Photography: Of Nation and Mountains

Aleš Erjavec

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ALEŠ ERJAVEC

Abstract

In his article the author presents ways in which in the last two centuries mountain photography was employed by Slovenians in establishing their national identity or sentiment. He points out the similar, yet also different development of realism in painting, on the one hand, and, on the other, the historical development of photography. He furthermore explores history of photography and of mountain photography in particular, and argues that in the case of Slovenia for a variety of reasons the mountains acquired a very special value. He notes that other countries too, possessed similar loci that played a similar role in similar ways but that they have never attained a similar decisive role as the mountains in Slovenia. The author points out that the photographic representation of mountains is but one of the instances of an imaginary employment of photography, for in the last few decades the representations of mountains could be found on a series of symbolic national objects, such as provisional Slovenian currency, the national flag, and the passport.

Keywords: mountain photography, national identity, Slovenian nation, mountaineering.

1. Prelude

In the Call for Papers to which this article is a response, the editors suggested two main perspectives: “one that recommends art as an instrument for political changes, and another that militates for isolating art from politics.” In what follows I intend to highlight a particular kind of national art that may act as an instrument of political action. I shall

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1 Research Professor in the Institute of Philosophy in the Scientific Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts; <ales.erjavec@zrc-sazu.si>.
thus not explore art as an instrument for political change in relation to social class. (This latter perspective is often being regarded as synonymous with Marxism.) Instead, I intend to demonstrate how in the photographic art such as that presented, reproduced, and discussed in this article, art expresses national ideology. I intend to present some of the ways in which in a particular realm (and genre) national ideology was erected over a span of hundred years, how it aided in creating a particular kind of art, and how it attained its aims without being either avant-garde or revolutionary.

2. *Il faut être de son lieu*

We have grown accustomed to regard the second half of the nineteenth century as the epoch of modernism. Some claim that realism reached its apogee around 1850, while others argue that that is when it started but then attained its apogee a century later i.e., in the 1960s.

In 1860s the impressionist movement appeared. From Paris it spread like bush fire to other parts of Europe and to United States, transmogrifying into modernism whatever it touched on its path, facilitating in this way the appearance of various new expressive techniques, styles and genres that claimed to offer new venues to the representation of beauty and truth.

In 1904 four Slovenian painters, Rihard Jakopič, Ivan Grohar, Matej Stermen and Matija Jama, held an exhibition in the Salon Miethke in Vienna. While the exhibition was well-received in Vienna, it would not be an exaggeration to say that in Ljubljana it was met with standing ovations. Although the four Slovenian painters initially intended to put the word “impressionist” into the name of their group, Miethke persuaded them to name the group “Sava” (after a tributary of the Danube river, and the largest river on Slovenian territory) thereby pointing to the local and national i.e., Slavic, character of the group and its art. Soon after their works were exhibited in Belgrade, Prague, Warsaw, Sofia, etc. Of course, the “Slovenian impressionists”, as they were soon called, were three decades behind French impressionism and
should perhaps have been called “post-impressionists”, none the less their approach, style, and subject-matter were pure impressionism.

In the second half of the nineteenth century photographic camera was being developed into an increasingly practical technical device that was soon ready to compete with the fine arts.

“[T]he ultimate consecration of photography as part of the fine arts required more than the simulation of handwork or the intellectual conversion of a few art critics; photography also had to become accepted by the art institutions. Pictorialism led the way with a series of well-received exhibitions in the 1890s, one of them, the first ever in an art museum, at the Hamburg Kunsthalle in 1893, whose daring director wrote of the public’s astonishment at seeing photographs hung in painting galleries: ‘To them it seemed like holding natural history congress in a church’.” (Shiner 2001, 232-33)

The second half of the same century was also the time of the emergence of realism which was based on a different artistic philosophy than modernism, making Jacques Rancière’s frequent claims about the problematic nature of modernism well-founded (See Rancière 2009a).

3. Mountain Photography

The topic of this article is the role of mountain photography in the constitution of Slovenian national sentiment or “identity”. Two preconditions had to be met before photography could acquire such a role: (a) photographic camera had to become an apparatus available to general population and (b) it had to be used easily by amateurs. In the images that accompany this essay their technical progress will become obvious – ranging from the static documentary images from the last decade or two of the nineteenth century to the sophisticated “art” photographs from the 1920s and 1930s. The images reproduced, are meant to show how photography – just like the cinema – was transformed from a technical invention into an art genre. Mountain photography could thus be regarded as a parallel to painting and analogously as a form of art. Considering the 1893 exhibition in
Hamburg and similar events, we see how a series of small steps was changing the over-all status and position of photography.

I have pointed out Linda Nochlin’s claim that a basic motto of the nineteenth century realism was to be of one’s place – “to deal with one’s own country, region, or even, at its most extreme, one’s own property” (Nochlin 1991, 19). The other realist motto was to “be of one’s times” – “Il faut être de son temps” (Nochlin 1991, 19).

The first motto concerned a desire which was widespread in Europe of that time: especially after the revolution of 1848 in different countries national aspirations grew. For this reason certain specifics of such nations, 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 a nation-state. Since such nations were often divided among different countries, geographical and topological landmarks were frequently used to denote national specifics. In such a way characteristics of a national countryside may have supplied additional weight to the identity of the nation which was trying to attain or strengthen its self-awareness. In this respect European countries differed: while some have already attained a high level of national self-awareness, others felt short of it. Thus in 1861 Massimo d’Azeglio exclaimed: “We have made Italy: now we must make Italians” (Quoted in Blumenkranz-Onimus 1973, 369).

In the last two centuries photographic representations of the Slovenian mountains represented a visible instance of, and a successfully functioning, segment of national ideology. Here “ideology” should be understood as “worldview” (Weltanschauung), although other meanings of ideology (such as Althusserian “Ideological State Apparatuses”) were also involved or present. Throughout the century-long period of conflict between the class and the national meta-narratives fought for exclusivity or at least dominance in Slovenian society. Ideology represented the “cement” that held the national community together.

In some cases the “place” where a nation is located, is a community which can exist even in diaspora. In Slovenia in most cases the “place” is a very real and relatively well-defined territory. Such place can, of course, be designated on the basis of “historical” borders, but it can also be based on geographical divisions such as mountain ranges, rivers or
deserts. In all such cases the “place” must be symbolically constructed. Realist art of the nineteenth century, too, 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 such place can just as well refer to a region, town, or some other “location.”

The conclusion to be drawn from this introduction is that the mountains serve – at least in Slovenia – as a national ideological representation in an almost ideal way, for they are accepted by the national community as the place of its “identity.” They function similarly to the signifier “Heimat” (homeland), and partly as fatherland, motherland, or the national spirit. 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, “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 1990, 73)

4. 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 the Pannonian plain. 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 chunk of Slovenian territory which remained in its hands until 1943. For that reason (and also because the Slovenian coast is only 43 km long) the sea did not play any significant role in the national consciousness.

Since romanticism mountains played an important role in Slovenian national mythology. They gained a special prominence from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, when throughout Central Europe mountaineering became one of the favorite bourgeois pastimes.

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2 Similar to the role of mountains in Slovenia was that played by the “puszta” in Hungary, or by the Great Karoo in South Africa. The first documented recreative ascent on mountains was Francesco Petrarca’s who climbed Mount Ventoux in Provance in 1336. The highest mountain in Slovenia, Mt. Triglav, was climbed for the first time in 1778. The possibility to appreciate the mountains is 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, horid and firefull Craggs and tracts’, and he concluded: ‘Nature has swept up the rubbish of the earth in the Alps’” (Charlton 1984, 42). In the eighteenth century the situation started 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 mountain literature, his long poem Die Alpen (1732). [...] Paul Van Tieghem (in his Le Sentiment de la nature dans le prêromantisme européen, 1960), writing of European literature as a whole, distinguished 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 and deserted mountain peaks” (Charlton 1984, 46). It is romanticism, with Shelley, Byron and Coleridge, that regards storms, mountains and the sea not as products of human sin, as Thomas Burnet did in 1681, but relishes instead in the “mountain glory”.
Mountains were 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 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. 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 and climbing 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. In 1874 the “German and Austrian Alpine Association” was founded. It was reestablished on Slovenian territory in the 1890s 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 nationalisms 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 population 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 Croatians, developed a prosperous middle class, which wanted to attain national independence. The Germans were, of course, opposed to such

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3 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.
an idea, 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 aims⁴.

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 create and 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 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 the well-known Slovenian romanticist sonnet “Baptism at the Savica Falls” (1835) by France Prešern tells us], but sometimes also as the birthplace of the Slovenian nation: a theory, refuted by professional historians but even recently attracting a substantial popular interest, professed that Slovenians were not really a Slavic nation but were of Illyrian descent instead, originating in the Alps⁵.

“From being the last enemy, nature is now a ‘friend’”, comments D.G. Charlton (Charlton 1984, 96) the change in the romantic perception of the mountains as compared to the previous depictions, encountered less than a hundred years before, of the mountains as repulsive and

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⁴ Perhaps the best example of this appropriation was the purchase of the very peak of the highest mountain in the Slovenian Alps, Mt. Triglav (2864 m) 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.

⁵ A consequence of such reasoning was that Slovenians “have nothing in common” with the other nations of the former Yugoslavia, such as Croatians, Serbians or Macedonians.
displeasing irregularities on the surface of the Earth. It is from romanticism on that the 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. Representing mountains as a shelter was not far removed from representing them as the source of national identity, 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 only the “place” of national origin as in the aforementioned case of the “Illyrian theory”) gained perhaps the most widespread support, although it was not explicitly stated except in poetry, and in monographs about the mountains. 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 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 (Planinski vestnik) in 1900 (Kambič 1989, 26). Its editors organized lectures while 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. If this film stirs this emotion in everyone, its aim will be more than attained.” (Kavčič 1986-7, 289)

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 to escape. The paradox of course was that this nature was represented and symbolically appropriated through culture i.e., film. The second film focussed on Mt. Triglav.

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 consisted in the impossibility of the latter to be reproduced without becoming a “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 nineteenth 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),

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6 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.
but creates it by choosing and carefully editing the motif and playing upon the pre-existent symbolic context. These gallery photographs are thus always 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 continuos 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 nineteenth century, mountaineering becoming a combat zone for the symbolic appropriation of Alpine territory between the Germans and the Slovenians, relatively well established photography in Slovenia in the same epoch⁷, and the foundation of the Alpine Association which subsequently promoted and 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 Slovenians retaining within the socialist Yugoslavia many of their cultural characteristics. In this way mountain photography and various publications presenting it to the broader public flourished into the present⁸.

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⁷ The Slovenian, Janez Puhar (1814-1864), invented photography on glass (heliotype) and, in 1859, the first photography studio appeared in Slovenia’s capital, Ljubljana.

⁸ Mountain photography is but one of the vehicles for retaining or enhancing the paramount role of the mountains in the national consciousness under discussion.
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 1988, 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.

Mountains are sublime. 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 (See Derrida 1978, 146). 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

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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.

9 See *Investigations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Part I.
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 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 1974, 479)

Or, as Terry Eagleton remarks:

“Auratic experience can only be recollection.” (Eagleton 1981, 35)

The mountains to which I am referring hardly ever belonged to anybody in an actual or practical way, for they are uninhabitable. Even if they were partly and in some ways 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 some other nation or race. The case of the aforementioned attempts of appropriating the mountains by the Germans and the Slovenians in the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth, was, of course, a symbolic appropriation, with the interesting fact being that even today the German names are often preserved and used interchangeably with the Slovenian ones. On other occasions name in one language persists while the name in the other language is losing its presence and is drifting into oblivion. The imaginary presentation of the mountains in question can obviously be invested with an almost infinite number of acceptable meanings. 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 cultural and ideological content would be absent or only implied. Thus the combined message of the photograph and its title serves as the vehicle 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.

If we discard the problematic aspects of Althusser’s theory (such as the absence of a persuasive link between the unconscious and ideology and of ideology and the Real), then national identity and nationalisms fit well into 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 (Althusser 1971, 162). [. . .] 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 1971, 165).

5. Identities and Imagined Communities

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 often supported by an extraordinary high number of intellectuals of a certain nation. In many cases the intellectuals are those who articulate, defend and most ardently propagate such ideas. It also remains true, as Celia Applegate writes that, “consciousness of national belonging is one of the most striking and least understood of modern phenomena” (Applegate 1990, IX). Still, it can be interpreted as a peculiar strain of ideology, combined with other (especially religious) ideologies and being carried out with the help of different institutions and apparatuses. As in the case of Slovenian mountaineers who strove to turn the Alps into the “Slovenian mountains,” in Germany too, one must note from the outset that those who held on to regional identities were, with a few exceptions, not conscious of being or doing 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 1990, 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. The love of the mountains and the wish to appropriate their symbolic value or potential were simultaneously preconditions for, and consequences of, national and nationalistic actions carried out by the Slovenian and the German mountaineers.

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 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 twentieth 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 was no enemy in sight who would endanger national sovereignty, identity, etc.). The other 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”.

According to Althusser, “Ideology is eternal, exactly like the unconscious” (Althusser 1971, 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.

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.

The same can be applied to collective subjectivity of the Slovenians (for those who can be interpellated as such) in the last century and beyond, when 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 such national subjectivity. 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 1966, 517)

A community – in our case a nation or rather those individuals who feel to belong to it and can thus be interpelleated 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 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” (Žižek 1991, 141).

“[S]uch 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.” (Žižek 1991, 141-2)

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 interpelleation 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. In various other countries, 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.

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 was the German Heimat. In this case the rural countryside, 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, parallely, of the individual with the forces of nature, both carrying many shared 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 partly valid when applied to Slovenian homeland.

We could, of course, also say that a Slovenian is defined also by the national territory, for the mountains cover only a part of the country. But this would be only partly true, for large segments of the territory previously populated by Slovenians are today 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 presence. 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 (Fig. 8), 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 the coffee-table kind of books with images of the mountains, 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 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. 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 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. To stress again, the described phenomenon is not unique. What is unique is that it exists in the Slovenian case in such a pure form. One of the reasons for this 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 a plethora of 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.

6. Conclusion

In the last century and a half mountain photography in Slovenia has helped to strengthen the image of mountains as the place of national identity and origin. In this way it helped strengthen Slovenian national sentiment. 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 continuously present for a century and more, for they were not only the geographical and topographical frame or context in which people lived but also a sight visible from a large part of Slovenia including the capital of Ljubljana from which the easternmost peaks of the Alps are very close.

From romanticism on the myths and folk tales served as the basis for the strengthened national awareness. During this same time but in a population broader than the local one, the mountains tied locals and those who imagined themselves to be sharing with them a sensus communis, of being tied “together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together” (Rancière 2009b, 56).

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 Slovenian national identity and thus of its Heimat. 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. Such contradiction should have existed between the class and the national metanarratives, but this did not happen.
Unlike those of most nations, the mountains in Slovenia represented a unique symbolic locus of identity and thus of collective subjectivity. With the transformations in national sovereignty due to its independence in 1991 and to the novel role of the European Union of which Slovenia is a member, their specific symbolic role is diminishing.

While real mountains play an ideological role, their impact is often stronger when offered via representations such as photos taken by ordinary people, in art photography or on postcards.

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 an 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 contemporary times, have lost their original dwellers. Instead we have today city life, fast and far removed from our origins where we can perhaps escape over the weekend.

A different, still purely documentary intention is evident from both photos from the nineteenth century depicting scenes from Mt. Triglav (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). Nevertheless, today these photographs offer a different reading: they are framed by later events, enabling us to view the mountaineers 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 pictures, 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 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. 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 Slovenian 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 Slovenian postmodern music group Laibach (Fig. 7). As can be seen, the members of the group have wrapped their flag around Aljaž’s Tower on Mt. Triglav. The group is a part of a Slovenian “retro-garde” movement from the 1980s. 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. This 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.
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Figures

Fig. 1. Gustav Pirc, “Aljaž’s Tower on Triglav”, 1895.
Fig. 2. Franz Leiner, “On Little Triglav”, 1888.
Fig. 3. Ivo Frelih, “Winter”, 1936.
Fig. 4. Slavko Smolej, “My Shadow”, 1938.
Fig. 6. Jaka Čop, “It is Dawning in the Mountains”, 1990.
Fig. 7. Laibach, 1989.
Fig. 8. A provisional banknote of Slovenia with the motif of Mt. Triglav, 1991.