

Place for Something Else

Analysing a Cultural Imaginary

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The importance of place and material culture for identity-construction in contemporary European regionalism is here brought up in an investigation of the region of Istria in Croatia and Slovenia. Theories of modernity tend to regard place either as disappearing in a time-place compression or as a compensation for the uprooting in a world of globalisation and insecurity. A slightly different perspective comes to the fore when focus is being put on how regions actually are used in a contemporary praxis: as basis for people's culture building and identification. Not as a place to defend or escape to, but as an "opening", a possibility. From a phenomenological point of view the imaginary potentials of things and heritage are being discussed, arguing that lived experience and agency must be studied in parallel to narrations and cultural constructions. Regions also could be seen both as outcomes of micro-nationalism and as cultural imaginaries where something different is formulated.

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*Such will things always be for us:
the focal point for poetics.*
(Gaston Bachelard 1992:28)

At the start of a new millennium, the Europe of Regions is emerging as the other face of trans-national culture building. What does it actually mean to perform on the European arena at this time? Which regions are selected, and which of their characteristics are emphasized? Starting with the province of Istria in Croatia, which attained the status of a Euro-region in 1995, I will discuss two characteristics which recur repeatedly: multiculturalism and the soulfulness of place and things. Several of the features displayed in Istria have their counterparts in Swedish regions like Skåne or Jämtland, in Vestlandet in Norway or Carinthia in Austria, and so on. Yet it may be strategically justified to exaggerate the contours and the blackness of the pictures and tone down the similarities between the places. On the one hand, regionalization makes certain areas in Europe concordant

precisely because they emerge as culturally significant at the same time in history. On the other hand, the distinctive local features in each area are placed in the developing tank. If distinctive local character is to be visible, then comparisons are necessary. The Swedish experience of cautious, low-key regionalism contrasts so dramatically with the tendencies to rebellion against an excessively bossy centre that are making themselves felt in Istria. In this essay I want to let a different world provoke the Swedish experience, allowing it to serve as a relief to what is happening "at home".

Cultural Imaginaries

Regions have, generally speaking, grown up as a kind of cultural interstices or imaginaries, in-between spaces of experimentation which make room for something different. They are at once virtual and real, for fun and in dead earnest. In today's debate they tend to be used to highlight something reprehensible and to hold up hopeful

alternatives. In a similar way, social groups – women, coloured people, ethnic minorities, the working class – were used in the twentieth century as concrete points of departure for criticizing society and searching for functioning models to copy (Stewart 1996a). With the aid of the regions, a broad spectrum of issues has been raised today. These range from the criticism of globalization and the levelling out of differences to the abuse of political power and the technologization of life. When regions emerge, they thus bear the impression of contemporary unrest while simultaneously offering a cure for it. Yet the questions that can be articulated are different from the emancipatory ones of the twentieth century. The regions foster misty ideas of closeness, authenticity, mystery, and a way of life adjusted to nature within a micro-nationalist frame (cf. Harvey 1996). Unlike the dreams of utopian social communities, the fantasies produced by the regions mostly concern material phenomena – the place and its things.

When social matters are mentioned, it is in the form of experiments with post-national identities. New groups of professions such as computer operators, information officers, architects, publishers, and craftsmen appear in the regions side by side with the local population, minorities, and people in folk costume. Syntheses of old and new are created, culture building takes place using local features as crucial components. The hope that the borders between nation states in Europe will disappear seems to be more obvious in places like Istria or Skåne, where it is much more credible that the established national identities might be replaced by something new – at once common European and locally rooted. The tolerance of diversity appears to be greater than in national centres. One's own country gives contours to collective and personal identities. When Europe – especially the European Union – launches its motto *In Uno Plures* ("Unity in Diversity"), it is therefore easier to embrace the programme in the regions than at the centre. The European rhetoric that emphasizes multiculturalism as its distinctive feature is thus most explicit here (cf. Shore 2000).

When, for example, the Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes an article

about the European Cultural Capital for 2000 – Bergen – he stresses its cosmopolitan character and shows how the population has a multicultural heritage going back to the Middle Ages. The town was founded and governed by Dutch merchants and Germans from the Hanseatic League, and this has been reflected in its distinctive character ever since (2000:68f). Today this orientation towards the multicultural goes hand in hand with the tendency of the internationalist city – with its oil industry, its university, its shipping lines – to create an image distinct from that of the peasant culture of the surrounding countryside. On "Stril Days" (*stril* is the term used for the rural populace around Bergen), the city is occupied by people in imaginative folk dress alluding to the peasant culture of the turn of the century. What unites them all is that they are folksy and antiquated (cf. Reme, this volume).

When regions take the stage, their character is thus as much dreamed as a factual geographical unit. They have something that the rest of the country presumably does not have: personality, life, and "soul". To give the soul a necessary anchorage, cultural heritage and ancestry have been put on the agenda. This may crudely be linked to the general European aspiration for distinction: it is by virtue of its civilization and its long history that the continent shapes its image (chiefly as a counter to the USA). And this is a strategy of which people are more aware in these vigilant cultural interstices. The cultural heritage undoubtedly functions as a kind of local charter, giving legitimation. The regions take pride in being more genuine, original, and ancient than the nation state. In Croatia the state as a national construction has a brief history going back no further than 1991 – although the declaration of independence was a "thousand years old dream" coming true, whereas the history of Istria started before the Romans. In this intermediate space there is not the same requirement for the state as an administrative unit; instead, people can experiment freely with long genealogies. Similar alternative genealogies, reinforced with the aid of the cultural heritage, function in most regions. Skåne and Jämtland, although long since parts of Sweden, invoke their Danish and Norwegian roots. Back in the Middle Ages, Vestlandet in

Norway was the seat of the Norwegian kingdom. These examples could be multiplied from the many parts of Europe where regionalism is strong: the Basque country, Catalonia, Brittany, Wales, Flanders – and they are growing in number and strength.

The Life of Things

The focus on the cultural heritage repeatedly highlights material culture. This has nothing to do with material circumstances in the historical materialist sense, but instead the concrete but far from dead material objects. The past becomes visible through its traces and artefacts, through houses, monuments, memorials, individual objects, art and sculpture. Things are truly living testimony to the cultural continuity and distinctiveness that people also search for elsewhere. And then something strange happens: the objects increasingly take on the character of subjects – acting of their own power. Of course, people use them to reason about identity and interpersonal relations, and for this they are ascribed the character of messengers, meaning-bearing objects. But surely they are something more than just what people around them want to read into them? Are they merely the *thoughts* they materialize? Are they not also surrounded by their own unique “aura” – the radiance that testifies to their strength and their power to invoke (Benjamin 1969)? Do they not also possess a poetic ability to give rise to new ideas, to activate people’s ability to dream and fantasize (Bachelard 2000:187)? To be parts of the dialogue of the present with the past, they must be proved to be something more than objective testimony and remains. How could we otherwise understand why people in Istria constantly speak of the *ambience* of places and buildings? Why would there otherwise be such an obsession with trying to understand the magic power exerted by Illyrian settlements and votive sites, by fortresses or chapels dedicated to the Virgin Mary, by churches and relics, by places where ley lines and fields of force are visible, by medieval wind instruments and ancient live-stock breeds? Things like this – and many more – have become something more than symbols. They bear secrets and have to be induced to speak.

The study of *the life of objects* therefore comes naturally to the fore if one wants to understand how regions at the turn of the millennium are shaped. To obtain interpretative tools, we need to extend the scholarly perspective beyond the functional, the symbolic, or the communicative – perspectives which have hitherto formed the interface between researchers and things. To acquire ideas for new perspectives, one can turn to the extensive literature describing how other artefacts in our high-tech society act: microchips, computers, the Internet, mobile phones, surveillance cameras, implants. The objects of the new technology have been ascribed agency, the ability to act on their own (Latour 1998). They appear as subjects, as active transmitters of memories, as actors with discrimination and the power to speak and seduce (Lash 1999:342). Yet it would be short-sighted to regard that ability as being restricted merely to the things with which technology has provided culture at the end of the millennium! Surely everyday things and remains of earlier eras can also be understood according to similar principles? Things appear to have an ability to collect and retain, even without batteries and electricity.

Here I am going to examine how the interstices, the regions, speak and think through their landscapes, cities, and beaches; through their material remains of previous and contemporary eras. For the phenomenologist and philosopher Gaston Bachelard, for example, the house is as much a physical body as material construction which thinks and stimulates dreams. Its potential lies not in the function but in its incredible ability to give substance and life to imaginary worlds. The house exists in us as much as we live in it – it arouses a response, strikes familiar notes, and sets our imagination in movement. A child has no problem with the idea that toys have a life and that they are merely concrete objects with which to start fantasizing. Becoming an adult, however, means that one ceases to dream, learns to stop being open to the potential of things and instead considers only their usefulness and function. As a researcher one should expend more effort on studying how imagination is slowly suffocated to make room for rationalism.

The house has the ability to do something to us, just as much as we do things to it. Its most distinctive characteristic is thus not just that it encloses us and grants us shelter and rest, but that it makes the world open up, that it actually functions as a sensory organ through which we investigate life. There is scarcely an idea about the world that is not mediated through open and closed windows or doors, by protective roofs and cosily furnished rooms. Every house is a possibility; it can be the start of a new voyage of discovery. It invites us on a journey where we can see one dreamed house after another rolling past before our eyes – to be examined, approved, or rejected.

When viewed in this way, materiality becomes a place from which our dreaming can derive nourishment and where our imagination can blossom; it has the ability to contain secrets and transcendence (2000:98). It can be seen from the point of view of its poetic, generative qualities – a cultural imaginary – as much as its utilitarian aspects. What story does it tell, what associations

does it arouse with other buildings in other places (cf. Stewart 1996b:181)? Failing to see the life that proceeds from things would be like looking at sheet music but not listening to the music it denotes.

What has been said here about the house can be applied to much wider fields. High technology certainly involves something new for culture, but in this context it is justified to point out how it has made us sensitive to the power of things. We have once again become alert to the meanings that reside in buildings and home interiors, in beautiful objects and things with a past. From this point of view it is no coincidence that today's interest in design runs parallel to the new IT society. There is something more to things than social distinction.

Things have always spoken, but people have not always paid the same attention. Today we listen. Can we find here an explanation why buildings, monuments, and other expressions of the cultural heritage have emerged from the prison in which museums and historiography

have placed them? If so, then material culture is not so much a testimony about as an entrance to the past. This in turn takes on the character of something semi-mysterious, living and contemporary.

Things thus appear to play an important role in the shaping of the imaginary, the regions that are “happening” today. In theoretical terms, this means opening up to the inspiration of phenomenology. This means that things should not be understood on the basis of what we have invested in them in a rationalistic spirit, or how they have been constructed. Instead it is a matter of understanding what they can create and give rise to – the diversity of resonance that arises in us in our encounter with them.¹ Or, as Bachelard says using a metaphor from the field of poetry: the wealth and depth of a poem are not revealed by tracing its motifs and composition but in the response it arouses in the reader (2000:23f). For ethnology and the cultural sciences this means keeping a sceptical distance to the otherwise so predominant perspective of modernity. That is an outlook grounded in social psychology. It makes it possible to understand people’s relation to things in the light of deeper drives such as desire, compensation, and security. People’s relationships to things are then mediated by human needs.² For Bachelard, on the other hand, it is more interesting to ask what *happens* in this encounter than to try to clarify the obscure reason for the occurrence of the encounter in the first place.

In several regions and “interstices” the liberation of local patterns of culture has taken place parallel to a series of political convulsions. Regions have risen in opposition to centres and asserted their distinctiveness on the grounds of cultural difference. When people begin to imagine that it is possible to make direct contact with the past through the place, the land, and things, it can give them a dangerous certainty about their own excellence. Things are so palpable, they do not argue, and they can therefore be used as evidence that we really have something genuine of our own, in contrast to the complexity of the surrounding world. “We have lived here since Roman times!” as the Italian-speaking population of Istria can be heard to

say. In the Austrian province of Carinthia, peasant culture and the *Heimat* have been a similar power centre for Jörg Haider’s FPÖ. In Vestlandet in Norway, Viking Age and medieval remains reflecting the conversion of the country to Christianity have been cited as evidence that this is a much more authentic land than the rest of Norway. The region easily becomes a place where micro-nationalism is confirmed by the things to which it refers. It is then important to bear in mind that materiality is much more ambiguous than political programmes and scholarly discourses. It can also serve as a strategy for bridging over history, liberating the place for communication with contemporary people. Material things are more accessible than memories of everyday social life. Just as it is possible to build a fortress against the outside world, so it is possible to open the local for free experimentation in a time of dramatic upheaval. Each region displays its own pattern in this respect. The pieces that people use to create something of their own are the same from place to place, but the outcome depends on local historical and economic conditions.

The role played by materiality in Istria will be discussed on the basis of the film festival in the little mountain town of Motovun in the summer of 2000. Perhaps more distinctly than in any other place, it shows the crucial role that things have come to play. The people here have actively repressed the self-identity built up of memory and narrativity. Instead they have used towns and landscapes and blended the magic of the place with technologies for communication and picture making. Local narratives and existing history were considered less interesting than the aura proceeding from things. Or to put it another way: If the past was to be made to speak, it had to be freed from memory, tradition, and history. In their stead came myths, fantasies, and volitional ideas. Reality became virtual more than real, and for this purpose materiality was needed, things which could bestow both mystery and concreteness. How this came about is the example used for showing the importance of material culture in contemporary European regionalism.³

From the Coast to the Heart of the Province

From my field notes from "The Second" film festival in Motovun, Istria, 1 August 2000. This was the second year the festival was held. It has now become an important film event.

"The day when the festival begins, we park below the town in the place to which we are directed. There are hundreds of other cars parked together. It turns out to be a mistake. When we want to head for home at midnight, the cars are parked so close that it takes me half an hour of steering and swearing to squeeze the car out. Along the road down the mountain there are vehicles parked on either side. Only one car and a thin sheet of paper can pass at the same time. It seems as if half the country plus Slovenia and adjacent parts of Italy and Austria have chosen to park here.

Like pilgrims we had walked the last steep slope up to the town. All private traffic was banned. This has become a *place* to which people come on pilgrimage, striving upwards. At the Venetian gate in the town wall there is a temporary ticket office where we queue to buy tickets for the evening's Chinese film and afterwards go to the opening party. An enterprising seller of Chinese food envelops Serenissima's winged lion of Saint Mark and the armorial bearings of the noble families in an aroma of sweet and sour sauce.

Inside the gate, the narrow terrace is lined by outdoor cafés which grant visitors the peace to regard three gigantic propellers cheerfully painted in red, green, and yellow, which rotate invitingly – a reminder of the power of the imagination. Some 150 years ago an engineer tried to drive boats up the River Mirna by means of propellers. Now they evoke wind and air, the landscape below seen through an element.

We crowd through the next narrow doorway, where signs saying "Pazi, klisko!" warn us that the stones are slippery. Centuries of soles have polished each stone smooth and shiny. The central square is thronged with urban youths: "hard blacks", beatniks with Jesus beards and headbands, who seem to have been resurrected

from the seventies; slender girls with bare stomachs, constantly smoking Zagreb intellectuals and perfectly ordinary young people from the surrounding towns of Pula, Poreč, Pazin, and Umag. Their dress evokes other times, other fashions, other places. The articulation has been carefully chosen to be distinct in its expression. Sitting under the chestnut tree in front of Hotel Kaštelet gives you the crucial experience of being here and simultaneously being somewhere else. Here, beside the assembly place, is where the specially invited actors are staying: Bibi Andersson and Erland Josephson; the greying director Vatroslav Minica and his wife, visiting from Los Angeles, are sitting here. He is actually here retrospectively since he has stopped making films; he has come to receive the festival's special "award for lifetime achievement".

In the little square outside the church, an enormous screen has been stretched, and white plastic chairs are awaiting the evening's showing. Strolling around in the balmy twilight are artists and cultural celebrities, ministers from Zagreb and 136 accredited journalists from national and international media. There are cameras, video cameras, and mobile phones everywhere. Sixty volunteers from Croatia, Holland, Denmark, and England walk around with yellow walkie-talkies in their hands. On their black t-shirts one can read *Staff*, *Motovun* and (*the second*). The brackets are the region as much as they are a production of fantasy; as much phenomenology's demarcated world of differentness – *époché* – as the time allocated to a film festival in a place that is off the beaten track.⁴

This is the day for the potentiation of Motovun. Overnight the town has become a stage where a drama can be enacted, dealing with how something local becomes a touchdown place for – and harmonized with – outside worlds. A majority of the films, to be sure, come from the former Yugoslavia, but it is Lars von Trier's phantasmagoria *Dancer in the Dark* that wins first prize. Short films from the USA, Israel, the Czech Republic, and Sweden are blended in a highly international mix. All the short films could be viewed via the Internet. Visitors to the site came from the whole of Europe and beyond,

and the voting for the best film was done at the click of a mouse.

People come here just as much for the ambience of the place as for the event. They also seem to be viewing things from a suitable distance. They are obviously present in a world of mobile telecommunications, a pictorial world, a world of celebrities. This is the place where expectations are to be translated into practice, where something that has been created far away in space or time is renegotiated. The production is both local and global, contemporary and from a dreamy past – virtually tangible like a computer game or a fantasy game. High-tech apparatus and ancient local artefacts help to convey and create this alterity. The medieval scene, in all its striking unreality, interacts with events in other places. A contemporary modern Europe makes itself felt, while its most cherished historical period, the Middle Ages, simultaneously helps to intensify that presence. Twenty thousand people visit a town that otherwise has room for only a few hundred inhabitants. It is still absolutely jammed when we drive away through the night.”

The choice of the little mountain town of Motovun as the venue for an international film festival was in no way random. In post-war Yugoslavia there were annual national festivals in another place, one that better met the needs of festivals in those days – ostentation, swimsuits, palm trees, and culture – namely, the old naval town of Pula. This Istrian coast has long been famous for its bathing and tourism. The coast is the truly international place where hundreds of thousands of visitors every summer come from all over Central Europe to occupy the beaches. On one of the islands in the Brioni archipelago just off the coast, Tito had his famous summer residence to which he invited foreign heads of state. Officers and sailors from all over Yugoslavia gathered in Pula, to train and to serve in the republic’s most important naval base.

With the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, a festival for Croatian production alone felt truncated. This is a small country with limited resources for filmmaking. Festivals are still held in Pula. This year’s winner, among a small

number of starters, was the farcical film *Marsala*, which portrayed what happened today in a little coastal community when Tito’s ghost suddenly manifested itself. It was also one of the few films worth seeing that year, and the festival attracted little attention. No, if you have to choose an international place in contemporary Europe, it is obvious that the half-forgotten little mountain town in the heart of the region exerts a much greater attraction. The coastal city may be allowed to go on holding the national in an international setting. At the same time, that is its limitation. Mystery, imagination, and dreams gain an easier foothold up on the rocks. This is a place that is in harmony with its time, it is able to conjure up a material culture which is as full of unspoken and secretive things as the films they want to show.

When the functionaries in Motovun wore the message “(*the second*)” on their t-shirts, it was thus not just a reflection of an alternative flair for making oneself visible in an age that demands something imaginative. The Istrian interior can entice people with something that have hitherto been in brackets, something *more* that appeals to people’s quest for transcendence. Just as things urge people to explore, so too does the place.

The Return of the Past

At the start of a new millennium, people’s linkages to places have changed in character. The local is seen as something more than the place where one works, lives, sends the children to school, and reads the newspaper. It is also expected to answer questions about identity and is ascribed an ability to create stability. What people search for is not something general and easily accessible but something unique and specific. The cultural heritage, for example, is supposed to help to highlight distinctiveness. There is scarcely a county museum in Sweden today which does not say that it wants to communicate knowledge of what is called “local and regional identity”. There is scarcely a place that does not claim to be able to point the way forwards by looking back. At the Istrian Ethnographic Museum in Pazin, an exhibition was staged in the summer of 2000 about the things

which – in the form of souvenirs – are currently defining what is distinctive about Istria. These things had little to do with the flows of tourists or the busy beach life; they were taken from the peasant culture of the interior.

For places to be able to answer questions about identity, they have to be equipped with a biography, a life story, a question that is constantly open to new interpretations and surprising insights. We thus see how something local is once again populated, filled with revived narratives and mysteries that suit our own times. It is not the history of the place that is sought, but its ambience, its soul, and its ability to accumulate memories and dreams.

The British-American geographer David Lowenthal has pointed out in several works how the past is now found everywhere, how it has been bent in such a way that it can be used as references in political argumentation as easily as in people's everyday lives. It has, he says, assumed the dimension of something resembling religion – something that can constantly be awakened to give explanations, something to which one can confess collective guilt as if it was a matter of personal sins. Public personages, from Pope John Paul to the Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson, ask forgiveness for the injustices committed in the past against outcasts and victims of persecution. The past that is brought out in political work and in people's everyday lives is not taken from the studies of historians and scholars. It is a moral history, one which can be used to tackle urgent questions. At a personal and collective level we see something that resembles *memory* much more than *history* taking the stage – or rather imagination more than actual memory (Lowenthal 1985, 1996).

Just as the biography is something that is constantly alive for the individual, the past of a place is not finished; it is a process extending into the present and reaching into the future (Marcus 1992, Bendix 2000). The past bestows an intention on the place and becomes an actor. It has an explanatory value rather than being something to be explained. Instead of appearing as the complex weave of politics, economy, and culture that always shapes the context in which events take place, the past is given intention

and meaning. And this can be read in the places where events happened.

This development has opened up the well-known opposition between those who work professionally with the management of the past and those who need to make it speak; between those who want to honour the place and hence themselves, and those who have to weigh it against other places, other events. In every museum or archive, researchers never cease to be astounded by the interpretations of history that they see emerging within the framework of regionalism. This is particularly the case in Sweden, where established historians have for generations claimed the privilege of formulating the problems and questions. The “vitalization” of history that is taking place in Skåne or Jämtland has been met by academics with sneers rather than rebuttals (Hansen 1998). Yet the situation in Istria has been radically different. The mythical has acquired an explanatory value because there has hardly been any dominating master narrative.

A Multicultural European Region

The depiction of the past that is taking shape in Istria today is intended to make the place a contemporary partner in dialogue. Alongside the fascination with the material – to which I shall soon return – the politically marketable term multiculturalism has increasingly come into the foreground. This means that people have successfully repressed history, traditions, and the collective memory in favour of myth.

Like several other areas in Central Europe and the Balkans, Istria through the ages has experienced dramatic conquests with the ensuing brutal movements of ethnic groups. Both Bosnia and Vojvodina are spoken of today in highly euphemistic terms as sites of multiculturalism, whereas occupation, persecution, and genocide would perhaps be more adequate descriptions. Lying at the intersection between Europe's great empires has made life fragile here.

Istria is criss-crossed by boundaries, constantly challenged and always movable. This was where the Roman Empire fought against the Illyrian tribes; the power of Byzantium, the Eastern Roman Empire, extended this far; it

was invaded by Celts, Visigoths, Croats, and Slovenes. During the Middle Ages, the boundary between the urban civilization of the Mediterranean and the feudal Central Europe – between Venice and Habsburg – cut through Istria. The hostilities between them swept over the province. All through the ages the inhabitants have had to get used to new lords coming and going. The population as such became mobile and mixed.

In the twentieth century alone, the inhabitants changed capital city no less than five times. From the fall of Venice in 1797 until the armistice in 1918, the whole of Istria was under Austria – apart from the brief but culturally significant interlude as an Illyrian province under Napoleon. The town of Pula was the home port for the Austrian Mediterranean fleet. After the First World War, Istria came under Italy. The region was then transformed into a real province, homogenized as a part of fascist Italy. From the Italian collapse in 1943 until peace came in 1945, Istria was for a short and terrible period directly under the Third Reich. As a result of the peace treaties of 1947 and 1954, the border between socialist Yugoslavia and the West was drawn just south of Trieste. Istria was now crossed by yet another boundary: the Iron Curtain. Under Tito, Istria became the place *par excellence* for in-migration for citizens of Yugoslavia, since this was the window on the west; the capital was Belgrade. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, Istria's capital was moved to Zagreb – and to some extent Ljubljana. In a few years the Schengen border will divide Istria into a Croatian part outside the EU and a Slovenian part inside the EU.

Being a sandpit for conquest, campaigns, guerrilla wars, and changing loyalties can of course be regarded as centuries of deliberately cultivated multiculturalism. It can also be described in terms of the inhabitants of the region having been mistreated without interruption by various European powers. Closed, conservative, and suspicious are adjectives that could likewise be used in this context.

The traces that this varied history have left behind, according to today's historiography, are tolerance and openness. Both Croatian and Italian are spoken in the region today, along

with Slovenian in the Slovenian part. Among Istrian intellectuals today there is a discourse, not just about the favourable influence that "Europe" is expected to have on the province, but just as much the reverse: an "Istrianization of Europe". This means that they believe that they are able to contribute a knowledge of how to find solutions whereby people can live together in a changing multicultural world, how different languages, religions, ethnic groups, and their traditions can live side by side in a limited area – while simultaneously supporting distinctiveness (Rakovac 1998). They have thus embraced the idea that the local is not just an application of general patterns, but more a place where patterns are renegotiated and from where something new and different is spread.

The regional political party, IDS, has put tolerance, multiculturalism, and orientation to Europe high on the agenda. Its slogan in the last election was in English: *Yes IDS!* And the leader of the party, Ivan Jakovčič, was Minister for Europe in the Račan government.

Repression of Memory

This interpretation of the past can only be kept alive if history is repressed, rewritten, and adjusted to the current situation. Istria has all the conditions necessary for allowing this discontinuity to gain ground. The people here are used to negotiating with the past. This seems due in no small measure to the fact that it would be a good thing if real history were forgotten. And there is a rich material culture to invoke and revive. The many lords have left numerous splendid traces. What is the process whereby the place and the material acquire the status of subject, something that is believed to have the ability to act while memory is repressed?

In the town of Motovun it is really only the things, the place, and the landscape that show continuity. This place is poor in memories. Of course, there is rich documentation from archaeological and historical sources. There are monuments from the Roman Empire and Drug Tito's workers' state in the 1950s. And of course there are descriptions of the church, chapel, loggia, town wall, well, and other historic buildings. (Descriptions like these are the very

prerequisite if material culture is to acquire the aura that will let it speak.) But people have come and gone – or conquered and been expelled – on such a scale that it is the buildings and landscapes that have survived while the memories have been subdued.

When the author Stephan Vajda had visited Motovun he was touched by conditional and insecure nature of people's lives and their clinging to material culture. The variegated history forced people to be extremely open to what is specific to the place, since this was the only thing that represented continuity:

“Lords came and lords went, Motovun was stormed, given away, pledged, sold, eroded, lost, and proclaimed a sanctuary. It nevertheless remained an Istrian town up in the mountains: just as much Roman, Illyrian, Byzantine, German, Italian, and Slavic. Traces and remnants, languages and objects grew together into an imaginary whole which ended up appearing wholly European – completely unintentionally – and so it remained, through bad times more than good” (Vajda 1998).

History taught people the usefulness of “un-remembering”, actively acquiring the ability to forget. After the Second World War, as we have seen, Istria was regained from Italy. It was now important to forget quickly. What had been won could of course be lost. The nationalization process was therefore quick and summary. The war against memory became a continuation of politics by other means (Girode 1999).

The majority of the Italian-speaking population disappeared into voluntary or enforced exile. Collaborators, real or alleged fascists, were executed. After the definitive transfer in 1954, the abandoned houses were confiscated or subject to compulsory purchase – often at arbitrary prices.

“Motovun was a very Italian town. It had its own theatre, and there was a middle class which took an interest in contemporary issues and culture. Among the small population – a couple of hundred – there were families who had long traditions and profound cultural interests in the place. When the partisans took

the town in the closing phase of the war, they found no less than nine pianos”,

according to the local journalist Davor Šišćević who works for the newspaper *Glas Istre*.

“After the war the inhabitants were forced to move. Hardly a single person from the time before the war is left in the town now. For natural reasons, the middle class was the main enemy, as regards both class and ethnicity.”

Into the empty houses moved people from other parts of Yugoslavia, mostly rural people. Many came from the region of Medimurje on the Hungarian border. People who had seen their homes destroyed during the war were uprooted and moved about. Those who now moved in had their family ties and networks elsewhere; their loyalties were to the party and the state more than to the place and the past. In their everyday lives and habits, they bore with them patterns from home – along with a profound conviction that history was disruptive, that the past was not something that led up to the present; it was best unremembered.

The Swedish journalist Richard Swartz, who lives in one of the small towns of Istria, made a comparison in a personal interview with another area in Europe that was afflicted by a massive exodus after the war, namely, the Sudetenland, Bohemia, in the present Czech Republic. There it was Germans who were expelled. At one stroke, the people who had borne up the society vanished, and newcomers moved in.

“To describe the situation in Istria after the Second World War, you have to imagine Stockholm having been invaded by people from northern Sweden, half of the population put to flight, the invaders taking over their flats and jobs and dividing the benefits between their family members and friends. What memory of the past would we have had in Stockholm if the city had undergone such a fate? As a bastion of northern Sweden?”

The comparison indicates that it was not really a matter of the expulsion of an ethnic group; the intolerance was directed against those who

were stewards of the narratives, the traditions, and the local expertise. Italian had been the language of the cultured class, the language one had to speak if one wanted a job, as a civil servant, primary school teacher, engineer, accountant, or doctor. That was how it had been, with few exceptions, during the Habsburg period. Many people took their education in Trieste, which was under the Habsburgs but where people spoke Italian. Venice was closer than Vienna. And so it continued to be, it goes without saying, under fascist Italy. Now the region was homogenized in earnest through an unscrupulous nationalist policy. Schoolchildren were forbidden to speak Croatian; street-names and place-names were Italianized; even the mountains and landscape formations were given new names. Oblivion appeared under Italian names. People in important positions in society were also forcibly enlisted in the local *fasca*.

Croatian speakers who refused to toe the line were expelled from the province, moving to the nearby town of Karlovac and the Croatian capi-

tal of Zagreb. A whole neighbourhood in that city is filled with street-names referring to previous homes: Oprtalj, Pazin, Labin, Buzet, and many more. The living memory of a past life in the town of Motovun was thus driven into exile, placed in a refugee camp in Trieste, or emigrated to the USA or Australia. After the war in 1991, there were several inhabitants of Serbian origin who withdrew from what had now been declared a foreign and hostile country. A well-established and dreadful pattern was repeated.

But the memory that was preserved in the diaspora quickly changed character from historiography to reproach. The Italian speakers who had a local family history in Motovun, who were able to retell the narratives from the past, were declared undesirable. Not only did the memory disappear; it was regarded as a threat to the new state of Yugoslavia. The Italian speakers' knowledge of the district and the town gradually merged with the claims to regain their lost homes. The memory and the local traditions became a matter of demands on the state of Yugoslavia.

In the city of Završje-Piemonte a majority of the houses are deserted.
Photo: Sergio Gobbo.

Those who had been proclaimed ethnic aliens thereby became bearers of memories who could be constantly called into suspicion.

It was specific linguistic groups that were expelled. Among them it was primarily those who bore some form of official history – the intellectuals – who were the main risk that the past would return. The war against memory blocked the entry to the past. What was then left for people to rely on when trying to create an identity?

The Partisan Monuments and the End of History

After 1947, the struggle against fascism was invoked to gloss over the past and function as a bearing myth. That struggle had exacted sacrifices, leaving hardly a village without loved ones who had fallen in battle or been summarily executed. The names of the fallen can be seen today as material remains everywhere in the landscape; they are carved on memorial tablets, symbolized in sculptures and monuments. In every village and every town, at roadside crosses and in cemeteries, the party and the local municipality have raised countless partisan monuments. In their socialist realism they are explicit and easy to read. They preach a morality translated to the sphere of art. They make statements about what history should have been like. Time stopped when the liberation came. A new society – that of socialism – with no other history than that of its own origin, emerged. The message that was cast in steel and concrete said that future was almost there, that paradise was just around the corner. The Istria in which they were raised could be that paradise and could be united with other provinces and countries which were also but a short step from becoming the true paradise. Yet Istria as such, as a province and as a country with history and a long continuity, was not interesting compared with what it could become. The place as such was provisional. It was determined by the monument, not by its own potential.

The monuments in Istria were maintained in good repair, unlike other parts of Croatia. Since the latest war many have been subjected to vandalization and outright destruction. What was once the triumph of the Yugoslav state has

been redefined as monuments to a dictatorial power. The link between the monuments and the now detested Yugoslav army, JNA, was all too clear. In many parts of the country, memory has caught up with the monuments and made them reveal themselves as demagogic attempts at persuasion. When people in Croatia needed to gain access to their history, they had to remove the monuments that were blocking their path. That is why they stand today as destroyed monuments. Access to history must be gained *through* them – not *around* them.

But here in Istria – which actually did not witness any hostilities during the fighting between 1991 and 1995 – there has not been any vandalization; people here have been schooled in living with a mythological history, a past to which they can relate relatively freely. Perhaps it is this training that has helped the population to close their eyes to the countless other “monuments” that were created at the same time and still stand today: memories without inscriptions.

The people who escaped or were driven away left houses which are still standing today. The Italian-speaking population owned most of them. These ruins, memories left behind by those who once belonged to the place but who cannot return, exert a poignant attraction. There is hardly a village that does not have boarded-up windows, crumbling façades. They are scattered here and there in the towns, like fossils from a bygone era, condensations of a history that is half-averted, promises from a world to which it is still possible to connect. Along some streets, one half of a house may be renovated and inhabited while the adjacent half is in decay. There are towns like Završje, Boljun, and Opatalj where houses with inhabitants seem to be outnumbered by those without. These ghostly houses of grey stone are constant promises that the past is here among us, that the present has a depth that both attracts and frightens, that the bill for the past has still not been paid. “It makes me so sad to travel through Istria”, says my Bosnian/Italian interview-partner who commutes each weekend between Trieste and Opatija and can hardly bring himself to stop along the way. “All these empty houses.” Half-demolished farms, town houses, and small

palaces have become training points for sensitivization, material reservoirs filled with the unspoken, something palpable but still not accessible to the memory.

Every memory, moreover, is filled with torment. A closer study of the past can tell us that today's society rests on the occurrence of a series of crimes – not just a victorious struggle against a fascist occupier. Ethnic cleansing was of course just as repulsive during the partisan fighting as it is now. If one starts digging in the past, one runs the risk that both evil and good will come spouting up in lumps and chunks. Houses without windows whisper that the past has not been cleared up; they make history force itself on us, asking questions about the present.

People in Istria had thus learned to live with a virtual world and with a history written in stone. At the same time, the many ruins have taught the lesson that the past is constantly round the corner, that the reckoning is still waiting to be settled. The houses have a life and the place is replete with an expectation of something more than today will admit. The possibility of recreating the present from the remains with which one is surrounded is thus painful, possible, and rewarding. The past that is now just around the corner contrasts so starkly with the socialist dream that history was completed, that paradise was at hand.⁵

The Magic of the Landscape

Istria as a region with a soul, palpable through its things and places, has found it easier to stand out by letting memory be repressed. Materiality has been a more dramatic, accessible way to come into contact with the past. In the general image of Istria today, things, architecture, landscape, and nature are prominent as artefacts full of life, much more so than society or culture. The words of the Swedish poet Verner von Heidenstam can be used to describe Istria's longing, "...but not for people! I long for the land, I long for the stones where as child I played".

Recent years have seen the publication of books about the region, especially the interior, with titles to fire the imagination, such as "Terra Magica", "Istria between Reality and Fiction", "Terra Incognita", and "Bewitching Istria".⁶ In a

short time the word "ambient" has risen from the pages of tourist brochures and become a frequently used adjective to show the life of the region. Places which were already rightly recognized for their beauty are now regarded from yet another dimension, one associated with the promise of personal reward – the exploration of the self. The poet Roman Latković tells in one of his books how he set off from nearby Rijeka in search of the elusive spirit of Istria; how during his trip through the landscape he tried with his pen to "reach the heart of Istria" and how he "constantly sends her love letters, tests the possibility of depicting the peninsula with a feeling that is ever new". He "worships her like a lover. Enraptured time and again by her slightest tremor" (1994:80). And the truth can be found in her existence outside history:

"This Istrian country, this Croatian country, has been devastated by primitivism, communism, state banditism, careerism, of spiritual dwarfs and by all the other 'isms' one can imagine and be disgusted with, and that spiritual vacuum, ugliness and debasement should be subjected to the resistance of the desire for something better, more beautiful" (1994:82).

And he finds it in castles, in villages, in the small towns perched on mountaintops; it lives in wells and in the peculiar white cattle, *boskarin*; in the wine and in the local dishes. This Istrian spirit or *genius loci* is as elusive as it is ever-present. It is in the place but it does not offer itself willingly.

"In Grožnjan everything seems to be just here, just around the corner, hidden in the glass of wine of the 'Al violina', right here, quite near to you but when you aggressively look around with a desire to grasp its illusive spirit, it vanishes...diabolically keeps out of your reach and disappears, right there, right around the corner. That's Grožnjan. And that is Istria. Everything that is just around the corner, just a few metres away from the main road, and calls for a bit of effort on your part" (1994:42).

This ambience that is found in the earth and the stones, in buildings and things, becomes a con-

Grožnjan. The city-gate.
Photo: Sergio Gobbo.

crete recollection of a truer past which has an intention for the visitor. With almost religious zeal, Latković sings of the beauty and mystery that ascends from the soil and the things. But now it is not emanating from any higher power or “ism”. Istria has become the landscape, not of history, nor memory, but the imaginary.⁷ What material things in the Istrian landscape can be described so easily in terms of subject? What ability does the place have to “hold” and contain so much and so many?

The Labyrinth

From the field diary, 2 August 2000: “We approach Motovun from the main road between Buzet and Buje. The River Mirna flows gently towards the coast in flatland between the hills. When the silhouette of Motovun is visible, we are already there. It is the recognition and Bachelard’s “resonance” more than surprise exercising its magic. The pictures, fantasies, and interpretations call on each other. I believe

that I have experienced this before, as a dream or a pristine memory. As if the really important images were already prepared and waiting to manifest themselves. The town wants something of me. The church tower crowns the town, striving upwards in almost Gothic fashion. There is a verticality and lightness which invites play and demands analysis. What a view there must be from up there! Although surrounded by other towns and with distinct boundaries, it speaks of solitude. Like a town among towns it reminds me of respectful community without intermixture as much as of melancholy and isolation.

The impression of recognition is reinforced when we pass through the gate. This is a town criss-crossed by the European Middle Ages and a provincial Renaissance. The buildings stick up massively out of the ground, communicating the same odd feeling as the stout town walls, that of brutal weight linked to lightness. This is after all a defensive structure.

The streets are irregular and labyrinthine, running between houses of two of three storeys. The alleys run like spirals in narrow passages from the central square. They seem made for slowing down rather than strolling. At the same time as one feels the place in advance, one is enticed to explore it. What lies round the next corner?

It is not possible to obtain any clear idea of the plan of the town; there is no street grid; no simple order to make the structure understandable. As in other medieval towns, there is nowhere but the church tower to offer an overall view. No one has taken any pains to impose a comprehensible pattern on the streets. The town grew up before linear perspective was established. Obviously, it should not be seen; it has to be experienced at close hand. What is within the walls delineates itself darkly, one meets it with the close-up senses: smell, touch, hearing. The houses have walls of cut stone, and the gaze catches and dwells on irregular angles, steps, ornaments, extensions. Rising from the cellars is a smell of centuries of damp and leaking sewer pipes. The street surface – comprising slippery, uneven cobbles – slows down the step and calls on our attention.

It is difficult to imagine that anyone could come upon the idea of strolling around to see

and be seen, yet one feels that one is under constant observation from windows and through door drapes. In pure fascination and out of an instinct of self-preservation, one never takes one's eyes off the surroundings, while simultaneously one feels that one is penetrating a world which has seen so many other people pass by without taking any notice. Is this a town that is looking at you, or is it you looking at the town?

It is the world outside that invites the gaze to pan. The views from the town wall are dizzying. You feel you are in a painting or in the middle of a world where the landscape is in the present, in the *doing* form. The gaze explores it. The river, surprisingly far below, makes its way through the fields; vineyards climb up the slopes in terraces; roads coil through the landscape; they work their way up to other hills, to other small towns. Church towers point to the sky above another town, above a cemetery or a chapel of the Virgin Mary. The wind blows across the Mediterranean-blue sky, granting cool relief in the summer heat. Away on the horizon a gleam from the Adriatic Sea flashes to hint of its presence.

Everything is near and yet far away, infinitely beautiful as a picture, and alive as if it were making itself and had been doing so all through the ages. At the same time, it is heart-rendingly lonely, isolated, abandoned. The beauty also makes something else present. The view from the wall makes the destruction palpable. This really is a European miniature. How many times has it been destroyed? How many times has the small population been replaced? The location on the hill was not determined by a longing for beauty, but by the need for security.

Why do some landscapes become culturally productive? There are evidently qualities in them which evoke a response in everyone, but which have also been exploited at specific points in time. Istria today is in search of its soul. And it is to be found here in the interior. Virtually all ancient inland parts of Europe satisfied the longing of nineteenth-century nation builders for something genuine and materially full of soul. They were transformed into mental landscapes as much as physical ones charged with emotions (Löfgren 1993:96). Dalarna in

Sweden, Setesdalen in Norway, Zillerthal in Austria, Zagorje in Croatia, Karelia in Finland. The coast was more dubious, permeated by influences which spoke of an outside world. People arrived and departed from the coast; this was where commerce was pursued; the horizon was open. The world was always becoming different. The presence of something from beyond challenged the ability of the place to “hold”, to be itself. It was easier to find a *genius loci* in places that were half turned away (Frykman 1999b).⁸

Istria, with its dramatic history of population movements and violent death, has a potential to let itself be filled with the imaginary and to offer the visitor a place which simultaneously is recognizable and gives observers a chance to get outside themselves. Material things stand out so much more clearly in the absence of memory and history and on the basis of qualities in the landscape as such. Other very small stone towns also beg to be seen again – Buzet, Grožnjan, Oprtalj, Boljun. It will also be said of them that people have lived here for thousands of years. Up here they have been well protected against hostile attacks and cattle rustlers, autumn damp and winter fog. The towns speak to us about the hidden continuity that tickles our curiosity.

This “something” that fills the visitor with wonder declares that the place is unfinished, waiting, challenging. The secrets are just the first step in staking a claim – on the landscape and on the observer.

My Country Which is Not

The film festival in Motovun in August 2000 demonstrated the presence of the international and the multicultural. People of varying backgrounds could easily occupy ground in a material environment where the “active things” – telephones, video cameras, and networks – were so obviously in harmony with the houses, the place, and its ambience. Both Erland Josephson and Bibi Andersson and the other celebrities who were interviewed in the media, stressed the attraction of the place. The concord between the place and the imaginary, the dreams, was also underlined by the art that was exhibited in connection with the festival.

Two exhibitions were opened on the first day of the festival, one of them in a newly built café annexe at the Hotel Kastelet, the other in the premises of the old museum, with its creaking floors and visible roof beams. The latter was beside the old town gate. Outside the window, the landscape billows far away and far down. The opening ceremonies were held within an hour of each other.

From the field diary:

“In good time before the first film, the first of the evening’s two exhibitions opens. Vlado Velicković has been invited by the management of the film festival and by the main exhibitor of the previous year, Edo Murtić. He is an artist of Serbian origin, who trained and got married in Zagreb but now lives in Paris. The dozen works that he chose to exhibit were grotesque portrayals of the convulsions that his country and people had undergone during the 1990s. The paintings repeated the same distorted man’s body hanging from a rope, upside down, with blood, excrement, and sex painted in black, white, and red. Violence and war, physical suffering and ruthlessly exposed torment convey a message of a human tragedy that is difficult to capture. There is no reference to any country, nation, army, or other obvious organization.”⁹

Velicković named the exhibition “My country which is not”. He regards himself as a relic of the old Yugoslavia in exile. The 1990s have made him homeless, cheated him out of place, homeland, and memories. The flaring nationalism in Serbia and Croatia has left him feeling “too little of a Serb to be a part of the new Greater Serbia and too little of a Croat to be a part of Greater Croatia.” He mourns the memory, agonizes not only over the suffering but also over the dream that was not fulfilled. And he does this from a great distance. The artist himself was not present at the opening; a friend, an art critic from Zagreb, who has also lived in Paris for a long time, represented him. Only a small group has gathered for the opening: were there 25 of us?

Quite a different opening ceremony greeted the artist Karlo Paliska from the Istrian town of Labin, about fifty kilometres away. All the local dignitaries who were able to crawl or walk had assembled here. The former minister of culture

Who looks at whom?
Photo: Sergio Gobbo.

in the HDZ government, Vesna Girardi-Jurkić from Pula, now living in Paris as UNESCO ambassador, was there, energetically waving a fan in the heat under the low roof. The evening sun shone in through the windows, making the outside world highly palpable. Also there were the provincial governor, the mayor from the provincial capital of Pazin, hordes of journalists and all the visitors greeting each other in recognition. The perfume hung heavy in the air, the clothes were elegant and the jewellery

opulent. It was obvious that this was a tribute to an Istrian artist.

Karlo Palinska stood silent, listening attentively to the speeches in his honour; a thin, thoughtful man in his seventies with a light-coloured jacket over his shoulders, perhaps to detract attention from his stiff right arm. He paints with his left hand. The exhibition was a retrospective, showing a long and active career in art. The contrast with Velickovic was striking. The motifs were mainly architectural: buildings,

landscapes, street scenes, rooms, and more or less dreamed shapes. Not factual but poetic representations, conveying subtle impressions, like moods captured in ambiguous and enjoyable pictures. The observer had ample scope to fill the paintings with content and meaning. The depicted objects scarcely described reality; they rather teased it out. There were also some figurative paintings, portraits and self-portraits, but stylized, without distinct poses or explicit pointers.

The main speaker at the opening was the art historian Berislav Valušek from the art museum in Rijeka. In his speech, which we simultaneously received in printed form, he expressed his interpretation of Karlo Paliska's art, as not only provincial in that he lived in Istria, but also provincial in its relation to the Centre, to the national élite of intellectuals and arbiters of art. Paliska is a moderate, modest man, we were told. He has never striven for attention from those with influence or from the masses, and his art was thus still open for interpretation, rich in meaning, not yet defined or delimited. "He himself is as tranquil as Istria and just as withdrawn. Like Istria, he can be discovered time and again."

There are not really very many artists from the province, he said. But within the pleiad of Istrian artists or artists who have Istria as their motif, "who share the fascination with this strange part of the northern Mediterranean – Bassani, Kokot, Jasna Maretić, Milić, Diminić, Murtić, Prica – Paliska's contribution will be acclaimed as one of those which has helped most to shape identity in this part of Croatia."

At first the description provoked our surprise, since the paintings did not really contain any motifs whose provenance could be identified. It seemed to be going too far to inscribe him in the place, to let his art articulate an Istrian identity instead of something more transcendent. But of course, the art historian was right. This artist made the place and the material culture present in such a composite way that people really could bond with his works. The presence of the many and the influential at the opening was no coincidence.

Regions and Beehives

When a region like Istria emerges and "happens", it carries with it an impression of the present day just as much as parts of its history. The most striking thing is how much space is given to material culture and place-bound distinctive features, and that this happens at the expense of social contexts. The result is not so much a community to long for as a possible imaginary world to connect with. It will therefore differ crucially from other areas where the quest for cultural identity and home has taken root during the twentieth century. At the beginning I mentioned how ethnicity, race, gender, or class have functioned as important determinants in the latter half of the now finished century. They have functioned as redeeming utopias and monolithic explanations for those who have searched for identity. They have also functioned as political and societal labels. In the nation state, people have been able to demand justice, to claim attention by virtue of their age, their gender, and their profession.

Yet the strategies cannot be used without complications in a globalized – or Europeanized – society. Here the political intention is that people will be physically mobile and culturally flexible. Identity is then not something you always carry with you; it can just as much be attached to the place where you happen to be. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Asking for attention from Brussels is much easier if you speak from a place than from an ethnic, racial, or social position. To be recognized as an ethnic minority in the EU, you have the greatest chance of success if you can make your demands from a territory. Europe today has many more such acknowledged minorities than it has nations. By contrast, large immigrant groups have scarcely any chance of attracting the same attention. In Sweden, for example, the Sami, the Finns of Tornedalen, and the Roms are recognized as linguistic minorities, whereas the one million people who ethnically belong to other cultures merely have immigrant status. It looks as if the twentieth-century obsession with "the politics of identities" is slowly giving way to the twenty-first-century "politics of place".

However, the significance of place as wrapp-

ing paper around different groups not only has a political foundation but also a social foundation that is at least as strong. The sociologists Scott Lash and Mike Featherstone have pointed out how people's ties to society's institutions, workplaces, and professions has come to be perceived as far too rigid. The place, in their opinion, can then contain the flexibility that our time is crying out for, something that simultaneously gives scope for chance, contingency, and concrete palpability (Featherstone & Lash 1999).

If this is correct, it means a challenge to the research community to think again when it comes to interpreting people's relation to places. I stated in the introduction that researchers applying the modernity perspective have tended to regard the local as a source of security in a changeable world. The place has had a strong taste of mother, family, relatives, neighbours, and tradition (cf. Siikala 2000).¹⁰ For many people, the place and the local became a backward-looking utopia to do with an undifferentiated life (Melucci 1991). This idea of the significance of place proceeds from metaphors such as *roots* and *belonging*. They become a dream of flight – but flight in the sense of escape, not aviation. The owls of Minerva fly at dusk, and place becomes important because people really are uprooted. This is an antiquated and static view of place as something closed, referring only to itself, yet the notion has paradoxically survived in the social and cultural sciences thanks to the powerful position occupied by the modernity perspective.

The study of Istria shows some of the potential of a place to be used for experiments in diversity, a world where the bonds between structure and culture, between social background and identity are stretched, and where people are open to the multifaceted effect that landscape and things can exert on them. It also indicates that the scholarly discussion of place is not a question of replacing one bunch of monolithic explanations with new ones. Place has no birthright in relation to other explanations. It is not more *primary* than anything else. What we are facing instead is “a polyvalent primacy”, as the philosopher Edward Casey says. “The primacy of place is not

that of *the* place, much less of *this* place or *a* place (not even a very special place) – all these locutions imply place-as-simple-presence – but that of being an event capable of implacing things in many complex manners and to many complex effects” (1997:337). In other words: place is where things happen.

When people begin to ask profound questions about a place, when they wish to be noticed for *where* they are instead of *what* they are, it is necessary that the place and the things should be given a dimension of actor and subject. What can give meaning is not unambiguous but complex, not predictable but surprising, not passive but active. When Istria emerges as a region, it is a process with many outcomes, with traditional peasant culture and European presence side by side. Above all, it happens by virtue of being a place where the imagination can gain a foothold, and from which it can take leaps forwards and backwards in time (Bachelard 2000). Places which have explicit definitions and demarcations are more difficult to think with than those which can bear a profusion of meaning. Landscapes which are to be used for a specific purpose and for attempts at ideological persuasion rule out surprises. The Istrian landscape that I have described is open to a series of elaborations.

Perhaps, says Casey, using a metaphor from the animal world, a new age forces us to see places not so much as dovecotes and more as beehives. He borrows this image from Gaston Bachelard's ideas about material things as a kind of beings, almost living creatures around which dreams assemble (Casey 1998:287). The dovecote is closed because it contains the idea of return, of a physical nest with its demarcations, security, repose after adventures in the outside world. It is a place in the sense of a container. The entrance to a beehive, on the other hand, is buzzing with images – information, interpretations of the smells, tastes, and directions of the surrounding world. Familiar aromas land outside the beehive; from here new flight routes are planned, and meaning is created. “Metaphors of the pigeonhole ... give away to the spider's web or the beehive as we begin to appreciate what is at stake in poetic imagery: intense efflorescence” (1998:287). The beehive as materiality is in itself an actor, one that affects

the world around it. It is like poetry, open to a multitude of interpretations, a point of departure for dreams and fantasies.

When regions happen in today's Europe, it is therefore part of a swarming culture-building activity which contains a large measure of today's political and societal reality. When the political phenomenon known as the Europe of the Regions exploits the capacity of these domains for mystery and romance and innovation, it holds a potential to generate new connections, to let artefacts join in the birth of new dreams, the creation of new productive forces.

The study of Istria can also give perspectives on how place – more than ideologies or national, ethnic, or religious identities – can serve as a basis for people's identification, something they can use for their own culture building. The place does not make the same demands as party, background, or ideology. It is more open to diversity than definitions which proceed from the nation or the group. As we have seen, there are historical precedents for this development. Through the ages, the place, the landscape, and the things in this region have represented a real continuity, provided room for people from different parts of Europe. One precondition for this is that the region has not been impregnated with interpretations or ideologies. There has not been any single grand narrative which has tried to bring people together, claiming to answer questions about whence and whither. This openness, however, has been bought at a high price.

Regions in Europe thus have a rich potential to function as new cultural growth zones today and in the future. Many of those, which have a long and well-known history, also contain a longing for a homogeneous and well-controlled world where the boundaries between the others and us are sharp and difficult to cross. Parallel to the openness, micronationalism is also growing. The friction between the two poles is of course not just a matter of one region against another. It takes place within every one of the regions entering the European stage today. Both possibilities are there. At the same time, the history and the materiality that are highlighted are not random choices, and, as we have seen, they affect the outcome. If one has a history which contains a wealth of diversity, it is difficult

to use it as a foundation for provincial fundamentalism.

To sum up, the example of Istria teaches us a couple of lessons. It suggests something about the role the regions will have in Europe, and it shows the conditions whereby the beehive and not the dovecote will be the guiding model. It challenges us to fix our gaze on the things and the place. As a consequence of this, we can search for the research perspectives which can clarify how these become culturally productive.

Notes

1. My intellectual debt to the phenomenologically inspired researchers who, more than any others, have worked with place and culture – Michael Jackson (1998) and Kathleen Stewart (1996) – is much greater than the references suggest.
2. A rich array of analyses in this field may be found in such classics as Anthony Giddens's studies of self-identity (1991) and Ulrich Beck's explorations of people's relationship to risk in modernity (1996). Culture is analysed here on the basis of people's need for security and control. And their projects in life appear to be the conscious building of cultural identity as a response to the insecurity caused by various threats in the form of globalization and the dissolution of permanent relationships.
3. The study is based on extensive fieldwork by Maja Povrzanović Frykman and Jonas Frykman in the summers of 1998, 1999, 2000, and the spring of 1999. The fieldwork consisted of participant observation, interviews in English and Croatian, and video recording. The cooperation with Lidija Nikočević at the Ethnographic Museum in Pazin has made this research possible.
4. *Epoché* designates the possibility of putting everyday life in brackets and annulling its blinding taken-for-grantedness.
5. For the film festival, the municipal authorities had set up new street signs of blue enamel in two languages, Croatian and Italian. "It's just to attract the Italians," mutters one of the old partisans, Ernest Benčić, well aware of how easily the past can be erased in the absence of historiography. He is chairman of the local veteran club and of those in the surrounding towns. The memories he has represent today the past of local history which is not good enough for shaping memory from. After a generation of paying tribute to those who gave their lives in the struggle against fascism, the recent past is now about to fall into oblivion. Once again it is time to rewrite the history of the place.
6. In 1997 the cultural historian Branko Fučić published the work *Terra Incognita*, which in a short

time has become a standard source for the cultural history of Istria. The historian Miroslav Bertoša, who is a leading authority on the history of the region, refers to the rich occurrence of fictions in his *Istra između zbilje i fikcije* ("Istria between Reality and Fiction") from 1993. *Terra Magica* has set the pattern for the presentation of Istria, and the book has been translated into English, German, and Italian.

7. Edward Casey points out the importance that place has acquired in religious thought, how place is no longer a location where God or the gods can manifest themselves, while remaining empty while he or they are not there. Instead, the places contain the god: "Particular places have taken the place of God and the gods: this is precisely what makes them divine" (1998:341).
 8. And what identity project can manage without castles? They are symbols of power and self-determination. The castles in Istria have also attracted particular attention in recent years, being the subject of surveys and exhibitions. In the building of a regional identity, then, a series of familiar devices from nation building are reused. What is new about the regions compared to the building of the nation state is that material culture can be highlighted without any demands for ethnic homogeneity being raised.
 9. Edo Murtić was much more explicit in his exhibition on the theme of Muerte "Death", which we had visited in Zagreb the week before. Here one could see military berets and insignia of rank. The suffering had an origin, and death had its own organization.
 10. For a generation of scholars and politicians alike, the dream of "the local community" was to represent the utopia of a whole life, of solidarity and ecological adaptation. Local communities became alternative places in the maelstrom of modernity. In the last decades of the twentieth century it was considered rewarding to link up with Tönnies' indestructible dichotomy of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. There was something secure about imagining that the contexts into which people were born were also the contexts in which they died. In the Gemeinschaft they do not need to negotiate their relations; economic activities are adjusted to nature, and life and thought make up a stable union.
- * This is a revised version of the paper "Motovun och tingens poesi", in *Fönster mot Europa*, Studentlitteratur, Lund 2001.

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