

# Mountain Photography and the Constitution of National Identity

Aleš Erjavec

*Il faut être de son lieu.*

In *The Politics of Vision*, Linda Nochlin speaks about the basic motto of the nineteenth century realism, that is, to »be of one's times« – »Il faut être de son temps.« She adds that »no less crucial to the Realist project ... was another admonition, sometimes related to, sometimes in contradiction with, the concern to be of one's times: 'One must be of one's place'- that is to say, the injunction to deal with one's own native country, region, or even, at its most extreme, one's own property« (Nochlin 19).

Linda Nochlin's two statements concerning nineteenth century painting can be transposed into another realm: that of photography. Like the fine arts, photography too had a special purpose which transgressed the usual documentary role assigned to it by many nineteenth century photographers. What many realist paintings of the previous century depicted and implied was not only a contemporaneity, but as Nochlin in her second observation succinctly put it, that »one must be of one's own place«. This statement has special significance for our topic, for in our case this »place« had two convergent, albeit different natures.

In the first case it concerned a desire which was widespread in Europe of that time: especially after the revolution of 1848 in different countries national aspirations grew. It concerned the wish to unite a nation in a nation-state. For this reason certain specifics of this nation, mostly related to culture but, as in the case under discussion, reaching beyond the usual realms of language, cultural history, etc., were brought to the fore as arguments for the establishment of such a state. The bourgeoisie of small nations was well aware that such states could only exist in federations, for they were much too small to be politically, economically and militarily viable. But as such nations were divided among different countries or, in some cases, dialects merged so much that it was impossible to draw clear borders, geographical and topological landmarks were used to denote national specifics. Sometimes the specific of a countryside added additional weight to the identity of the nation that was trying to attain its self-awareness. This did not always take place by itself.

Thus Massimo d'Azeglio said: »We have made Italy: now we must make Italians« (Confino 49).

If in the first case national identity is yet to be established around different specifics, whether they be real or imaginary, and if here the geographical specifics serve as one of the means to attain such an aim, then the second case concerns the »real« geographical basis for such claims and may transgress national boundaries. Thus the »Swiss« are not really a »nation« though for all practical purposes they nevertheless appear as one. On the other hand, the Russian steppe is often presented as very typically Russian<sup>1</sup> and a whole »national mentality« can be erected on its basis.

Certainly, once the rural countryside is gone such archetypes serve purely ideological functions, even if before they may have had a basis in reality. But when they did, they almost never served any purpose which could be called »national identity«. They emerged as such when they could serve an imaginary and ideological function, especially if it was integrated into the broader context of the »source«, which had been spared the devastations of civilization. Twentieth century thought abounds with claims of a pristine nature and rural life serving as examples of unmediated and unspoiled human life and community.<sup>2</sup> The opposition between the modern urban landscape, with its machines and their velocity and the rural, primeval, »natural« image of the unspoiled past from which the nation supposedly emerged, can be encountered especially from the second half of the nineteenth century on. The bourgeoisie in the predominantly rural countries encountered enormous problems in uniting them so they could serve as vehicles of nascent national economies. To achieve this aim it used the »nation«, although it represented means of a very contradictory nature.

In most cases the »place« where a nation is located is primarily a cultural community which can exist even in Diaspora. In the second case, the »place« is a very real and relatively well defined *territory*. It can, of course, be designated on the basis of »historical« borders, but it can also be based on geographical divisions such as mountains or rivers. In this sense it has to be protected or appropriated. It need not be populated but it must be symbolically appropriated, otherwise it does not really belong to us.

<sup>1</sup> It may not be a coincidence that Chekhov and Gogol, among others, used in the nineteenth century the topography of certain parts of Russia so profusely that the image they represented in their plays and novels even today still persists as the image of the »real« Russia. Not to mention the closing paragraphs of Gogol's *Dead Souls* in which he presents an »Ur-« image of Russia, very similar to »Nordic« ideology. One could find similar examples all over Europe with the exception of countries that managed to establish their nation-states much earlier in history.

<sup>2</sup> Examples range from Heidegger to Walter Benjamin.

In both aforementioned cases the »place« must be symbolically constructed. Realist art of the nineteenth century often played the role of constructor and designator of a »place«: From Scandinavia to the Mediterranean we find in national museums and galleries national »frescoes« depicting fights against the enemy from whom the motherland or fatherland had to be protected. This certainly is not the only aspect of »being of one's place«, for it can just as well refer to a region, town, or »place« – and that is actually what much of French or British realism was concerned with, both in literature and painting as the predominant art forms.

The »place« which must be constructed can obviously represent many different places. What concerns us here is not just any place, but a »national« place and the way in which it is constructed. A term one could use instead of *construction* of a place would be its *constitution*. What we are usually dealing with here is a construction on the symbolic plane which, after some time, gains the appearance of »reality«. What I thus intend to present in this essay is a construction or a symbolic and fictional constitution of a place or space (»Raum« in German and perhaps also »location« in English). This place is simultaneously an imaginary and a real geographical place, with neither of the two being well defined, being with no parergon, so to speak. This imaginary and simultaneously really existing place are the Slovenian mountains.

Why not the Alps? Ultimately, all the mountains in question do lie in the Alps. – But for Slovenians the Alps do not belong only to them, but are just as well Austrian (»German« for short), Swiss or Italian, to mention just the closest countries and nations, while the »mountains« are a signifier which is concrete enough to enable their reading as »Slovenian mountains« (one would otherwise specify these mountains as being Austrian, Italian, French or whatever) and is abstract or general enough to enable the individual or national community to designate them as an imaginary place, usually devoid of concrete geographical specifications.<sup>3</sup>

»Mountains« can thus function simultaneously as a metaphor and metonymy. One can always think of mountains in an abstract and metaphorical way. If one would want to specify them, this abstract meaning would, of course, be converted into a concrete one – that of an actual mountain, mountain peak, etc. Nevertheless, due to the symbolic content invested into »mountains« as such, actually only very few mountains appear to deserve the title of a »real«

---

<sup>3</sup> This vagueness is facilitated and strengthened by the fact that a Slovenian minority lives in the area of the Italian and Austrian Alps. Furthermore, a part of the region in Austria beneath the Alps, where Slovenians live (Carinthia or Kärnten with its capital Klagenfurt – Celovec in Slovenian) almost became a part of the newly formed Yugoslavia after the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

mountain. Preconditions for this designation are certainly the height (usually no less than 6,000 ft, better still 7,000 or 8,000 ft),<sup>4</sup> its historical significance and, finally, its representational value.

The conclusion to be drawn from this introduction is that the mountains serve – at least in Slovenia – as an ideological representation in an almost ideal way, for they are unconsciously and also consciously accepted by the population as the place of its »identity«. In this way the mountains supplement and strengthen the broader »national identity«. They serve this purpose in an almost perfect way, for although they function similarly to signifiers like »Heimat«, »motherland«,<sup>5</sup> or the national spirit (of whatever nation) they have the advantage not only of being able to be visually represented as a singular and homogenous entity but also of being attractive to the whole of the population, for they can be invested with so many different meanings that it is possible to find in them »something for everyone«. In this way they function similarly to, for example, the role of »nature« in the prewar Germany: »The surge out from the cities into nature also represented a search for a source of collective identity not to be found in the urban environment. The movement was informed by the presumption that what all Pfälzers [inhabitants of a region in Germany] had in common was the land. Nature alone could be the appropriate symbol as well as source of Heimat feeling; love of nature, like love of Heimat, was not bound by social class or confession. Workers shared it with industrialists, old with young, uneducated with educated, Catholic with Protestant and Jew« (Applegate 77). The fundamental difference between this case and the Slovenian one is that in the latter this role is predominantly assigned to the mountains.

---

<sup>4</sup> In the Slovenian context a peak of 2,000 ft would only be »hill«, and a peak of at least 3,000 ft (which they call a »munro« in Scotland) would be no more than a kind of highlands, designated by the term »planina«, usually referring to a mountain pasture where cattle would graze in the summer and representing an entity between a high hill (or perhaps a »ben«) and a »mountain«.

<sup>5</sup> »The attributes of the national Heimat raise the question whether there was a difference between *Heimat*, on the one hand, and *Vaterland* and *Nation* on the other. These three words described the German people and the territory of Germany, but their meaning was not identical. The words differed in what they represented, how they represented it and their effect on German society. While fatherland and nation represented Germany as one and indivisible, Heimat represented Germany as the one and the many. ... Heimat was a representation of the nation informed by feminine sensibilities. Fatherland and nation, in contrast, conveyed masculine qualities such as courage, combativeness and competitiveness. Fatherland and nation therefore, could go to war, while Heimat could never do that« (Confino 72, 73). The described terms differ to a certain extent in different national contexts, with »nation« often replacing, in the more recent past, the rather outdated »motherland« and especially »fatherland«.

*The Mountains*

Slovenia is situated beneath the Alps and stretches to the Adriatic Sea. The ancestors of the Slovenians settled in the Eastern Alps and Pannonia. Under pressure from the Avars they moved towards the Adriatic Sea and Lake Balaton and established in the seventh century the first independent Slav state. In the tenth century the Franks began to colonize the territory belonging to the Slovenian tribes. Until the formation of Yugoslavia in 1918 it was the German predominance that threatened the Slovenian national existence. The first books in Slovenian language were published five centuries ago and from that time on, and especially from the end of the eighteenth century, a national consciousness existed on a broader basis. After the Treaty of Versailles, Italy acquired a large part of the Slovenian territory which remained in its hands until 1943. For that reason (and also because the Slovenian coast is only 26 mi. long) the sea did not play any significant role in the national consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> As was the case, perhaps to the greatest extent, in Britain where the sea played a very important role in many different symbolic ways. Similar to the role of mountains in Slovenia was that played by the »puszta« in Hungary, by the Great Karoo in South Africa and, to a lesser extent, by the West in the United States or Sahara in Arab countries. But, as far as I know, a concrete geographical territory (symbolically transformed and restricted) in no other national environment played such an essential and especially unifying function in constituting and retaining the national subjective identity. Thus in some countries such mythical places and spaces did or do exist, but hardly ever attain such an unspecified prominence, because a) there is more than one place or area with such a symbolic value (in the United States, for example), b) it is limited only to a certain part of the country (the Great Karoo), c) it was balanced by the existence or emergence of a national political power (as in Hungary), d) because it was primarily a negative concept (the sea in Britain and some other seafaring countries), e) it played an important role only in a specific period of national history, or, f) it was limited to a single mountain peak (as in Germany, Israel, etc.).

In the case of Slovenia several, otherwise disparate features converged, thus enabling the mountains to attain such a privileged status. The first among them was, until recently, the absence of a nation-state which had to be replaced by a series of symbolic substitutes or surrogates, ranging from the Slovenian language and its extensions (literature) to the aforementioned mountains and their frequent mythical representations.

The possibility to appreciate the mountains is, of course, a relatively recent phenomenon: »For us today it is hard to recapture the sense of repulsion, displeasing irregularity or, at best, disinterested boredom felt by most people prior to the eighteenth century (and still during it) at the sight of mountains (or of the sea). John Evelyn, to give a mid-seventeenth century example, crossed the Simplon Pass in 1646 and was, incidentally, set upon by brigands as an additional suffering. He tells that the way – said to have been 'covered with Snow since the Creation' – was 'through very steepe, craggy, and dangerous passages, ... through strange, horrid and firefull Craggs and tracts', and he concludes: 'Nature has swept up the rubbish of the earth in the Alps'« (Charlton 42). In the eighteenth century the situation commenced to change. At first, mountains acquired a special significance only for a few individuals. Thus the Swiss botanist »Haller went to collect plant specimens, but the outcome was the first major work of

Mountains played an important role in Slovenian national mythology, especially since romanticism. They gained a special prominence from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, when throughout Central Europe mountaineering became one of the favorite bourgeois pastimes. Mountains were actually one of the last frontiers to be conquered and contained much of the adventurous potential vested at that time upon faraway lands. The high esteem enjoyed by mountaineering<sup>7</sup> was also strongly linked to the sentiment of national identity, of belonging to a nation, especially when it came to smaller nations of Europe aspiring to gain independence (mostly from Vienna). Such was the case of the Slovenians and also of the Czechs. (Later in the century there existed a Czech branch of the Slovenian Alpine Association.) Mountaineering was not limited to men, for women too played a visible role in hiking endeavors. Obviously all these phenomena were consequences of the new ideas and values of the nascent bourgeoisie erupting after 1848 as well as a consequence and part of the emerging national aspirations for the formation of nation-states within what was then still the Austrian Empire.

In 1874 the German and Austrian Alpine Association was founded. It was reestablished on Slovenian territory in the 1890's and was, at that time, very nationalistic. The time was overflowing with ideas of national autonomy and independence for the nations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These have already gained an important level of cultural autonomy and their next aim was political independence, either in separate states or in a federation which would bring together various Slavic nations. In this respect the German and Austrian nationalism can be viewed also as a countermeasure to the Slavic drive for independence.

In 1893 the Slovenian Alpine Association was founded and in 1897 its Photography Section was established. The founding of the German and the Slovenian associations had much to do with the strengthened polarization of the popula-

---

mountain literature, his long poem *Die Alpen* (1732). ...Paul Van Tieghem (in his *Le Sentiment de la nature dans le préromantisme européen*, 1960), writing of European literature as a whole, distinguishes three phases: from about 1730 a gradual rise of interest in mountains; from about 1762 a more emphatic liking for the lower, more pastoral slopes of mountains; from about 1773 an extension of that liking to include the high, deserted mountain peaks« (Charlton 46). It is romanticism, with Shelley, Byron and Coleridge, which views storms, mountains and the sea not as products of human sin, as Thomas Burnet did in 1681, but relishes instead in the »mountain glory«.

<sup>7</sup> The fashion, of course, did not have only national or nationalist significance for its participants, but often represented a test of personal endurance, strength and even superiority. In Slovenia the best example was the philosopher Klement Jug (1898-1924) who became so obsessed with mountaineering that he devoted most of his time to it and finally died while climbing. He was also an avid reader of Nietzsche.

tion of the present-day Slovenia at the turn of the century into Germans and Slovenians. Slovenians, like some other Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire such as the Czechs or Croats, developed a strong and prosperous middle class, which wanted to attain national independence and sovereignty. The Germans were, of course, opposed to such ideas, and different means to retain or attain not only physical hold over the territory, but also to appropriate it symbolically, were used by the parties in conflict to achieve their aims.<sup>8</sup>

Mountaineering turned into a competition between the proponents of the pan-Germanic idea and the Slovenians. Each tried symbolically to appropriate the mountains, i.e. use their already existing symbolic value in the struggle for dominance between the two national groups. At that time paths were created in the mountains called the »Slovenian« and the »German« paths, with members of each nation trying to discover and then name paths which would bear names showing that they appertain to the German or the Slovenian nation. As already mentioned, these mountains (and Mt. Triglav as practically the only »concrete« mountain among them) acquired their Slovenian national significance well before the second half of the previous century. The cause of this rather unique feature was that the mountains were viewed not only as a shelter (into which, for example, the predecessors of Slovenians would hide from the attacking (Germanic) »foreigner« who tried forcefully to Christianize them, as a well-known Slovenian romantic sonnet tells us), but sometimes also as the birthplace of the Slovenian nation: a theory, refuted by professional historians but even attracting recently a substantial popular interest, professed that Slovenians were not really a Slavic nation but were of Illyrian descent instead, originating in the Alps.<sup>9</sup>

»From being the last enemy, nature is now a 'friend'« (96), comments D.G. Charlton the change in the romantic perception of the mountains as compared to the previous depiction, encountered less than a hundred years before, of the mountains as repulsive and displeasing irregularities on the surface of the Earth. It is from romanticism on that the Alps (= mountains) acquire a special significance in Slovenian history. With romanticism popular myths and tales are recorded and are fused into the more widespread sentiment of national identity. As it has been mentioned, the mountains are also used as a mythical shelter.

---

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the best example of this appropriation was the purchase of the very peak of the highest mountain in the Slovenian Alps, Mt. Triglav (9,397 ft) in 1895 by the parish priest, Jakob Aljaž, so the peak (and symbolically the mountain as the symbol not only of the »Slovenian mountains« themselves but also of the Slovenians and Slovenia) would remain in Slovenian hands. Aljaž had a shelter built on top of the mountain. See *Fig. 1*.

<sup>9</sup> A consequence (or cause?) of such reasoning is that Slovenians »have nothing in common« with the other nations from the former Yugoslavia, like Croatians, Serbians or Macedonians.

Representing mountains as a shelter was not far removed from representing them as the source of *national identity* (and not of the nation), for they were linked not only to popular tales and myths, but also to literature and painting from the late eighteenth well into the twentieth century which established them as »typical« for the Slovenian nation. The notion of the mountains as the »source« (and not the »place« of national origin as in the aforementioned case of the »Illyrian theory«) gained perhaps the most widespread support, although it has never been explicitly stated except in poetry, and in monographs about the Alps. The idea of the »source« is most probably related to the fact that practically all the rivers in Slovenia have their sources in the mountains. These rivers themselves were often viewed as »Slovenian« at their birth (at their source and while they were still in the mountains) and something foreign when they entered the »foreign« (i.e. Italian or eastern) plains.

Mountains turned into a widely accepted national symbol and remained such for the last century and more. A whole range of representational practices established them in this privileged position vis-à-vis other possible national signifiers, which positioned them into a rather unique place when compared to similar symbols, representations and landmarks or landscapes in other nations.

The mountain landscape became a favorite source of photographic motifs. »Many members of the Slovenian Alpine Association from Ljubljana and its surroundings and even from other countries have called«, reported *The Alpine Review* in 1900 (Kambič 26). Its editors organized lectures and the first exhibition of mountain photography took place in 1898. Every year the *Review* also organized a competition for the best photograph, accompanied by prizes and critical reviews.

In this way, mountain photography received a continuous place and attention in *The Alpine Review*, which is still being published. This continued in the interwar period when mountain photography was joined by the first Slovenian full-length feature film, entitled »In the Kingdom of the Goldhorn« (1931) and the following year by the film »The Steep Slopes of Mt. Triglav«. These films were similar to the »Heimat« and patriotic films, praising one's land and country. Thus we read in the introductory text to the first film (director Janko Ravnik): »This is a silent film. Nevertheless in our hearts resounds a powerful song: sacred you are, Slovenian land.<sup>10</sup> If this film stirs this emotion in everyone, its aim will be more than attained« (Kavčič 28).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The Slovenian word »zemlja« simultaneously means land, soil, and earth.

<sup>11</sup> As often in this essay, the parallel with the Germans is relevant. This is even more so, for a very similar type of films emerged in Germany in the early twenties. The genre of the mountain films was discovered by Dr. Arnold Fanck. »He began with the three films devoted to the joys and



The film was based on the opposition sacred/profane and nature/culture, with mountains representing unspoilt nature, the birthplace of the Slovenian nation, and something to which the man from the city strives to return or escape. The paradox of course was that this nature could be represented and thus symbolically appropriated only through culture, i.e. film.<sup>12</sup> The second film dealt with Mt. Triglav,<sup>13</sup> which is the highest mountain in the Slovenian part of the Alps. It represented this mountain as the symbol of Slovenian national identity.

At the turn of the century, photography was still viewed as a document, but so was, in many respects, realist painting. The basic difference between the two consists in the impossibility of the latter to be reproduced without becoming a

---

beauties of mountain sport: 'Wunder des Schneeschuss' ('Marvels of Ski', 1920), 'Im Kampf mit den Bergen' ('Struggle with the Mountains', 1921) and 'Fuchsjagd im Engadin' ('Fox Hunt in the Engadine', 1923), a film depicting a paper chase on skis. These films were extraordinary in that they captured the most grandiose aspects of nature at a time when the German screen in general offered nothing but studio-made scenery. In subsequent films, Fanck grew more and more keen on combining precipices and passions, inaccessible steeps and insoluble human conflicts ... The message of the mountains Fanck endeavored to popularize through ... splendid shots was the credo of many Germans with academic titles, and some without, including part of the university youth. Long before the first World War, groups of Munich students left the dull capital every weekend for the nearby Bavarian Alps, and there indulged their passion. ... Far from being plain sportsmen or impetuous lovers of majestic panoramas, these mountain climbers were devotees performing the rites of a cult« (Kracauer 110, 111). The mentioned case of Klement Jug (see Note 7) would fit this description. In the early thirties another kind of films devoted to mountains appeared. The first among them was Luis Trenker's »Berge in Flammen« (»The Doomed Battalion«, 1931). This and another film of his »mark the junction of the mountain films and the national films« (Kracauer 259-60). In such films mountain climbers turn into war heroes – and the link between heroism in combating natural forces and the glorification of war is established. In the two Slovenian cases the »Heimat« as well as a »Nietzschean« ideology was at work, but in a muted form and without any militaristic overtones. The reason was a simple one: throughout the ages »Germans« were opponents of Slovenians and that reason alone sufficed to cancel any overt sympathy for the nascent national socialism. Just as importantly, Slovenians were devoid of military history (except as soldiers in »foreign« armies) and militarism was never cherished.

<sup>12</sup> Grant McCracken is correct in stating that a community may displace certain ideals if reality is impervious to them. »It will remove them from daily life and transport them to another cultural universe, there to be kept within reach but out of danger«(McCracken 106). This observation applies well to the mountains in their imaginary form and thus also as represented in the two mentioned films. The unique opportunity offered by the mountains in question (but much of tourism has basically the same roots) is that they can exist as a real place that one can visit, »submerge« himself or herself into it, and cherish and appropriate it in its representational form, without one contradicting the other, but supplementing it.

<sup>13</sup> In Slovenian Triglav means »the three headed« (the mountain has three peaks. The origins of the name are related to old Slavic mythology: the Slavic god the »Three-Headed« was the god of the three lives; underground, on earth and above it.

»copy« devoid of the »aura« appertaining to a painting as the original work of art, and thus being reduced to the status of the former, i.e. photograph.

There is a continuation in the treatment of mountains from the nineteenth century into the early twentieth, and it is in this respect that Linda Nochlin's statement of the need to be of one's place becomes so important, for, as mentioned, we can easily broaden it from the fine arts into gallery photography. For what, in our case, does mountain photography witness? At the beginning it is just a recording, a »still« of a certain presence as in many photographs from the sixties of the previous century onwards. It documents a waterfall in the Alps, the ascent of Mt. Triglav (*Fig. 2*), Aljaž's Tower on top of the same mountain, etc. But slowly, photography acquires an »artistic« value as well. Now it not only witnesses an event or natural fact (of some special significance), but creates it by choosing and carefully editing the motif and playing upon the pre-existent symbolic context. These gallery photographs are thus already framed. However, they are framed not only by the general knowledge and national features appertaining to the »mountains« as such, but also by previous documentary photographs within the series represented by their continuous appearance in the same publications and aimed at the same public. In our case this feature is much more striking because it is limited to a small and limited environment and thus more easily diagnosed than would be the case with a larger nation and culture. The series of events ranging from interest in mountaineering in Europe in the second half of the previous century, mountaineering becoming a combat zone for the symbolic appropriation of Alpine territory between the Germans and Slovenians, relatively well established photography in Slovenia in the same epoch,<sup>14</sup> and the foundation of the Alpine Association which subsequently stimulated mountain photography in an organized way, all blended in the emergence of a well developed mountain photography which often exhibited patriotic overtones. A relatively large number of photographers and writers was encouraged to produce mountain photography and a whole series of publications ranging from newspapers and journals to monographs devoted exclusively to the Alps and mountains, usually lavishly illustrated with photographs and sometimes consisting exclusively of them. One might expect that this trend would cease with the demise of interest in »Heimat« ideas and ideologies throughout Europe after the demise of national socialism. What happened instead was that in certain parts of Europe it continued immediately after the war. In the case under discussion this course of events had a lot to do with Slovenia retaining within the former Yugoslavia many of its cultural features after becoming socialist. In this way

<sup>14</sup> The Slovenian, Janez Puhar (1814-1864), invented photography on glass (heliotype) and, in 1859, the first photography studio appeared in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana.

mountain photography and various publications presenting it to the broader public flourished into the present.<sup>15</sup>

Even today the photographic image has a special power: »Photography's vaunted capture of a moment in time is the seizure and freezing of presence. It is the image of simultaneity, of the way that everything within a given space at a given moment is present to everything else; it is a declaration of the seamless integrity of the real« (Krauss 107). Mountains function as a seemingly unideological entity, for they hide this very fact in an almost perfect and veritably sublime way. Of course, I speak here of their representation, which is by far the most common way in which they are presented to us. In his *Investigations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant already described the sublime as deep loneliness, but in a frightful way. The sublime must be big, but the beautiful can also be small. A view of the mountains, the snowy peaks which loom over the clouds, a description of a savage storm, or Milton's depiction of the kingdom of hell induce pleasure, but mingled with horror.<sup>16</sup>

Mountains are sublime. (We are not following Kant's *Critique of Judgment* here very closely, for we are not interested in his ethics.) This feature, to be sublime (or, following Kant, to invoke in us this feeling) is crucial for the mountains being able to function as a place of origin and identity, for in the form of their representation and their imaginary mental form they constitute a void. As Derrida points out in *The Truth in Painting*, the sublime cannot be framed: thus the connection between the sublime and the parergon makes no sense.<sup>17</sup> Frame in this sense, the parergon, has as its necessary precondition, to rephrase Rosalind Krauss, »the seamless integrity« of that represented within it. Within parergon there is no void. The body of photographs showing the mountains produced a realm of »mountains« which are simultaneously »real« and fictitious, real because they really are there, fictitious because with a few exceptions (Mt. Triglav being paramount among them) they are not referred to as actual mountains, but only as a body of mountain peaks represented through paintings, photographs of individual peaks or slopes and, more often, of scenes from these mountains, the latter enabling us to build a fictitious image of the mountains. As they are not geographically defined they can function in many different symbolic and ideological ways, their imaginary parergon being very

---

<sup>15</sup> Mountain photography is but one of the vehicles for retaining the paramount role of the mountains in the national consciousness under discussion. Another, perhaps the central role, was played by the aforementioned Slovenian Alpine Association which had in the recent decades almost 400,000 members, i.e. a fifth of the whole population.

<sup>16</sup> See *Investigations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Part I.

<sup>17</sup> See Jacques Derrida. *La vérité en peinture*, p. 146.

similar to the picture frame of a painting or photograph. Within this imaginary parergon everything is integrated and complete, but as this is a fictitious place it is impossible to be »within« it. Even if we go hiking and mountaineering, the real value of such an experience emerges only before or afterwards. The »aura« is absent when we are »there« and emerges only when gazing at the mountains from afar: »Motionlessly gazing in the summer in the afternoon at the line of hills on the horizon or at the branch casting its shadow on somebody resting – this means to breath in the aura of these hills and of this branch« (Benjamin 479). Or as Eagleton puts it even better: »Auratic experience can only be recollection« (Eagleton 35).

The mountains to which I am referring never belonged to anybody in an actual or practical way, for they are uninhabitable. Even if they partially and in some ways were claimed (as in the case of Aljaž's purchase of the peak of Mt. Triglav), they still remained empty. Also, they were not annexed from another minority, race or nation. The case of the aforementioned attempts of the Germans and Slovenians in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the turn of this century was, of course, a symbolic appropriation, with the interesting fact being that even today the German names are often preserved. (Or to be more exact, their translations into Slovenian still exist, the consequence being that sometimes the same mountain passes, for example, have two names.) The imaginary presentation of the mountains in question can obviously be invested with an almost infinite number of acceptable meanings.<sup>18</sup>

According to Roland Barthes, »the spectator of a (photographic) image receives *at the same time* perceptual and cultural message« (Barthes 42). In mountain photography under discussion in most cases the titles of the photographs are those that give us the cultural message. Without them the whole

---

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that mountains in our case function almost like the perfect »Heimat« and a series of other terms associated with national issues. What Confino mentions about German nationhood and the Heimat idea could well be applied to any nationhood and also to the Slovenian one. Even more, it could perfectly be applied to the »Slovenian mountains« as an extension or rather an essential constitutive element of the »motherland« or, to give a literal translation, of the »homeland«: »For the essence of this idea is its indistinctness, its capacity to mean different things to different people: in order to work as an national common denominator the meanings of this idea had to be interchangeable« (Confino 50). What is so curious in the Slovenian case is that »nationhood« or »national identity« were so perfectly positioned into the »mountains« that their representations collapsed all differences. This of course does not mean that other carriers of national identity didn't exist, but in those cases quite often divisions occurred and therefore they did not possess the same homogenizing potential. At the same time it should be pointed out that in Germany »Heimat« referred to the rural countryside, while »motherland« (or »homeland«) in the Slovenian case represented a broader entity which encompassed also the urban environment.

cultural and ideological content would be absent or only implied. Thus the combined message of the photograph and its title serves as the carrier of the meaning that is then invested into the frame of the national identity. In what follows I shall use Althusser's theory of ideology, and the complementary psychoanalytical theory of the constitution of the subject.

National identity and nationalisms fit well Althusser's description of ideology as the lived, experienced relationship of people towards the world, as a »representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals in their real conditions of existence. ... What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of the individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the relations in which they live« (Althusser 162, 165). If we discard the problematic aspects of Althusser's theory (like the absence of a persuasive link between the unconscious and ideology and of ideology and the Real) what strikes us as very useful when dealing with issues of national identity are two theses.

### *Identities and Imaginary Communities*

First of all, national identity and nationhood appear as »eternal« and are most commonly presented and represented as such; they usually resist all attempts to reveal their »ideological« and »mythical« nature. Even when such attempts succeed they in most cases do not hold persuasive power. In this respect national identity functions like a *belief* and obviously responds to the human desire to belong, to appertain and to be rooted. In spite of having a nonrational character it is nevertheless often (especially when it comes to small nations) supported by an almost extraordinary number of intellectuals. In many cases the intellectuals are those who articulate, defend and most ardently propagate such ideas. It is also unfortunately true, as Celia Applegate writes that, »consciousness of national belonging is one of the most striking and least understood of modern phenomena« (Applegate ix). Still, it can be interpreted as a peculiar strain of ideology, combined with others (especially religious and political) and being carried out with the help of different institutions and apparatuses. As in the case of Slovenian mountaineers who strived to retain (or make) the Alps the »Slovenian mountains«, in Germany too, »one must note from the outset that those who held on to (regional identities in Germany) were, with a few exceptions, not conscious of doing or being anything remarkable. They understood their regionally directed activities, if they thought about them at all, as a private enjoyment, comparable to a hobby, and as a public service – a civic-minded contribution to the health of the community« (Applegate 3). Similarly, the struggle for the symbolic appropriation of the Alps was not an action directed from a center. In most cases these were very spontaneous

actions by both parties to achieve their aims, especially since the local government which had to answer to Vienna did not want to provoke the Germans and at the same time did not want openly to support the Slovenian side. The love of the mountains and the wish to appropriate their symbolic value or potential were thus simultaneously preconditions for and consequences of national and nationalistic actions carried out by the Slovenian and the German mountaineers.

Secondly, national identity or consciousness is a form of mediation. Wherever we encounter nationalism we usually also encounter centuries old problems with »identity«, with bringing (and sometimes holding) the country together, with the feeling of being subordinated to somebody else, all this usually being located in a rural setting. It is therefore not surprising that we encounter at the turn of the century opposed views about the advancing industrialization, urbanization, and cosmopolitanism. Such views were equally forcefully represented in social theory and in art and can be discerned in Russia (decadence arising from western Europe will destroy the Russian way of (rural) life), in Italy, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe. In short, we encounter an oscillation between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*.

If we leave aside other cases of national consciousness and return to the Slovenian case it could be claimed that mountains conflated two topics which carried a great potential for strengthening the national consciousness. First among these was the age-old issue of Slovenians (or their predecessors) versus the »Germans«. This struggle had a much longer history than the relatively recent events from the second half of the last century. As such the former were able to serve as an abstract vehicle for the latter, with the role of the enemy being exchangeable and sometimes even disappearing. (That is, when there wasn't any enemy in sight who would endanger the national sovereignty, identity, etc.). The second topic or rather feature of the mountains was that they acted as a *source* of national identity. Celia Applegate mentioned, in the previously cited passage, that »surge out from the cities into nature also represented a search for a source of collective identity«. The mountains under discussion also served this function.

According to Althusser, »*ideology is eternal*, exactly like the unconscious« (Althusser 161). We know from psychoanalysis that the subject is constituted around a certain void, which by its very emptiness, enables us to invest it with different meanings. (Althusser would say that we are interpellated into subjects.) We as subjects – Cartesian subjects, as Jacques Lacan would put it – are in a continuous process of constitution, reconstitution and changing that point or »line«, as Michel Foucault phrased it in *The Order of Things*, which we experience as our subjective identity.

Perhaps the same can be applied to collective subjectivity – at least in certain cases, that is. In this way, it seems, that for the Slovenians (for those who could be interpellated as such) in the last century and beyond, the mountains have played the role of a void which enabled the constitution of the subjectivity around it. The photographic representation of these mountains essentially contributed to this constitution of national subjectivity – which is what an identity really is. For the essential trait of the perception that a subject has of himself/herself is that it is identical with himself/herself. This search for identity, which is impossible to reach, is the essence of the Cartesian *cogito*: »I am not there where I am a plaything of my thought; I think of what I am there where I don't think thoughts« (Lacan 517).

A community, in our case a nation or rather those who feel to belong to it or can be interpellated into this role, is a more static entity. Although it is an imaginary entity it builds a whole network of symbolic representations which enable its members to feel a common identity. This search for »identity« which is a common denominator of all forms of national consciousness (and of others as well) has in the Slovenian case found a perfect vessel for it: the mountains. The curious issue here is really the identity itself. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, »Hegel 'stages' identity (imagines a subject saying 'Plant is ... a plant') and thus arrives at its truth – that is to say, demonstrates that identity-with-itself consists in the absolute contradiction, in the coincidence of the (logical) subject with the void at the place of the expected, but failed predicate. ... Such a notion of identity implies the presence of the *symbolic order*: for an object to 'coincide' with its empty place, we must in advance 'abstract' it from its place – only in this way are we able to perceive the place without the object. In other words, the object's presence can be perceived *as such* only within a differential order in which absence as such acquires positive value« (*For they know not what they do* 141, 141–42). This is very similar to the empty mountains which in our case play the role of the »repository« of the national identity.

I have referred before to collective subjectivity which is also the level of ideology. On this level the interpellation of individuals and groups coalesces into a social group, community, nation, etc. In our case the perception of the »mountains« and of finding in them one's own identity functions as such an ideological mechanism. It is by belonging to this common denominator that the majority of the Slovenian population regards these »mountains« as their common denominator. This, of course, is not unique. What is unique is that this denominator has no competitors, as is usually the case. At the beginning of this essay I have mentioned few possible options as they exist in various other countries, where a certain part of their territory is perceived not only as the most typical but also of special national significance. Sometimes, due to

various (usually historical) circumstances, it is employed for representing or symbolizing the nation or country as a whole.

I have mentioned that in most of these countries the territory itself does not play such a significant role as is the one played by the mountains in Slovenia. This is so either because its role is divided among different parts of the national territory or because such a territory and its depictions are supplemented by other national attributes such as political power, sovereignty, long history of the nation-state, etc. The other case mentioned is the German Heimat. In this case various authors have shown that the rural countryside, actually consisting of various and disparate parts of Germany, and therefore essentially different in outlook and national specifics, was collapsed into an imaginary whole in which differences were nevertheless retained, even if they were not explicitly shown. Hence depictions of Heimat represented a unity of differences which were based in German regionalism. In the Slovenian case the situation differed because the mountains were constructed simultaneously as *a*) the place of origin (as the source of collective identity), *b*) the location of national identity (the most typical part of the national territory), *c*) the symbolic and historic national battleground (the battleground of the nation with the foreigners and, parallelly, of the individual with the forces of nature, both carrying many common or exchangeable traits), *d*) a place of escape/refuge from everyday urban life, where all class differences vanish and where everybody finds himself in basically the same situation, i. e. the quest for survival and mountain beauty. The notion of Heimat is thus only partially valid when applied to Slovenian motherland (homeland) and its extension and also its constitutive feature, i.e. the mountains.

We could, of course, also say that a Slovenian is also defined by the national territory, for the mountains cover only a minor part of the country. But this would be only partly true, for large segments of the territory now or previously populated by these people are in Austria or Italy; one also could claim that there exists a common culture and this certainly is true, for culture (especially language) is that broader common national denominator. Still, culture as such is not so specific as to offer a clear recognition, although this could certainly be said of language. Nevertheless, the language does not compete with the role the mountains have, for in the case of visual representations of the mountains the national language functions as their auxiliary tool: it offers the »cultural message« and a discourse on them and about them. It verbalizes the mountains.

What the mountains primarily offer is *a visual representation of identity, of its straightforward material location*. They offer a symbolic feature which was hard to confuse with features of other nations in the former Yugoslavia and



also when compared to neighboring countries (Italy, for example). A general consensus existed in the past and in the present (although it is less pronounced after the independence of Slovenia in 1991 for there is less need for it) that mountains can serve as the national common denominator. Thus Mt. Triglav appeared on the provisional banknotes issued before the independence from the former Yugoslavia, on the newly designed insignia, on the new national flag (both designed in 1991), while the mountain contour map of Slovenia was used in designing the newly issued passports. Many old as well as recently issued postcards show motifs from mountains, usually without specifying the locations photographed, and numerous monographs of mountains or of mountain photography continue to be published every year and sell out quickly. Again, this is not specifically Slovenian. What is specific is that beside general publications of Slovenia the only specific ones are those concerning mountains. Also, in general publications, regions are specified and locations duly noted, while in books about mountains, especially those of mountain photography, locations remain vague, only poetically described, or absent. But in these locations another kind of absence can be located: the absence of people, of life in general, and of civilization. Furthermore, these places *are meant to remain empty*, to be sanctuaries for spiritual and symbolic use, to be a place of nature to escape, as it was mentioned, from our culture and urban environment and then return to them. In this respect, again, these mountains do not differ much from national parks, and the like, except that they receive a symbolic treatment rarely encountered in other cultures.<sup>19</sup> This applies not only to poetry, novels, and even music, but also to the aforementioned cinema (from the thirties and again from the fifties) and especially photography. It is this photography which appears to have carried a special role in the development of the contemporary image of these mountains and to represent them as an almost fictitious place, which can function as the location of the national identity and even origin.

As a void this place is never filled and fulfilled and thus remains a place of our permanent desire. Mountain photography helped to constitute the representation of this place or space in an adequate, imaginary, ideological way. At the same time these mountains served as a mythical place of origin – as the source (or *Ursprung* in the Heideggerian sense of the word) which helps us to answer the question »What is my identity?« by another question: »What am I as a subject?« followed by a third question: »Where do I come from?« (Often all three, of course, have little to do with reality.) Furthermore, because these

---

<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, a national park consists of numerous and various elements and the same, of course, applies even to a greater extent to nature in general. What we encounter instead in the mountain photography under discussion are usually the empty mountain spaces.

mountains are the sole location of the *visualized* national identity they can function as the »real object« in the Lacanian sense of the word. Although they exist materially, they are hardly ever located in their »reality«. Mountains, like characters in fiction, cannot be pin-pointed, for this would spoil the poetic effect. Hence the »mountains« exist as a fictitious entity side by side with the actually existing mountains, or better put, they exist on a different plane of reality, on the plane of *effects* which are pure symbolic effects, constituting the real. This »real« of the represented mountains is impossible to attain; whenever we are there, we have already missed it. It is like the »aura« that occurs only in recollection or when gazing at the mountains from a distance, which excludes simultaneous actual contact with them. In mountain photography the effect is only strengthened, for in them the actual locations are superfluous: they even hinder the poetic and ideological effect which they simultaneously convey. In this form they function as the real of the national identity, the real which is, according to Žižek, »a cause which in itself does not exist. It is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted and displaced way. If the Real is the impossible, it is precisely this impossibility which is to be grasped through its effects. ... It is something that persists only as failed, missed, in a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature« (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 163, 169). This is exactly the description of the way mountains were represented in our case through mountain photography, whose reading they successfully enforced. To stress again, the described phenomenon is not unique. What is unique is that it exists in our case in such a pure form. One of the reasons is the existence of a general national consensus that the mountains can serve this function of the locus of national identity. This imaginary representation can be invested with all possible acceptable meanings, including political ones, from the liberal to the most conservative and nationalistic. The mountains in their present representational form function as the perfect signifier, because they enable all possible meanings to coexist without giving rise to the awareness of the impossibility of such a coexistence in reality. This consensus is, of course, mostly unconscious; the majority of the population simply feels that »mountains« are acceptable as a national symbol and, simultaneously and additionally, as vehicles of other associated significations, mostly related to issues arising from the division between nature and culture.

In the last hundred years mountain photography in Slovenia has helped to strengthen the image of mountains as the place of national identity and origin. This was made possible due to a series of events, ranging from the early attempts of the Slovenians and Germans to symbolically appropriate the mountains, to their later poetic and artistic photographic representations that strengthened their role of the »Real«. In local and national consciousness

mountains were present for centuries, for they were the geographical and topographical context in which people lived. This was especially true of the people living in the countryside for it was this population which preserved the Slovenian language and traditions. From romanticism on their myths and folk tales served as the basis for the strengthened national awareness.

Due to the possibility of investing mountains with almost infinite and unconflicting meanings and to the aforementioned events or features, mountains could attain an extraordinary symbolic value in the constitution, retention and strengthening of national identity. For the mountains to be able to function in such a way they had to function as a void, capable of being invested with different and contradictory meanings. Unlike those of most nations, the mountains in Slovenia represent a unique symbolic locus of identity and thus of collective subjectivity. It will be interesting to see whether, with the attained national sovereignty, their role will diminish in the future.

In the case of the mountain photography in question, representation functions mainly through *substitution*, *trace*, and *absence*. All three features sometimes appear as parallels between the empty space of the mountains and empty pristine and sacred space. The preconditions for this place or space to play the role of the locus of the constitution of the aforementioned collective subjectivity is that it is empty – and that is what it must also remain.

We see a dilapidated chalet in the mountains (Fig. 5). The poetic effect is achieved by its being a trace of absent people. It is a remnant of life long gone (into the valley and thus into an urban environment), a remnant of past life in these mountains which now, in modern times, has lost its original dwellers. Instead we have today city life, fast and far removed from our origins where we can perhaps escape over the weekend.



Fig. 1 Gustav Pirc, »Aljaž's Tower on Triglav«, 1895.



Fig. 2 Franz Leiner, »On Little Triglav«, 1888.

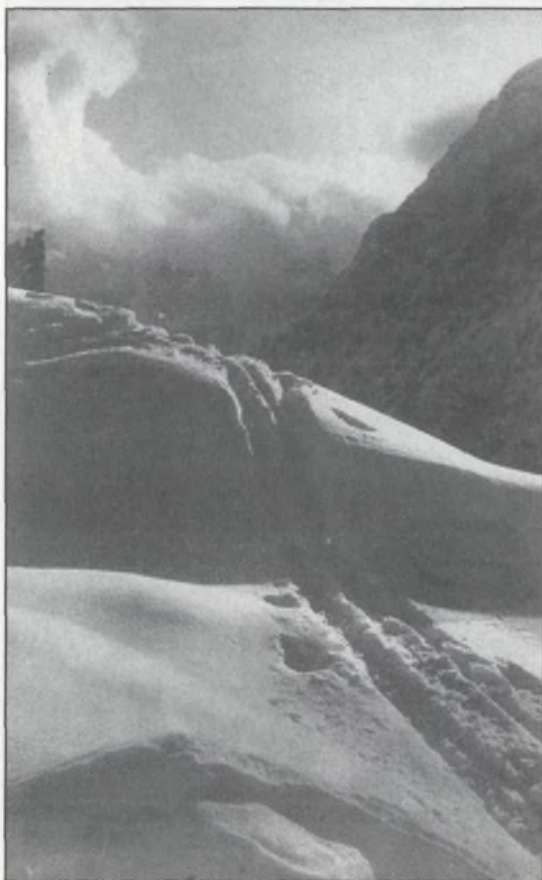


Fig. 3 Ivo Freljih, »Winter«, 1936.

A different, still purely documentary intention is evident from both photos from the previous century depicting scenes from Mt. Triglav (*Fig. 1* and *2*). Nevertheless, today these photographs have attained a different reading: they are framed by later events, enabling us to view the climbers on Little Triglav as hardy men, capable of climbing the dangerous mountain, and at the same time as those who fought against the dominance of the Germans.

*Fig. 3* offers a reading similar to that in *Fig. 5*. The human presence is again felt through its absence. The winter scene reinforces the feeling of solitude and emptiness. But in contrast to the previous picture, in this one our feelings are ambivalent. On the one hand, we see the trace of a former human presence, on the other we see that the skis have intervened in a spoiled nature, leaving a trace, which is quite different from the one in *Fig. 5*. Human intervention in nature has spoiled the pristine winter landscape, while in *Fig. 5* nature has reclaimed its territory.

*Fig. 4*, »My Shadow«, uses substitution to present the creator and the subject of the picture. Photographer's shadow is seen on the steep and snowy mountain slope. At the same time the shadow doesn't present itself neither as a simple oblique shadow nor as a direct double of the author, i.e. as identical with him. It creates instead an »other« person who appears as if he had nothing to do with the author of the photograph, except being its object. It is by the use of this »twist« encountered by our gaze, that the picture achieves its dramatic effect.

*Fig. 6* suggests a different reading. The solitude of nature is very pronounced, but at the same time we can see trees fighting for survival. The wild landscape functions as a sharp contrast to our urban and (relatively) safe environment. Something similar can be experienced in most adventure films. In the foreground there is a dead lonely tree still fighting the wind and other natural forces, sometimes implying that the Slovenians (or whoever) have also stood firm against the invading Germans, Italians, and other enemies.

A very different reading, totally unmodern, is suggested by the still from a video clip by the



*Fig. 4* Slavko Smolej,  
»My Shadow«, 1938.



*Fig. 5* Jaka Čop, »Under a Precipitous Rock«, 1990.



*Fig. 6* Jaka Čop, »It is Dawning in the Mountains«, 1990.

music group *Laibach* (Fig. 7). As can be seen, the members of the group have wrapped a flag around Aljaž's Tower on Mt. Triglav. The group is a part of a Slovenian »retro-garde« movement from the eighties. Among its symbols are also Malevich's suprematist cross from 1915 and the cog-wheel which was a motif much used by socialist realist artists. By wrapping their flag around the tower, they have symbolically appropriated the symbol of the Slovenians. It is a case of postmodern irony, something which is totally absent from previous representations of mountains. In modernist representations mountains are always something serious, a grave matter, representing crucial issues, where laughter and irony are superfluous.



Fig. 7 *Laibach*, 1989.

*Works Cited*

Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.

Applegate, Celia, *A Nation of Provincials. The German Idea of Heimat*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Barthes, Roland, »Rhétorique de l'image,« *Communications* 4 (1964): 40-51.

Benjamin, Walter, »Das Kunstwerk in Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit«, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 1.12. Eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974. 9 vols.

- Charlton, D.G., *New Images of the Natural in France*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Confino, Alon, »The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Heimat, National Memory and the German Empire, 1871-1918«, *History and Memory* 5.1 (1993): 42-86.
- Čop, Jaka, *Kraljestvo zlatoroga* (In the Kingdom of the Goldhorn), Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1990.
- Derrida, Jacques, *La vérité en peinture*, Paris: Flammarion, 1978.
- Eagleton, Terry, *Walter Benjamin*, London: Verso, 1981.
- Kambič, Mirko, »Fotoamaterji in njihova združenja, 1884-1919,« *150 let fotografije na Slovenskem. 1839-1919* (150 Years of Photography in Slovenia 1839-1919). Ljubljana: Mestna galerija Ljubljana, 1989.
- Kavčič Bojan, »Kult(ura) – Natura,« *V kraljestvu filma* (In the Kingdom of the Film), Ljubljana: Slovenski gledališki in filmski muzej, 1986-87.
- Kracauer, Siegfried, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969.
- Krauss, Rosalind, *The Originality of the Avant-Gardes and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988.
- Lacan, Jacques, »L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient,« *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966.
- McCracken, Grant, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.
- Nochlin, Linda, *The Politics of Vision*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1991.
- Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989.
- Žižek, Slavoj, *For they know not what they do*, London: Verso, 1991.