clash of Kings, Chapter 27)

Even Qarth's somewhat 'dubious claims […] to be the place where civilisation as we know developed' (Martin et al., 2014, p. 13) is almost satirically reminiscent of all the supposedly cultural achievements of the Republic of Ragusa that I have heard so often during my many conversations. If the focus and attention of all visitors would not have been on King's Landing, but rather be identified as the 'greatest city that ever was or ever will be', maybe the Ragusans might have looked more favourable onto to their fictional counterpart and those who sought it out – or, it might have awoken the memory of their old naval rival Venice, encouraging the competition between the two imaginaries even further.

8.4. Conclusion

This chapter and its two case studies have shown how the same imaginary realm can interact differently with different existing heritage landscapes. On the one hand, attaching the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones – even though a heritage of blood and death itself – onto post-conflict societies has tremendously impacted the perceptions of these troubled landscapes. Previously associated with war, civil unrest and negative stereotypes, their pop-cultural representation has significantly improved their real-life reputation and thus helped not only to overcome negative associations but build new positive narratives. In the case of Northern Ireland, this was even embraced and fostered by the local population and its official branding by declaring itself 'Game of Thrones Territory' and utilising the diegetic heritage of this imaginary realm to promote itself to the world. On the other hand, Dubrovnik's current policymakers and even many of those directly profiting from being re-

imagined as King's Landing are at best indifferent towards Game of Thrones and the impact it had on the use and engagement with the city's heritage. This can be explained by the differences in what societal role heritage plays within the respective communities, what ideas, values and attitudes are projected onto them and what functions and purposes it serves. While heritage in Northern Ireland is something that has divided its community internally, in Dubrovnik it is its heritage that has kept society united for centuries.

In Northern Ireland, an internally divided community has produced a divided heritage landscape that kept the underlying divisions and conflicts in the present, for which Game of Thrones was able to provide one of the first unifying narratives that both sides could finally unequivocally subscribe to. In contrast, the people of Dubrovnik are unified in their opposition to outside forces. Dubrovnik's heritage, in the case of the mighty city walls quite literally, is what stood between their freedom and their subjugation for centuries, something that is, not least due to the recent siege of the early 1990s, strongly engrained within the local identity and self-perception. Ragusa's heritage protected the Ragusans, thus, the Ragusans are very protective of their heritage and feel the need to defend it from any invader, real or imaginary. While the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones has provided an alternative shared heritage for the divided community of Northern Ireland, it is perceived as a source of division in the more coherent community of Dubrovnik. Therefore, these case studies illustrate not only how previous heritages and narratives are directly influencing how new heritages are negotiated, but also that heritages are both imagined and real and always at the centre of identity conflicts.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION
The power of stories

> **Vignette 9.1: Final(e) thoughts**
>
> It was one of my last days in the field in late September 2019. Almost like clockwork, the tour group came around the corner of Papaliceva ulice in Split's old town and stopped next to the gate of the City Museum. The guide was holding up her flip book with a screenshot to illustrate the importance of the location they had just arrived at. 'This', she dramatically proclaimed, 'is the "Kill the Masters"-Street', referencing the scene of the slave riots of Meereen in which slave masters discovered a graffiti stating the same, mere seconds before finding their violent ends. The group listened carefully as the guide described what had taken place in this narrow medieval street over the course of the series, mentioning behind the scenes gossip and made the usual quips on geographical inconsistencies. In short – a by-the-books Game of Thrones tour as I had witnessed them so many times before. However, something happened this time, something that made me stop, listen closer, and wonder. Something that only could have happened at this time in my research, the time after the last episode of Game of Thrones had finally aired. The guide's concluding remarks were that she knows 'the ending wasn't that great, but we can all agree that Game of Thrones is still the best show ever made, right?'. She was met with silence, with complete indifference. Yet, nonetheless, all of them were still participating in and, most importantly, paying for a Game of Thrones tour.

There are several overarching conclusions that can be made about the nature and status of heritage in the modern, global and highly mediatised society in which phenomena like Game of Thrones take place. Not only has this case study of Game of Thrones' diegetic realm illustrated how pop-cultural narratives and social media significantly changed how we use, engage with, and perform heritage, this research has also confirmed and refuted various assumptions about heritage. This concluding chapter presents several original contributions to knowledge and ties together the central findings of this thesis. This further includes an examination of the prospects of the diegetic realm of Game of Thrones and the

paradigm shifts it encompassed within the heritage discourse, and an outlook for what lies ahead in the study of pop-culture and heritage in the not-so-distant future.

9.1. 'You know something, Jon Snow': Contributions to Knowledge

This thesis not only tells a compelling story of the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones, its fans and which new experiences can be encountered at the series' filming locations, but also significantly extends our understanding of the impact of narrative fiction and pop-culture on the perception, engagement, and creation of transnational heritage landscapes in contemporary media culture. Thereby, this research makes substantial contributions to knowledge in the fields of heritage studies and visual culture, moving forward debates and forging new links between various literatures, concepts, and theories about socio-cultural identity, place, authenticity, and imagination within the context of tourist spaces and a global, digitised multi-media society.

9.1.1. Going beyond screen tourism: Diegetic heritage

The present research offers a much more interdisciplinary approach to examine larger socio-cultural trends in the production and consumption of place, space, and heritage associated with narrative fiction, fantasy, and pop-culture. Previous scholarship has not only struggled to find appropriate terminology but also remained conceptually limited by producing an ever-increasing number of similar single-site case studies that provide little new insight (Connell, 2012b; Reijnders, 2016b; see Chapter 2). Therefore, this research extends existing theoretical frameworks of tourism and heritage performances related to narrative fiction by establishing the concepts of 'diegetic tourism' and 'diegetic heritage'. This terminology has been introduced to better reflect the specificities of tourism and heritage practices and associated phenomena that are created and performed at places and spaces connected to narratives and fictional worlds from film, television, literature, or gaming. Although, there have been previous attempts to further the understanding of the impact of narrative fiction onto places, most notably Stijn Reijnder's concept of 'places of imagination' (2011), they still rely on already well-established 'tourist gazes', icons, and signs of real-life places, as well as remaining firmly situated in examining location specific niche fandoms rather than multi-sited mass-phenomena (ibid.). This thesis illustrates that rather than just appropriating known, established signs and icons to anchor fictional narrative, imagination does not simply 'take place' (Reijnders, 2011b, p. 17), but is

actually capable of creating place and establishing transnational spatial relations that have not existed before.

This research has successfully shown how places and spaces in a globalised world can be instantly inscribed with new identities, toponyms, and heritage practices that are detached from any local or national narrative without any loss of authenticity and meaning – in many cases, they only then become meaningful to most people. Indeed, for many Dubrovnik, Castle Ward and Castillo de Almodóvar del Río remained King's Landing, Castle Ward, and Highgarden respectively even after visiting. These are the place identities through which they have been introduced to the world and thus remain the first and often only reference point. However, this does not suggest that the 'reel' has entirely replaced the 'real'. Even the most enthusiastic fans who primarily experienced locations through the 'Westeros-lens' would not exclusively see the 'Game of Thrones identity' of a place. They consider it as a supplementing, improving, and adding of value, thus illustrating how the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones has become yet another layer in the palimpsestic history of its filming locations. As it has been shown numerous times, once a story has attached itself firmly to a place through visual, performative or narrative repetition, it is difficult, if not impossible, to remove it – 'places remember' and retain traces of what happened there (Crang, 2013; cf. Orley, 2012). Whether those layers are 'old' or 'new', 'local' or 'global', 'imagined' or 'real', 'intentional' or 'incidental' is not of importance to be considered 'heritage'. As soon as a heritage claim is made, used for a new purpose or a new narrative, another layer is added to the palimpsest while the traces of all previous iterations remain. Most heritage sites were not built to be 'historically significant' or tourist attractions; their heritagisation, however, has made this their primary purpose. Similarly, most places have not been intended to be filming locations and have imaginary realms projected onto them, yet those realms became a part of them. What layers are proportionally stronger and bear the most significance depends on the Authorized Heritage Discourse of the sites in questions as well as personal stakes, interests, and emotional investments into each of the various meanings (cf. L. Smith, 2006).

While the palimpsestic nature of places, spaces and heritage landscapes has long been acknowledged and shown that heritage is a continuously expanding assemblage (cf. Crang, 1996a; Harvey, 2001; Holtorf, 2005; Macdonald, 2009; L. Smith, 2006), this thesis illustrates that modern pop-culture and social media have immensely diversified and accelerated these processes of adding new layers of meaning and engagement onto heritage

landscapes. This indicates significant paradigm shifts in how heritage is produced, consumed and owned in contemporary, global society.

9.1.2. Heritage and Visual Culture in the Age of Virality

Furthermore, no previous study, to the best of my knowledge, has explored the centrality of contemporary visual culture in the creation of transnational socio-cultural identities and heritage landscapes to this extent. Entertainment media and social media in particular have become a part of global culture that allow their consumers and users to have similar experience, use the same visual language, and express shared values, heritage, and thus socio-cultural identity across the world. Much research on diegetic tourism has become outdated, as it was conducted in a time before social media, video streaming services, and the omnipresence of always connected portable devices. Yet, many new studies on diegetic tourism still do not address this paradigm shift. Although, as this research illustrates, these new ways of consuming and engaging with media must be reflected within the practical and theoretical frameworks of how these phenomena should be examined and analysed.

Through analysing the imaginary realm of Game of Thrones, this research has demonstrated how these new modes of digital and visual experiences also impact the ways in and the pace at which places, spaces, and heritage are produced and consumed. At Inch Abbey, a German fan compared Game of Thrones to a 'contagious disease', an ironic choice of words in hindsight, which, however, perfectly described the nature of the phenomena portrayed within this thesis as well as the age we are living in more generally. 'Going viral' has become a descriptor of success and impact, while social media and its influencers act as the super-spreaders of digital, global culture. However, this virality has sprung from the virtual into the physical world: Virality of telecommunication, virality of pop-culture, virality of photography, virality of travel, and even literal viruses like COVID-19. We are living in an age of virality that has significantly changed how we engage and experience our world and imposed a collective immediacy (cf. Sampson, 2012). Just as no one could avoid being affected by the pandemic, it is impossible to isolate oneself from the virality of modern mass-media and its effects. We have reached a point where globalisation has become inescapable, whether we like it or not. While the virality of pop-culture and social media photography increased mobility and tourism, the virality of the pandemic brought them to an abrupt halt, shifting places like Dubrovnik from struggling with over-tourism to suffering from under-tourism within just a few weeks.

Heritage, for many, is still regarded as something local or national in its character, even in cases where it is supposedly of 'universal value'. It gains meaning, importance and legitimacy through its supposed *longue durée*, practice of tradition and being inherited from an (imagined) past. In contrast, this research has shown that the realm collectively imagined through Game of Thrones across previously unlinked spaces has become as real, if not more real, not only for fans of the series but also those who are encouraged to reiterate visual and spatial practices through a mainstreaming of fandom and 'fannish behaviours' (Busse, 2013; Coppa, 2014) and social media that encourages participation (Nymoen & Schmitt, 2021). Thus, the diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones has not only confirmed that the meaning of monuments and landscapes are not set in stone but are constantly reinvented. It has illustrated that in this viral age, through 'memifying' the spatial performances and disseminating them through social media, these new narratives can be created almost instantaneously. Therefore, this thesis illustrates, how this virality of our contemporary society confirms and accelerates, like nothing else before, the everchanging and fluid nature of place, space, and heritage, and showcases new requirements and demands we have from heritage.

9.1.3. The deterritorialization of socio-cultural identity

Existing research on heritage and identity in relation to pop(ular)-culture and media has primarily focussed on reiterations of previous understandings of local, regional, or national heritages and identities through pop-culture and media (Crang & Travlou, 2009; e.g. Edensor, 2002; Light, 2012; Orr, 2018; Tzanelli, 2014), while the present research has shown that there are now entirely new heritages transcending these geographically and historically limited categories. Heritage is a vehicle for various societal values and needs. Thus, heritage is whatever society needs it to be, and anything that society needs to be heritage, becomes heritage. In a society in which spatial and territorial borders increasingly blur through digitisation, global media and high mobility, national monuments and narratives might not convey the same inspiring effect as they have done in the past. How much more real does the 'Battle of Hastings' in 1066 seem in our minds in comparison with the 'Battle of the Bastards' in Game of Thrones S05E09 (fig. 9.2)? Which one are we emotionally more invested in, which one do we find more relatable or even relevant? Over which one can we connect with others? The imaginary realm of Game of Thrones and its tangible and intangible manifestations within the landscape of its filming locations

provided a shared 'coming home' space and an identity offer for a new transnational community of Game of Thrones fans. Collective, global narratives and imaginations created through pop-culture appear to have become far more relevant, even necessary, in times of higher mobility, global connectivity and increasing secularisation, leading to a search for new global identities and transnational interest groups (Bhabha, 1990; Buchmann et al., 2010; B. Graham et al., 2000; cf. Harvey, 1989). Although these processes have been accompanied by a resurgence of nationalist and protectionist tendencies, certain aspects of this decentring of space and fragmentation of identities through globalisation and interconnectedness of media, cannot be reversed.

Figure 9.1: The Battle of the Bastards portrayed on the Game of Thrones Tapestry, NMNI (above); the Battle of Hastings portrayed on the Bayeux Tapestry, Bayeux Museum (below)

The diegetic heritage of Game of Thrones has infused landscapes, that have previously been defined by local and national heritage narratives with new meanings and made them relevant for a transnational community of fans. Heritage has often, if not always, been

defined through hegemonic narratives and who is excluded from it, rather than who can be part of it. However, anyone, no matter their nationality, creed, race, or gender, can partake in these new transnational heritages, if they choose to do so. Even further, a de-nationalised, diegetic heritage of 'Game of Thrones Territory' was finally able provide a new outlook, a change in (self-)perception and a unifying narrative for Northern Ireland, something the available national heritages were incapable of due to their intrinsic dissonant and exclusive nature. Therefore, rather than rendering heritage trivial, irrelevant, or disappearing, these new modes of heritage creation and performance lead to a diversification and multiplication of narratives and offer new identities for those who engage with them. In a world in which people engage with each other transnationally, new de-territorialised heritages narratives become increasingly significant.

At first glance, this seems to lead to a far more open and democratic heritage building process. However, this research also shone a light on how the creation of new heritages through pop-culture and social media might merely indicate a shift from one hegemonial discourse to the other. In recent years, private global corporations and rich individuals have been described as having established a neo-feudal status and assert more political, social and economic power than many nations, acting globally and imposing their own rules and narratives without any democratic legitimacy (Kotkin, 2020; cf. Zuboff, 2019). This, as it has been illustrated through the present research, also extends to the creation, interpretation and use of heritage. While in the traditional sense of nation- and community-building, identities were imposed from the political ruling class of the nation state (cf. L. Smith, 2006), this role could be transferred to a global corporate media industry. This time, these traditions and monuments are not created and fostered by the hegemony of a nation state, but by the industries as well as newly emerging private businesses. Although fan communities are generally considered as grassroots movements and the internet as great social equaliser, these newly created diegetic heritages, their imageries, their narratives, their subsequent material manifestations, such as artefacts like the Game of Thrones Tapestry and Doors, are all officially sanctioned and authorised by the new highest heritage authority: the copyright holders. This might be challenging the nation state's former interpretive dominance over the identities of heritage and landscape. For those who do not find themselves represented by the previous heritage discourses this might be a liberating change, as these are identities, they chose for themselves. Some communities, however, who are affected by this reimagining more tangibly, might find those new

heritage discourses invasive. This is best illustrated by Dubrovnik's transformation into King's Landing, where parts of the local community feel that they are overpowered by an outside narrative they do not feel part of or do not want to participate in. Additionally, pop-culture and diegetic heritages imposed through Hollywood's cultural hegemony might further engrain previous misconceptions and stereotypes or even invent new ones.

In conclusion, this research has showcased how the dominance of pop-culture in the public global memory and the omnipresence of digital media have, as with all other aspects of modern life, significant influences on heritage in the 21st century. The case study of Game of Thrones has illustrated how pop-culture and social media, particular digital photography, has impacted how we perceive, use, and engage with heritage, how it shapes the communities associated with it, who determines what heritage is, and how heritage can be reterritorialized and commodified not only within but across national boundaries. However, while Game of Thrones provides the most prominent case study, this research suggests that this is not an isolated phenomenon but rather indicative for various emerging issues in contemporary and future heritage discourses, the extent of which is yet to be determined through further research. As we are only at the beginning of these developments, I want to conclude this thesis by presenting the current state of diegetic tourism across Game of Thrones' filming locations and a brief outlook of what questions we might have to ask ourselves in the not-so-distant future.

9.2. Game of Thrones Tourism: Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken

> What is dead may never die but rises again, harder and stronger. – Ironborn proverb

With this long journey across the imaginary realms of Westeros and Essos coming to its end, one of the questions that has come up repeatedly in interviews and conversations, both before and after the final episodes of Game of Thrones aired, was the longevity of this phenomenon in the pop-cultural discourse as well as the impact on its filming locations. On the one hand, there have been several prominent examples like *The Sound of Music* or *The Lord of the Rings* that have remained places of 'media pilgrimage' with strong performative and iconographic legacies enduring for decades. Similarly, Game of Thrones has not only created a similar, in many ways even more elaborate transnational heritage space of visual, material and performative signifiers, 'hyper-traditions' and a plethora of tangible and intangible manifestations by fans, private companies and public authorities,

but has also dominated the pop-cultural discourse of the 2010s to an extent not seen since the advent of multichannel multimedia. On the other hand, however, we should consider the fast-paced nature of modern 21st century pop-culture that usually does not linger but quickly moves to the 'next big thing', the disappointing final episodes that received harsh reviews across the board from fans and critics alike, and last but not least, the pandemic-induced disruptions of any Game of Thrones-related on-site practices due to a global standstill of travel and tourism.

However, the question of Game of Thrones' perseverance appears to be answered in real-time as this thesis is literally coming to its conclusion. Although Game of Thrones' final season left most fans unsatisfied, the series and its imaginary world still exerts power over perceptions of its filming locations. With travel restrictions easing, it appears that people are once again seeking out the lands of Westeros and Essos. King's Landing and Winterfell seem not only to have survived the attack of the White Walkers and Drogon's dragon fire but also withstood bad reviews and the forced tourism hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of writing these last pages, almost three years after the final episode aired, Game of Thrones' imaginary realm remains an integral part of the narrative of its filming locations, as social media posts by friends and acquaintances as well as tour providers indicate. On Facebook, 'Game of Thrones Tours' in Northern Ireland references the resilience of Game of Thrones' popularity and the soon to be released prequel *House of the Dragon*, intended to capitalise on the new series. Meanwhile 'Walking Tours Dubrovnik' has made the divisive final episode part of its marketing by using the tag-line 'Create your own ending!' (fig. 9.1). On their website 'Dubrovnik Walking Tours' writes:

> You are not satisfied how season 8 finished and who ended up on the Throne? Neither was our group so they decided to make different ending on their bachelor party. In their version Khalessi [sic] ended up on Iron Throne with her beloved Jon Snow, while they are looked after by Three-Eyed Raven, Night's Watch and of course Queen's dragons – Dragon [sic] and Rhaegal. (Dubrovnik Walking Tours, https://www.dubrovnik-walking-tours.com/dubrovnik-guide/game-of-thrones-dubrovnik-bachelor-party/; accessed 05.05.2022)

Figure 9.2: Facebook posts by 'Game of Thrones Tours' and 'Dubrovnik Walking Tours' showing an 'epically large Winterfell Trek' in Northern Ireland and a Game of Thrones Bachelor-Party in Dubrovnik in April 2022.

In fact, rather than ending, HBO appears to be unleashing the full potential of this franchise. HBO aims not only to keep this immensely lucrative franchise alive through the 'Game of Thrones Studio Tours' in Banbridge, Northern Ireland, which, after a two-year coronavirus-induced delay, finally opened its gates in early spring 2022 and constitutes their very own tourist offer, but also expand the universe with several new series, the first of which, *House of the Dragon*, was released in August 2022 to thus far great critical and commercial success. While it still has to be seen whether *House of the Dragon* can rekindle the fiery passion of Game of Thrones, through the continued exposure and the still popular tours, it can be expected that the imaginary geographies of Game of Thrones and its diegetic heritage will continue to have a significant, lasting impact on how the landscapes of the filming locations are perceived. One could even argue that some of those places have been so thoroughly re-imagined that one might not be able to see anything, but a fantasy landscape shaped through depictions on screen and material and performative

signifiers *in situ*. And as Goldsworthy (2013, p. xiv) pointed out when writing on imagined countries on the Balkans, 'does it really matter which ones are real and which not?'

9.3. Franchising Heritage?

In an early episode of *The Simpsons*, the Springfield Elementary School Carnival is promoted as 'the happiest place on earth', something that prompts three lawyers to confront Principal Skinner and remind him that this description is a 'registered Disneyland copyright' (S04E04). Once a satire on how corporations would license everything if they could, the copyrighting of place narratives might not be as ridiculous and far-fetched after the success of Game of Thrones.

Figure 9.3: Screenshot from Marvel's Thor: Love and Thunder (2022). 'New Asgard' has become a centre of mass (cruise) tourism and location tours. As seen on the street sign, 'New Asgard' has superseded 'Tønsberg' as placename. St. Abbs, Northumbria, stood in for 'New Asgard' in *Avengers Endgame* (2019) and tried to capitalise from diegetic tourism itself (see Chapter 6)

The diegetic tourism and its accompanying phenomena described in the present and other research were by-products of television programmes and films. Although welcome due to the publicity and exposure they generated, it was never planned that these fantasies have any real-life impact on the landscapes surrounding the filming locations. Mostly driven by fandom and private entrepreneurs capitalising on the new demand for these new heritage products, so far, the studios and production companies had little to no active role in performing of these new heritages in the 'real' world apart from agreeing to let destination marketing organisations such as Tourism NI use their licensed imagery as a *quid pro quo* for the local support of the production (or in the case of Italica, refusing to allow imagery being used). However, Hollywood appears to become more and more aware of its heritage-creating powers as the trailer for the latest Marvel film indicates (fig. 9.3). In the trailer for

Thor: Love and Thunder (2022), there is a short glimpse of 'New Asgard' which apparently has become a place of (over)tourism as shown by tourists, several cruise ships and a van with the label 'New Asgard Tours' – almost satirically mimicking locations impacted by Game of Thrones tourism.

Whereas this particular example still is just an ironic, self-referential gag, producers and studios who have seen the popularity, and more importantly economic potential, of diegetic tourism may soon realise their full heritage-creating might and plan to capitalise more directly from it. Although there are places such as Disneyland and countless studio tours, most notably the Harry Potter Wizarding World, these spaces have been clearly separated from the 'real' world as they are more akin to theme parks and isolated enclaves of imagination. However, this clear spatial distinction seems to dissolve with more and more imaginary worlds and new diegetic heritages being created and asserted onto previously existing heritage landscapes through large fantasy and sci-fi franchises.

With the recently opened 'Game of Thrones Studio Tours' in Northern Ireland, HBO has taken the first steps to capitalise from the diegetic heritage they have imposed onto the Northern Irish landscape more actively. They seem to have collaborated closely with the established Game of Thrones tour providers to connect the filming locations with their unique offer of 'authentic' and 'real' Game of Thrones sets and artefacts (which only they are allowed to possess). While they still let the established Game of Thrones tour providers operate freely, one of the guides, Richard, told me that if HBO chooses so, all local businesses that capitalise from their diegetic heritage could be shut down over night or at least have to pay licensing fees. In contrast, when being asked about future licensing issues over presenting Dubrovnik through Game of Thrones, Paula, in her usual Ragusan defiance, proclaimed that 'we are all using the screenshots […] I think we are entitled because they filmed in our city' (Dubrovnik 24.09.2018).

As diegetic heritage has turned out to be a lucrative commodity through tourism, this raises the question of whether this could lead to the privatisation of specific heritage narratives that are the intellectual property of certain corporations, and thus to subsequent heritage and memory conflicts between various stakeholders. Copyrighting certain aspects of tangible and intangible heritage is not a novel concept; light installations of the Eiffel Tower caused lawsuits about freedom of panorama (cf. Newell, 2011), while Disney's (failed) attempt to trademark the 'Día de los Muertos' years ahead of the release of its film

Coco (2017) triggered a major backlash (Rodriguez, 2013). While heritage narratives are usually regarded as 'open access', Westeros and Essos and thus 'Game of Thrones Territory' are the licensed intellectual property of HBO. Will copyright holders sell licences to those who want to guide through these imaginary yet copyright-protected realms? Could the next stage of 'imperialism of imagination' be the licensing and franchising of heritage landscapes?

9.4. What is West of Westeros?

As it has only been a few years since Game of Thrones has come to a close and the last years have been dominated by a pandemic, no other franchise has yet been able to recreate what Game of Thrones has achieved – and it might take many years until 'the next Game of Thrones' has been found. However, the age of diegetic heritage might have only just begun. New imaginary realms such as the nameless 'Continent' of *The Witcher* (2019–) have already sparked interest among its audience. HBO's *House of the Dragon* (2022–), and the highly anticipated continuation of *The Lord of the Rings* by Amazon's *The Rings of Power* (2022–) brought Westeros and Middle-earth back onto the global television screens and thus into the collective pop-cultural memory. Or maybe there will be something entirely new and unexpected that takes the world by storm just like Game of Thrones did over ten years ago. With an ever-growing number of new imaginary worlds created on- and off-screen, it is just a matter of time until we find ourselves engrossed in another strange new world, explore every nook and cranny of exotic new places, point out the imaginary in the landscape, share our enthusiasm with others and brag about the snapshots we recreated for us and the entire world to see. However, to quote Eddard Stark, 'only winter is certain'.

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A mind needs books like a sword needs a whetstone. That is why I read so much. –
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APPENDIX 1

List of stakeholders:

Category	Name	Role	Organisation/Business	Location	Country	Date
Destination Marketing and Policy Maker	Moyra Lock	Head of Marketing, Communications and Audiences	Northern Ireland Screen	Belfast	Northern Ireland	19.06.2018
Destination Marketing and Policy Maker	Judith Webb	Head of Screen Tourism	Tourism Northern Ireland	Belfast	Northern Ireland	14.09.2018
Destination Marketing and Policy Maker	Ana Hilje	Head of Department	Department of Culture, City of Dubrovnik	Dubrovnik	Croatia	25.09.2018
Destination Marketing and Policy Maker	Marko Miljanić	Head of Department	Department of Tourism, City of Dubrovnik	Dubrovnik	Croatia	28.09.2018
Destination Marketing and Policy Maker	Jelka Tepšić	Deputy Mayor	City of Dubrovnik	Dubrovnik	Croatia	18.10.2018
Destination Marketing and Policy Maker	Piluca Querol Fernandez	Director	Andalucia Film Commission	Seville	Spain	24.05.2019
Fan Community Representative	Elio Garcia	Operator of Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire Fan Website and George R.R. Martin's confidant	Westeros.org	Seville	Spain	18.05.2019
Fan Community Representative	Linda Antonsson	Operator of A Song of Ice and Fire Fan Website and George R.R. Martin's confidant	Westeros.org	Seville	Spain	18.05.2019
Fan Community Representative	Javier Marcos	Operator of A Song of Ice and Fire Fan Website and Podcaster	Los Siete Reinos	Seville	Spain	18.05.2019
Filming Location Management	Robert Boake	Locations Scout and Locations Manager	Robert Boake Locations	Belfast	Northern Ireland	14.09.2018

Game of Thrones related business	Caroline McErlean	Inn Owner	The Cuan (Game of Thrones Door #1)	Strangford	Northern Ireland	18.06.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Kevin Kearney	Newsagent and Merchandise Vendor	Kevin Og Gift Shop and Newsagent	Strangford	Northern Ireland	18.06.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Tracy McCarthy	Pub Owner	Fiddler's Green (Game of Thrones Door #2)	Portaferry	Northern Ireland	18.06.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Damien Owens	Pub Owner	Owens' Bar (Game of Thrones Door #5)	Limavady	Northern Ireland	20.06.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Mark Edwards	Pub Manager	Blakes of the Hollows (Game of Thrones Door #4)	Enniskillen	Northern Ireland	29.06.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Aida Dilberović	Souvenir/Merchandise Store Owner	Souvenir Shop Onofrio	Dubrovnik	Croatia	10.10.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Ana Zelcić	Souvenir/Merchandise Store Clerk	Souvenir Shop Gundulićeva	Dubrovnik	Croatia	10.10.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Annamarija	Souvenir/Merchandise Store Clerk	Souvenir Shop ul. od Puča	Dubrovnik	Croatia	10.10.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Bogdan Dascalescu	General Manager	Dubrovnik Escape Room	Dubrovnik	Croatia	16.10.2018
Game of Thrones related business	Luca Galić	General Manager/Museum Director	Iron Throne Fan Shop Split and Dubrovnik/Game of Thrones Museum Split	Split	Croatia	15.09.2019
Heritage and Museums	Sarah Sharp	Visitor Experience Manager	Castle Ward (National Trust)	Castle Ward	Northern Ireland	14.06.2018
Heritage and Museums	Shane O'Neill	Estate Manager	Shane's Castle Estates Co Ltd.	Antrim	Northern Ireland	29.06.2018
Heritage and Museums	Tara Russel	Visitor Experience Assistant	Castle Ward (National Trust)	Castle Ward	Northern Ireland	30.06.2018
Heritage and Museums	Ivica Grilec	Director	Island of Lokrum Reserve	Lokrum	Croatia	09.10.2018
Heritage and Museums	Ozana Domijan	Park Ranger	Island of Lokrum Reserve	Lokrum	Croatia	09.10.2018
Heritage and Museums	Denis Orlić	Treasurer	Society of Friends of Dubrovnik Antiques	Dubrovnik	Croatia	11.10.2018

Heritage and Museums	Bob Johnston	Basket Maker	Ulster Folk Museum	Cultra	Northern Ireland	09.04.2019
Heritage and Museums	Roisin Aiston	Visitor Guide/Weaver	Ulster Folk Museum	Cultra	Northern Ireland	09.04.2019
Heritage and Museums	Valerie Wilson	Museum Curator (Textiles)	National Museums Northern Ireland	Cultra	Northern Ireland	20.04.2019
Heritage and Museums	Tyrion Lannister (pseudonym)	Geologist	National Museums Northern Ireland	Cultra	Northern Ireland	26.04.2019
Heritage and Museums	Daniel González Acuña	Conservator/Photographer	Archaeological Park Italica	Santiponce	Spain	29.05.2019
Heritage and Museums	Rosario Borjabad	Visitor and Education Service	City Museum Santiponce/Italica	Santiponce	Spain	29.05.2019
Heritage and Museums	Rocio Aceña Balmon	Manager	Castillo de Almodóvar del Río	Almodóvar	Spain	31.05.2019
Heritage and Museums	Teresa Moreno	Assistant Manager	Castillo de Almodóvar del Río	Almodóvar	Spain	31.05.2019
Heritage and Museums	Kathryn Thompson	Museum Director	National Museums Northern Ireland	Cultra	Northern Ireland	20.06.2019
Heritage and Museums	Filip Hinčević	Visitor Guide	Fortress of Klis	Klis	Croatia	17.09.2019
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Jon Snow (pseudonym)	General Manager	Winterfell Tours	Castle Ward	Northern Ireland	30.06.2018
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Anne-Femica Kunčević	Tour Guide		Dubrovnik	Croatia	23.09.2018
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Paula Bilić	Tour Guide/Extra		Dubrovnik	Croatia	24.09.2018
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Davor Majić	Tour Provider and Guide	Majić Walking Tours	Dubrovnik	Croatia	25.09.2018
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Ivan Vuković	Tour Provider and Guide	Vuka Tours	Dubrovnik	Croatia	26.09.2018
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Josip Crnčević	Tour Guide		Dubrovnik	Croatia	26.09.2018
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Richard Hodgen	Tour Guide/Extra	Game of Thrones Tours Northern Ireland	Bangor	Northern Ireland	07.05.2019
Tour Guides and Tour	Lola Rubio	Tour Provider and Guide	Sevilla4Real	Seville	Spain	23.05.2019

Operators						
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Gytha Gorana Galić	Tour Guide/Extra		Split	Croatia	14.09.2019
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Sara Dyson	Tour Operator	Game of Thrones Tour Croatia	Split	Croatia	17.09.2019
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Ivana Kovačević	Tour Operator	Vetus Itinera	Split	Croatia	20.09.2019
Tour Guides and Tour Operators	Vjeran Mlačić	Tour Guide/Tourist Information	Split Tourist Board	Split	Croatia	21.09.2019

APPENDIX 2

Consent form:

Durham University
Department of Geography

CENTRE FOR VISUAL ARTS AND CULTURE

Consent for Participation and use of Audio/Video-recording

Study title (preliminary):	Travels from Winterfell to King's Landing: Assessing the Creation and Perception of Fictional Worlds through Visual Media and their Impact on Heritage Reality
Researcher:	Christoph Doppelhofer (PhD researcher)
Supervisors:	Mike Crang, Robert Witcher, James Koranyi

PLEASE MARK EITHER 'YES' OR 'NO' FOR <u>EVERY</u> STATEMENT BELOW:

<u>Consent for participation</u>:	Yes	No
I consent to having my speech recorded and transcribed for the specific research project identified above.		
I consent to being photographed/filmed for the specific research project identified above.		
I consent that transcriptions of these recordings and any analyses drawn from them may be used by the above-named researcher for teaching or research purposes, and in presentations and publications.		
I consent that the researcher may contact me at a later date for follow-up questions		
I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study during or after data collection. Any recording, transcripts or copies of photographs will be deleted at that time.		

<u>Protection of personal data</u> *If you would like your identity to appear in any resulting publications, please confirm by checking 'Yes' at either one, all, or none of the following identifiers. Otherwise, please check 'No' to confirm that your identity will never be publicly associated with the data you produce:*	Yes	No
I consent that <u>**my name**</u> will be used in this study.		
I consent that <u>**my age**</u> will be used in this study. [insert age: ___]		
I consent that that <u>**my occupation**</u> will be used in this study. [insert occupation: _____]		
I consent that <u>**my gender**</u> will be used in this study. [insert gender: _____]		
(if applicable) I consent that the <u>**name of my organisation**</u> will be used in this study. [insert name of organisation: _____]		

Name:_____   Email:_____

Signature: _____Date:____/d_____/m_____/y

Information sheet:

Project Information Sheet:

TRAVELS FROM WINTERFELL TO KING'S LANDING

My PhD research *Travels from Winterfell to King's Landing* at Durham University aims to explore how the modern pop-cultural phenomenon *Game of Thrones* is influencing the way we are seeing and engaging with cultural heritage sites. Many sites across Northern Ireland, Croatia, Malta, Spain, Morocco and Iceland, have been used to portray the fictional world of Westeros and Essos. To understand how *Game of Thrones* and its fictional world is impacting the identity, meaning and perception of real-life heritage sites and landscapes that have been used for filming the series, I want to observe and interview visitors as well as talk to the local population to see how they perceive this new phenomenon.

Nature of Study and Use of Data:

With your consent, I would like to **record** (audio and/or video) **our conversations** we are having about the local Game of Thrones filming location and your views on new phenomena emerging from this. These interviews will later be transcribed and **could be used in my research and its outputs** (such as in my dissertations, academic articles, blog posts and presentations).

Confidentiality:

Participation is absolutely **voluntary** and unless you explicitly indicate otherwise on a separately provided **consent form**, any recording and your data will not be associated with your name or with any other personal details that might identify you. If you decide to withdraw from the study during or after data gathering, I will delete all generated data.

Contact:

I can be contacted at christoph.doppelhofer@durham.ac.uk for questions. For further information on my study, please ask me at any given time after the interview or visit my blog www.heritageofwesteros.com. If you have any questions about what you've just read, please feel free to ask now.

Thank you very much for your help!