

## Research Article

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# From mining tool to tourist attraction: Cultural heritage as a materialised form of transformation in Svalbard society

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**Abstract**

In the context of socio-economic transformation of Svalbard, from a place dominated by the coal mining industry to a nature-based tourism destination, the article focuses on how this transformation is co-created with material objects of coal mining remnants. These seemingly marginal, insignificant or even out-of-place remnants of coal mining activity (such as rusty barrels or collapsing infrastructure) have become, by law, a protected part of the Svalbard environment, a cultural heritage. Based on the relational (more-than-human) ethnography of guided tours, the analysis shows that this transformation is co-creating the characteristics of both the past of coal mining and the present notion of wilderness. It demonstrates the process not only as a transformation of interpretations, knowledge and values but also as a transformation of relations with non-human components of the environment. Rather contextual than linear shifts in a biography of the objects, together with the temporality of the objects and their porous character, play a significant role in the Svalbard's transformation into a nature-based tourism destination.

**Introduction**

While Svalbard has been, for most of the twentieth century, a place where coal mining was a dominant activity, one of the most common representations of Svalbard is currently being driven by nature-based tourism, relying on the presence of wild animals, endless glaciers, the notion of wilderness and nature-based tourism activities. In such an imaginary, nature and culture are separate spheres (Belsky, 2000; Gómez-Pompa & Kaus, 1992). However, as many scholars point out, it is both humans and non-humans (including those produced by human agency), their presence and history, that are part of a place and its dynamic processes within the environment (see e.g. Ingold, 2000; Kohn, 2013; Latour, 2005; Law, 2004 and others). This article will reveal the transformation of Svalbard into a nature-based tourism destination as a result of relations between natural and cultural processes in which none of the two mentioned spheres are separate.

The article focuses on how the transformation of Svalbard from a place of coal mining to nature-based tourism destination is experienced among and created with the remnants of mining. The fact that the presence of the mining remnants, and cultural heritage in general, is on Svalbard rather scarce and often marginal (compared to many other places) has a significant influence on the general imaginary of Svalbard as wilderness (mainly through relations of (un)familiarity and dominance, Kotaskova, 2022). While accounting for this scarce presence, but without discussing it deeper in this text, I keep the focus on the role of the objects of coal mining remnants in the wider socio-economic transformation on Svalbard.

The article follows the relational perspective and traces the (changing) relations to these remnants as well as the ways these relations have co-created the recent socio-economic transformation from coal mining to nature-based tourism destination and the current imaginaries of Svalbard. In this text, imaginaries are understood as not only an outcome of thoughts, meanings and representations but also as a relational context of engagements with the environment and its constituents, including not only human thoughts and meanings but also more-than-human agency (Salazar, 2010; Salazar & Graburn, 2014; Tsing, 2000). The article is based on the ethnography of guided tours (excluding cruise tourism and “city guiding”, i.e., guided tours within the settlements on Svalbard) which provide the data for the analysis focusing on how these objects of past human activity are incorporated in different emerging narratives and imaginaries about the Svalbard environment. The analysis further examines the role of legislature and tourism, or more specifically, guided tours and the role of the guides as mediators and experts who have knowledge and expertise within the local environment. The analysis shows that the socio-economic transformation and the process of creating present imaginaries necessarily include the transformation of relations with non-human objects (of past human activities) within the environment.

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After introducing the relational approach to changing places, imaginaries and the role of non-human objects, the research case and methods are described. The main analytical part examines the changing process of transformation in Svalbard including the changing relation to things and the need for a transformation in the meaning of things into cultural heritage. This transformation of meaning at the same time provides a tool for the transformation to nature-based tourism destination. The historical as well as current human activities and traces are rather disturbing to the notion of an untamed land, and they are actively incorporated into the enactment of Svalbard's environment and wilderness through a politics of protection and conservation and through engagement with the objects, the narratives of the guides and the responsiveness of things.

### The ways in which objects actively constitute social context: Theoretical background

In this article, I follow theoretical approaches which are critical of the theoretical tendencies reducing material objects to the social relations or meanings in which they are embedded (Strathern, 1990; Thomas, 1999 and others). Instead, the analysis looks at particular objects and what they *make* manifest—or what they, in their form and characters, themselves reveal in relationships with other entities. Such a premise “refuses to assign priority to mind and mental processes, but instead considers the bodily engagement with material worlds in which humans are constantly enmeshed as equally productive of cultural process” (Stahl, 2010, p. 154).

Objects do not only carry meaning but, at the same time, are never just purely material forms, or, as Thomas points out, “They cannot be dissociated from the bodies of knowledge, practices and values through which they are animated” (Thomas, 1999, p. 7). Appadurai's proposition that things have “social lives” brings attention to the ways in which objects are successively recontextualised (Appadurai, 1986). Appadurai's theoretical approach, together with Kopytoff, highlights an important character of objects which is neither static nor stable. Quite the opposite, objects actually change their function, character or position through time and space (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986). However, such an approach again leaves the object rather passive, and, in order to understand the complexity of the studied issues, one should focus on the ways in which things *actively* constitute a new social context (Strathern, 1990; Thomas, 1999; Tsing, 2015). From this perspective, objects change their character, role and function not only as a result of *social recontextualization* but also as a result of complex dynamic *socio-material relations* which are changing, and at the same time are influenced by, different contexts and temporalities (Ingold, 2000; Kohn, 2013; Latour, 2005; Law, 2004). It is then not only the contexts that are changing objects but objects themselves that are co-creating the contextual changes. An object, therefore, can never be fully stabilised—it is in a constant state of becoming something (else) (Haraway 2008), or as Ingold puts it “in motion” (Ingold, 2013b, pp. 214–216). And it is this process of “becoming something (else)” that further influences other processes in lived reality. Since different realities and different objects overlap and interact with one another in complex relations, both are fixed only temporarily, partially and contextually (Ingold, 2013; Law, 2004).

Such overlapping and interactions between objects and between objects and humans, in different contexts, are possible just because objects are not static, integral and independent of socio-material others. Objects can be, on the other hand, understood as *porous* (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2017), i.e., “continuously absorbing

human–non-human environments within which they interact” (2017, pp. 9). Being porous means having an ability to receive and adopt (external) influences and at the same time an ability to react and influence others. In other words, porousness is an inner quality of objects that allows them to be an integral part of making the world we all live in – to be influenced and influence other socio-material constituents of the world; to react and elicit a reaction; to be constantly in the process of contextual change; to “move and grow” (Ingold, 2013b, pp. 216–219). The porous quality establishes mining remnants as cultural heritage and/or garbage, and/or a reminder of climate change, depending on different contexts that are creating the remnants and simultaneously are being created by them. Analytically, if we understand objects and materials as porous, we can question the dualistic world in which material and social forms are essentially different (Appelgren & Bohlin, 2017, pp. 10) and capture the circulations through which realities, imaginaries, objects, and things are emerging (Ingold, 2013b, pp. 218). This porousness of objects and their temporal and contextual relations with other humans and non-humans is what takes a significant part in the transformation of particular places and imaginaries of those places.

Places are an outcome of dynamic processes that are changing in time through, and with, social, historical and material relations and interactions, without a particular origin or starting point (Moore, 2004, as cited in Salazar, 2010, p. 11). Such a process includes contradictions and a need for resolution in order to maintain a stable understanding of the lived reality. Furthermore, as Salazar (2010, p. 46) notes, places and destinations are constructed in both the imaginative and material sense. This means that our experiences, that are social as well as material, create the realities we live in; and within these experiences, we also create imaginaries to represent significant features of the reality. Imaginaries are then understood as collective practices that, importantly, cannot be dissociated from the (socio-material) experiences (Salazar, 2010). In other words, imaginaries are materialised and enacted social relations (Salazar, 2010, p. 9) circulating through material and institutional infrastructures (Tsing, 2000: 338).

The main theoretical focus in this text is on the process and on how particular realities, places, imaginaries and objects get made and remade in relations (Law, 2004, p. 2) where both humans and non-humans potentially play roles, are responsive (Ingold, 2000), interact (Kohn, 2013) and, generally, are part of the networks constituting realities (Latour, 2005; Law, 2004; Tsing, 2000). The transformation of the residual mining material into cultural heritage then not only represents an intersubjective model or a way of interpretation but also it constitutes a character of relations between human and non-human components of the environment (Ingold, 2000, p. 47). The character of changing relations between humans and non-humans then manifests and reveals the larger transformation of Svalbard's character. In this sense, the article also contests the one-sided perception of tourism as an external power changing places, people and nature, and it aims to understand the complexity of processes in which places develop with dynamic relations, relations which also include non-humans taking part.

This leads us to the silver lining of the theoretical perspectives adapted for this text: a perspective disrupting the dualistic understanding of nature and culture as separate entities with a set of definite and universal forms created by modern Euro-American practices and discourses (et Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2006; Latour, 2005; Law, 2004). To avoid a priori division between the natural and the social, I follow the “pragmatic constructivist”

approach which focuses on the processes of construction in which both human and non-human actors can have an active role (see e.g. Law, 2004). With this approach, the article also contests the imaginary of wilderness as an untamed, pure or people-less land – an imaginary based on dualistic understandings of nature and culture.

### A changing Svalbard: Research context

More than four centuries ago, the Svalbard archipelago became a destination for polar expeditions, scientific research, (commercial) hunting and trapping. According to historians and archaeologists, the discovery of these islands is attributed to Dutchman William Barentz in 1597, and it has since been the focus of many peoples from around the globe: Russians, Scandinavians, the Dutch, the British, the Americans and so on (Arlov, 1994; 2005). For two centuries, the aim of these Euro-American expeditions was a scientific and adventure exploration of the Arctic areas, as well as exploitation of the resources it offered. Whales as well as polar bears, walrus, seals, foxes and numerous birds were hunted and sold on the European market until the twentieth century. Due to the massive decrease in animal numbers and their official protection, hunting and trapping have become more of a short-term lifestyle for the few. While the hunting and trapping decreased, little by little, starting in the early 1900s, the major activity on Svalbard became coal mining, which came to predominantly shape (not only human) life on the archipelago.

In the last two decades, Svalbard is, once again, experiencing significant changes regarding the environment, climate, society and economics. For several reasons, the mining industry has lost its dominant position: both mining companies (Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (SNSK) and Trust Arktikugol) have scaled back their workforce and the produced and shipped coal has decreased. The statistics for SNSK shows a decrease in workforce from about 400 in 2007 to roughly 100 today (Statistics Norway, 2020), and the produced coal has decreased in the same period from approximately 4.1 million tonnes to 1.1 million tonnes (Statistics Norway, 2016). The shipped coal has decreased, between 2007 and 2019 from 3.5 million tons to below 200 000 tonnes for SNSK, and from 482 000 to 117 000 tonnes for Trust Arktikugol (Statistics Norway, 2020b.) Due to the falling prices for coal, in 2015, the Norwegian state decided to put its newly established mine Lunckefjell at Sveagruva on hold, and in 2018, the Norwegian government have made the final decision to close and clean up the site (SNSK, 2021). Both Norwegian and Russian mining companies are facing a question of how to maintain their presence and influence in Svalbard (see, e.g. Avango, Nilsson, & Roberts, 2013). In order to do that, and to replace the lost coal mining jobs, they are, among other things, making use of their possessions, e.g. creating tourist attractions from old, decommissioned mine buildings or providing guided tours.

In the period between 2007 and 2018, official statistics showed an increase in the order of 60% both in the number of travellers and in the income of the commercial tourism industry (Statistics Norway, 2016). Before the Covid-19 pandemic started, Svalbard experienced what probably was the peak of “tourism boom”: new companies providing guided tours were starting businesses; established ones were offering more trips for more visitors, buying new buildings to host their events; new restaurants have opened, two new hotels were built, and two of the already existing ones were renovated in order to increase capacity. The local University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS), which was previously focused exclusively on sciences like biology or geology, has been offering a

guiding programme since 2008. While this can be in the near future also influenced by the upcoming governmental regulations regarding tourism on Svalbard (see Sysselmeisteren, 2020), tourism has gained a dominant socio-economic status.

Unlike many other destinations (e.g. with UNESCO or indigenous cultural heritage), cultural heritage does not constitute the main driver of tourism on Svalbard. Experiencing natural phenomena such as northern lights, wildlife (especially polar bears) and “untouched Arctic nature” are, among the tourists, the most important motivations in choosing Svalbard as a destination (Enger, 2018, p. 21). In comparison, the motivation of visiting historical and cultural places or events is rather low (ibid.). This goes hand in hand with Svalbard’s public presentations and the marketing strategies of Svalbard tourist board as well as many tourist companies, both visually and verbally emphasising the above-mentioned characters of Svalbard (Kotaskova, 2022). While this is neither the only way of presenting Svalbard, nor the only way the tourists experience it, the “wilderness experience” is the predominant attraction. Tonnaer (2014) argues that it is the vitality of tourism imaginaries more than the strength of nature itself that determines the success of such projects and research on Svalbard, as well as the rapid rise of tourism on the archipelago, suggests that focusing on wilderness imaginaries has been a rather successful strategy (Enger, 2018).

The guided tours are largely situations in which tourists engage with the environment and with the remnants of mining. As Salazar (2010) indicates, the imaginary of the local is also constructed through the tourism industry and the actors within—often in contradictory ways. The tours are also situations where the imaginaries emerge and the details of practices, such as replication, contestation or alteration of imaginaries, are arising. Therefore, the guided tours focus on this analysis, aiming to understand the transformation of relations to the coal mining remnants and the emerging imaginaries and narratives in the context of the transformation from coal mining to the tourism industry.

The guided tours have (among other) the intention of allowing one to experience the Svalbard environment empty of humans but full of vast landscapes and wild animals. This is most notable in the marketing and public presentations of Svalbard, within which the environment is constructed into a form of wilderness that is “pure”, “real”, “untouched” and/or “untamed” (Kotaskova, 2022). There are (so far) few guided tours with a focus on coal mining heritage; and even though the remains in the landscape are compared to what most tourists are familiar with from other places, scarce, one can encounter them on many of the tours, especially day tours in the Isfjorden area where the mining was historically concentrated and where, at the same time most guided tours are organised. Given the historical context of Longyearbyen, established as a mining settlement, and its close surroundings, this is an area where the coal mining remnants prevail over other historical remnants (e.g., warfare remnant in Hiorthamn, and several whaling and hunting remnants that can be found in Isfjorden area). However, most of the non-mining remnants are rather far from any infrastructure, accessible mostly to cruise ships. Therefore, mining remnants are what most of the tourist experience on majority of the tours (for an analysis of cultural heritage in Ny-Ålesund see Roura, 2009; 2010. For imaginaries of coal industry in Barentsburg, see Norum, 2016; Gerlach & Kinossian, 2016). The presence of cultural heritage disrupts what is presented as the main destination attraction. This tension between the presence of man-made mining objects in the supposedly people-less wilderness is managed in many ways, in tourism administration, environmental

management, etc. For the purposes of this article, I focus on how this tension is solved in everyday practices, “on the spot”, during the tour, where the guides have a significant role in explaining the objects and setting them within the context.

Even though most of the mining on Svalbard was brought to an end and the place has been transformed into a tourist destination with a strong focus on “pure” wilderness, the residual material of mining persists in the environment. Residual material of coal mining remains are objects that had once been functional tools or buildings for workers or managers; the coal mining infrastructure itself, such as buckets, oil barrels, wires or railways for transportation; and often also barely identifiable scraps. While the material objects remain, their character and meanings change with the new context (for analysis of cultural heritage on tours within Svalbard’s settlements, see Gerlach & Kinossian, 2016; Norum, 2016; Roura, 2009). In the nature-based tourism, with wilderness imaginary context, these objects create a disruption in the untouched character of the land – and more so since they are the remnants of coal mining, an activity very much associated with impurity and pollution of the environment. The temporality of objects and their persistence is not synchronous with the temporality of meanings. This tension is part of a larger socio-economic transformation process, one which also creates new relations with the objects. This is done by a range of actors: administration and laws, tourism industry managers and guides, the tourists themselves and, e.g. the mining company, which turned one of the mines into a museum. However, it is also the objects themselves that can play an active role. In other words, it is not necessarily the change of context which changes the relations with things, but the relations with things can also change the context (see, e.g. Thomas, 1999).

### Research questions and methods

To understand the material experience of socio-economic change on Svalbard, the changing relations to what remains of coal mining in the context of nature-based tourism and the ways in which these relations co-create the transformation and imaginaries of Svalbard, the analysis will provide answers to the following questions: *What is the role of cultural heritage in the socio-economic transformation of Svalbard? How does the cultural heritage of coal mining co-create the transformation and current imaginaries of Svalbard? What are the relations with coal mining as cultural heritage in the context of Svalbard as a nature-based tourism destination? How and by whom are these relations established? And what kind of narratives are emerging in this context?*

Following the outlined theoretical perspective, ethnography provided methodological tools which go hand in hand with the utilised conceptual background and rather emphasises the focus on the enactment of realities, which emerge from practices, relations and encounters between humans and non-humans in the environment (Ingold, 2000). An ethnographic project allows one to understand the practicalities, materialities and events in detail and on site (Mol, 2002, pp. 12–13), which is especially useful when it comes to exploring the engagements with the environment and emerging relations, including humans and non-humans. The ethnography of guided trips, daily routines of guiding and touring, including bodily experiences and material agency of the objects, reveals how realities are constructed in practice, events that people live through, including both meanings and practices, imaginaries and materialities with which are these realities created. And these practices, including the narratives that are part of them, are not

only about meanings – they convey a lot about objects such as coal mining remnants.

I thus combined participant observation with informal and formal interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Amit, 2000). The data were obtained between 2016 and 2018 (two winter seasons and three summer seasons) during ethnographical fieldwork as part of my dissertation research. During this time, I participated in the guided tours of four different (Longyearbyen-based) tour operators. I have also worked on Svalbard as a guide myself, which has provided many opportunities to share thoughts and see the guides in informal work settings while on duty. The tour operators were selected to cover different company sizes (from small to larger scale operators) and, most importantly, to cover a variety of trips (hiking, kayaking, small boat trips and dog mushing) and a variety of the length of the trips (half day, day and multiday).

Formal semi-structured interviews with 12 guides and 5 managers were conducted as well as informal interviews with guides and tourists during the tours and shortly after. The participants were employees of the cooperating companies, selected according to the above-described criteria, with a focus on their gender, previous formal education and the length of guiding career. Both the interviews and the field notes were transcribed and analysed in the analytical software Atlas.ti. All the names are changed, and measures have been taken to provide anonymity.

### Mining remnants, garbage or cultural heritage: The porous character of objects

Processes such as the socio-economic transformation of Svalbard necessarily include a transformation of people’s relations with certain things and, consequently, a transformation of the meaning of things. Since the social and the material are not separate entities, the transformation of social relations cannot be dissociated from relations with materialities (Ingold, 2000; Tsing, 2015). Unlike many other “wilderness” areas (e.g. northern Scandinavia, Antarctica, and so on), from a Norwegian legal perspective, the natural and cultural heritage of Svalbard are both considered as part of the environment (Roura, 2010, p. 181). While a more common approach towards cultural heritage is, in terms of protection, performed through revitalisation, the 2001 Svalbard Environmental Protection Act understands protection “as an element of a coherent system of environmental management” (section 38). Generally, the law protects structures, sites and movable historical objects preceding 1946; cultural features, such as human graves and certain animal slaughtering sites, are also protected irrespective of their age; and more recent cultural remains that are of particular historic or cultural value and that are protected by a decision of Norway’s Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Roura, 2010, p.181). The protection includes a prohibition against moving, modifying or rearranging the objects and restrictions on camping, lighting a fire or leaving other traces within 100 m of the objects (again, with exceptions to move/excavate the objects in order to protect them from, e.g. coastal erosion (Det Kongelige Miljøverndepartement, 2001; Governor of Svalbard, 2000; Syssemannen, 2019; Roura, 2010). Consequentially, the remains are “left behind” and widely spread throughout the environment. Approximately 920 cultural monuments in Svalbard have been identified to date, covering all periods of the archipelago’s history (see also Marstrand, 1999, as cited in Roura, 2010, p. 181) and, physically merging with the landscape. While hiking around Longyearbyen, the main town of Svalbard, one can meet a rusty barrel tumbling into the ground, a half-broken rusty bed



Fig. 1. Cultural heritage in Grumantbyen, Svalbard, 2017 pp. 15.

construction sinking into the mud with missing parts blown away by the wind, numerous planks and wires spread around the valleys or washed onto the shore by sea currents, industrial building remains on the mountain sides and so on. In other words, the mining remnants are physically porous, meaning their physical characters are responding to influences that are both cultural (e.g. protective or restorative actions and attitudes) and natural (e.g. animal or microbial behaviour). The man-made non-humans are being absorbed by, and at the same time are absorbing, the landscape, mud, ground, grass or frost and so on. This physical porousness goes along with the legislature intending these objects to be an integral part of the environment. And, as I will argue later, this porousness is also an important character for creating the wilderness imaginary.

Not only are the remnants porous physically but also their biographical trajectories are porous: they are absorbing the context of relations in which they are and accordingly change in categories of remnant, garbage and cultural heritage. The linear biography of these objects is as follows: after shutting down coal production, many places, such as Grumantbyen or Advent City, were abandoned, and what was valuable or possible (tools or, at times, even buildings) was moved to other mining settlements to be reused or repurposed. What was not valuable or not possible to move due to logistics or time was thrown away or left behind, becoming garbage until the legal concept of cultural heritage was introduced in 2001, together with strategies of protection. Through the legal protection of these objects as cultural heritage, they became objects valuable not for their industrial function but as “reminders” of historical events, objects to look at and talk about during guided tours, and also something which creates stories about the past and imaginaries of the present. This change of meanings within a changing context is what Appadurai (1986) describes as the “social life of things” and what Kopytoff (1986) understands as their “biographies” when discussing their trajectories. As I will show further in the article, following relational perspectives, these biographies and changing meanings are not static and are rather multiple in their porous socio-material lives. These legislatures and the characteristic porousness of cultural heritage establish the basis for further relations with objects of the past and the transformation of their meaning in the context of wilderness attraction as part of a larger socio-economic transformation from a place of coal mining into a nature-based tourism destination.

### Cultural heritage within imaginaries of “pure nature”

Even though man-made objects may upon first impression disrupt the imaginary of wilderness as a pure, people-less land, the fact that the remains are “left behind”, merging with the landscape, and not further restored or directly adjusted by mankind, was mentioned in the interviews as an important feature which softens the feeling of disruption in the wild environment:

People just left it and let it die in peace where it was left. And still, until now, nobody has come in here and made a museum piece out of it or tried to build something around it to present it to people. They just let it be in nature and let nature do its work on it. And it feels, for me, very good compared to what we are used to. (Interview, guide Jon, October 2018)

The legal strategy to leave the cultural heritage objects in the landscape and protect them from the further influence of people creates a form of relation which corresponds with the imaginaries of wilderness. It creates a context where nature is left to “do its work on it”, an understanding which corresponds with the dualistic nature-culture divide based on which the imaginary of wilderness is built. Importantly, this is a context where “nature” can express its agency and be dominant over people and man-made objects. A picture of one of the coal mining remnants can show better than words, how nature is left to “do its work on it” or how the landscape expresses its agency over coal mining remnant (Fig. 1).

As Ingold (1993) points out, different components building the landscape are doing so in different temporalities: “What appear to us as the fixed forms of the landscape, passive and unchanging unless acted upon from outside, are themselves in motion, albeit on a scale immeasurably slower and more majestic than that on which our own activities are conducted” (Ingold, 1993, p. 163). However, not all the non-human components of the landscape are changing in the same temporal scale, as it is possible to see in the case of cultural heritage on the shore. When ocean currents, stones or at times also grass and mud devour what used to be an industrial mining tool, the man-made object shows as not as obdurate anymore – such a process contains different temporalities also within the “non-human” category. And this diversity of temporalities influences the mutual interaction between different non-humans (and consequently, this further influences the human–non-human relations). While the metal mining tool might decay slowly, the grass, wind, snow and mud are even slower – and, more importantly, more lasting. With longevity comes power, and, in this case, cultural heritage is that which is “losing the battle”, slowly but unequivocally. On one side of this battle is the object of cultural heritage together with the dry air and the partial frost and permafrost which preserves it for most of the year. On the other side is the wind, snow, water, mud, movement of the ground, flora and sometimes also animals which contribute to the decay. It is not a battle of culture versus nature; on both sides, there are different humans as well as non-humans.

Cultural heritage is becoming part of the environment as a result of social–material relations. As any other object, it is porous and responsive – both metaphorically and physically it expresses the porous character of nature culture (see Ingold, 2000). Objects are not closed entities, quite on the contrary, they change their character, function, meaning or even physicality as a result of interactions within the environments in which they are: the cultural meanings, historical interpretations, legislature, values as well as climate, weather, flora, fauna or any other elements of the landscape. In the case of mining remnants, without people, laws and discourses the agency of the landscape destroying the objects could not be performed and sedimented into the imaginaries. And

without material agency, the power of the landscape, the partial obduracy of the objects—metal, wood or objects made from obdurate materials – there would be a lot fewer revelations of and about the wilderness. It is both the nature of the objects and the nature of the law and discourse that “allow” the mining remnants to become cultural heritage and take part in creating the wilderness imaginary. The objects are spread around the archipelago at such great distances apart, far from infrastructure, that for many reasons (e.g. logistical or financial) it would not be affordable to remove them or maintain them. There is a common joke on Svalbard that says, “It’s just here because people are too lazy to clean it up, and so, they came up with the concept of cultural heritage protection”. Anecdotes aside, the legal concept of cultural heritage can de-problematise objects which could, from other perspectives, be problematic – especially the heritage of coal mining, an activity associated with environmental destruction. It conserves the past and establishes relations to it as well as the imaginary of the present.

In spite of the cultural heritage objects being legally and physically part of the environment, merging with the landscape, as described above, on tours many of the objects are commented on by the tourists as “trash”, “a mess” or simply “not nice to have around”. I noted this many times, e.g. while on the shore of Hiorthamn, a mining settlement active between 1917 and 1940:

On the shore of Hiorthamn, there are rather chaotic and scattered piles of wood and metal of different sizes, shapes and states of ruin. Some of them are square, some round, some short some very long; some are just wires; some are big rusty plates. Some are mantled together, but parts are apparently missing, and parts are sinking into the ground. There are also a few plastic objects washed in by sea current. While standing there with a group of tourists, looking at the shore and around, one of the tourists, Mike, commented, “Why don’t people clean up this mess?” I have noticed this is a rather common first reaction to this spot. (Fieldnotes, June 2017)

The rather messy appearance of the remnants of coal mining is also given by the context of wide coast of Arctic tundra, surrounding mountains and fjord which itself gives one an impression of a vast and empty “wilderness” landscape (anchored in the tourist marketing strategies and general public discourse). Despite the merging with the landscape, the man-made objects, at times, simply stand out. However, what might be perceived as messy garbage at first, changes throughout time, not only historically or over long periods but also contextually, e.g. with knowledge of its history, which opens the imagination and makes possible the transformation of objects from “garbage” to valuable cultural heritage and part of the wilderness imaginary. This happens not only to tourists but also arose in many of the interviews with the guides when asked about their relation to the cultural heritage:

For me, it has changed a bit. In the beginning it was maybe more disturbing. When I came to Svalbard, I had a different experience. For me it was something dark, a bit scary, something that does not have such a nice history. But now that I have started reading into these stories, of all these expeditions, it actually only makes the place wilder. Because you know the history of this object, or whatever, or maybe you don’t know, but you can guess it could be from this or that expedition. You know it is [from] a hundred years ago, and you kind of realize it, and you try to imagine how wild it must have been at the time. (Interview, guide Jolanda, September 2017)

The transformation of objects and their meaning also changes with knowing them. Something at first rather “dark”, “scary” and “not so nice” transforms into a valued part of wilderness with knowing the narrative built on historical interpretations and incorporating these objects into the present imaginaries of Svalbard. For both the guides and the tourists, at first, the imaginary of Svalbard as wilderness is mostly a “pure land”, in which human activities and

remnants are disturbing. Later, with more detailed knowledge of the protection of mining remnants, the relations to these objects, as well as the imaginary of Svalbard’s wilderness, are modified.

While the objects merge into the landscape, draw attention, challenge and raise questions, the guides learn the value of those objects and get to know the surrounding narratives. They become experts and further mediate these narratives, through which they co-create specific relations with these objects. Tourists then co-create the narratives by raising questions and incorporating the narratives into their experience and expectations built upon initial imaginaries. The construction of Svalbard imaginary on tour is a collective work of both guides, tourists and the objects themselves, as well as other non-human parts of the landscape. The objects are incorporated through narratives based on historical interpretations, such as the Arctic heroism of skillful men, which sparks the imagination. This imaginary is then reproduced further, but not without challenges.

### Stories to maintain the (feeling of) wilderness

Because of the general disruption of the wilderness imaginary, which should be people-less and untouched, and for the common chaotic appearance of the objects, some of the guides expressed in the interviews that maintaining the “wilderness feeling” for the tourists can be a challenge for them:

Regarding cultural heritage, I am kind of aware that people [tourists] could feel less in the wilderness. For example, in Hiorthamn, where you have the cable train station, old cabins and all kind of things you find on the beach. In such places, I try to present it in a certain way, to use it as a tool to explain how wild this place actually is. And then I have the feeling it is definitely not a negative experience. This is just so good, this place, so I make the best out of it. If I can give the tourists a piece of culture with it as well, why not. It makes me only more skilled as a guide. So, I see it as a challenge for myself and try to include it in their experience in a positive way and do not complain about it. I try to use the stories as a way to make them feel that they are in a wild place. (Interview, guide Jon, October 2018)

It is through storytelling that the guide “solves” the tension created by the presence of cultural heritage in what is expected to be “pure nature”. Storytelling is, as Maggio (2014) points out, a dynamic and contextual process in and around which many things happen. It is necessary to pay attention to “relational dynamics between the people involved in the storytelling situation: the storyteller(s), the listener(s), but also the entities who take the role of characters in the story, who might be real persons (such as members of the storyteller or listeners social network) or representations of real persons (such as fictional versions or caricatures); other storytellers who have a particular relationship with the story being told, as well as other listeners who have heard the same story, or a different version, and so on and so forth” (Maggio, 2014, p. 92). Stories emerge within negotiations between various actors, including non-human entities who can take the (active) role of characters in the story. Storytelling is then an experience which co-creates imaginaries in a dialogue between guides, tourists and the remaining objects of the mining. Through the guide’s storytelling cultural heritage can become part of the environment in which culture and nature are materially entangled together and at the same time separated in verbal descriptions. In this way, the environment can be enacted as wilderness with the coal mining remnants.

Narratives are central to the understanding of the imaginaries and the forms of their transformation or reproduction (Salazar, 2010). They can highlight or neglect certain issues, disrupt or reproduce (a hegemonic) an imaginary, facilitate the aesthetic or

visual impressions, work with what is, for the tourists, unknown or unfamiliar (ibid). When I talked to one of the tourists, Linda, about the mining remains around Longyearbyen, she said:

The first time I arrived, I saw these big wooden things, and I wondered, “What is it? And why it is there? It looks too old to be used and too strange to be kept on the mountain.” Then on the trip, Samantha (the guide) explained that on this one was a cable and, at the time, there was a wagon coming with coal. And it was connected with the mines and the pier where the coal was loaded. And you were looking at them, and you were thinking, “Wow. They were actually really smart at that time.” So, then it was more a cool thing to see and think that they had been here so many years ago. (Fieldnotes, informal interview, tourist Linda, June 2017)

As described in the previous section, the guides with their knowledge and expertise further create the imaginary of Svalbard through narratives about, and relations to, the mining remnants – cultural heritage. Based on that, the tourists are, more or less critically, understanding the value of these objects, in this case coal transportation slopes, and modifying the relations with them. However, storytelling is not only a discursive practice. Of equal or even more importance is the presence of non-humans, their movement, features or character. In this case, it was the wooden transportation structures which activated the curiosity and, later, with the guide’s narrative, co-created the imagination (about the past). In the interaction between the objects, the guides and tourists, any of them can creatively influence the interpretation. The quote from Linda above shows how the contradiction between pure wilderness and impure coal mining is resolved through what Gell (2006) conceptualises as the enchantment of technology – an enchantment with the past skills of the miners.

The enchantment, however, again works in this context with temporality. The ongoing coal mining on Svalbard is usually seen as endangering the environment and is presented as something soon to be ended together with the naming of a number of possible sources of energy being discussed by the Svalbard administration. On the other hand, the old, historical mining of long ago is more acceptable; the historical context removes the edge from the otherwise endangering character of coal mining. The temporality tames the remnants of mining, removing the endangerment, and, at the same time, it naturalises it in such a way that it becomes part of the wilderness. This can also be explained by the increased interest in industrial history – an interest in the disappearing world of certain industries which are becoming part of modern nostalgia and modern myths. Part of this process is a new form of engagement with industrial objects which turns social and material decay or rust into something seductive and aesthetically pleasing – something mostly seen in the coal mining buildings (see, e.g. Saunders, 2000). For instance, the photography of such objects is a way of documentation but also an attentive way to approach those objects themselves (Olsen & Pétursdóttir, 2014).

To get back to the agency of the objects, it is important to note that cultural heritage almost always requires a human mediator to be recognised as cultural heritage or to be activated in mediating the narratives themselves. This is partly due to the fact that there are not many remaining objects of mining available for tourist’s self-narrations without a guide (expert) – most of them are scattered far from the town, where it is practically impossible to go to without a guide. Those, that are visible from where the tourists spend time alone, have no explanatory sign around (such as information desk, fence or anything suggesting their meaning or function). Often, the guide needs to mention the object to even be noticed or recognised as something particular or, as some of the previous fieldnotes also showed, not “misinterpreted” as garbage.

Either way, through guide/expert mediation they often point out what tourists, who are not familiar with the landscape, either do not notice, see with unknown distinction or perceive as garbage.

On one of the trips to Grumantbyen, Amir, the guide pointed at something that looked like two slightly darker spots on the mountain side: “I don’t know if you see them. There are two openings, one high up and another about one and half meters above sea level.” The tourists looked where Amir was pointing, to a tall and barren mountain wall rising straight and steep from the fjord, without a shore below. I wondered whether they saw the spot. It just looked like two slightly darker spots on the mountain side, although the mountain has quite horizontal layers, so the spots do stand out a little bit. Amir continued, “This coal layer is going downhill, and they started mining under the sea level. They got a lot of sea water inside the mine and that made it very dangerous and difficult. Another problem was that it can be very rough here. Because this way”, Amir pointed to the open sea, “there is no land until you hit Greenland. And with a westerly wind, waves tend to build up. So, they tried to build a harbour here, to ship the coal down, but that was not possible, and they had to dig a tunnel in the mountain into the next bay to have a harbour there.” (Fieldnotes, August 2018)

Narrating the story has a bigger impact for the reproduction of the wilderness imaginary if the visual impressions are present. In this case, not only were the coal miners skilled but they have been also tough, living and working in the dangerous, rough and isolated environment of the Arctic. Like the adventurers of the gold rush – a western historical archetype of rough men in the wilderness – they fought with the rough sea, westerly winds and mountains containing the desired compound. By pointing out objects or features in the landscape, the guides are not only raising the attention to them but are also mediating relation with them and with the environment and the imaginaries of Svalbard as wilderness, if not people-less, then inhabited by wild and tough characters.

Finally, the process of creating new relations with the object and imaginaries of the present is necessarily including some and excluding others. Within the process, the narratives about the objects can also change to empower the imaginary. This is also part of the process of constructing an imaginary, of using and choosing things to change contexts. At the same time, the context influences the choice and the narrative:

For lot of people, being close, touching and feeling historical cultural heritage can be a good experience. If they are interested. For example, on multi-day hikes, you come across an old trapper station, which does not have to be in the way of nature at all because you can relate it to why people came and trapped in this area and why the cabin is here and not over there and just put your focus on how the nature looks and why things are as they are. But, sometimes, you find wires around and cables and stuff left by the mining operations. You have a lot of examples of reindeers getting caught in this and then dying. Then I use my personal view or the environmentalist point of view to explain why it is ridiculous at some point, how it is protecting garbage lying around. (Interview, guide Esther, September 2017; author’s emphasis)

The approach expressed here by the guide Esther shows how the imaginary of the nature-based destination is constructed through relations with objects of past human activities and how these relations are formed and change in particular contexts. When the coal mining remnants are put in context with the remains of trapping activity, they become more disturbing to nature, and to the wilderness imaginary, because they harm the animals. What is silenced here is the fact that trappers on Svalbard hunted the animals often to the point of endangerment of the species (Le Moullec, Pedersen, Stien, Rosvold, & Hansen, 2019). However, generally, the life of hunters and trappers tends to be understood in romantic terms of “living with nature”, following the “call of the wild” and,

therefore, become part of the wilderness imaginaries more smoothly than the cultural heritage of miners. In the new context, next to the trapping history, the temporality of coal mining, which no longer has an endangering character as described above, does not work anymore. In this context, the impurity stands out and the remnants of the mining are in the guides narrative in the category of “garbage”, while criticising its legal protection as cultural heritage. As a side effect, such a distinction emphasises the ambivalent relation to the coal mining past; it is conceived as brave and skilful, rough and wild, but also endangering the animals, and, in line with Anthropocene discourse, bad for the environment. Consequently, this also becomes part of the wilderness imaginary, i.e. the dominant Svalbard imaginary, where animals and certain relations to them are more appropriate than others.

The last thing this example shows, yet again, is the porous character of objects and their biography: Whilst the remnants of coal mining activity became, at one point, garbage and, later, cultural heritage, some of the objects in the context of guided tours remain in the category of garbage (and at the same time are still in a category of cultural heritage). The biography of objects is not a linear path from one category to another; the biography is rather changing with different contexts and the relations within, without a fixed (historical) timeframe (see, e.g. Jones, Diaz-Guardamino, & Crellin, 2016). Biography is a story told by someone to someone else which changes in context – it is not only historical but also depending on, e.g. aesthetic preferences, discursive values and the character of the objects themselves.

## Conclusion

The imaginary of a nature-based tourism destination, into which Svalbard has been transforming throughout the last decades, brings expectations of the pristine land, in which human activities should not have a place. At the same time, the remnants of a previously dominating coal mining are by law protected as a cultural heritage and are an integral part of the environment. I have focussed on the analysis of this transformation as a process that is situated within complex cultural–natural relations. As the analysis showed, the transformation of the meaning of material objects from what has been functional mining tools, garbage or mining remnants and finally is cultural heritage, is not only a transformation of interpretation, knowledge or values. It is also a transformation of relations between human and non-human components of the environment.

In this process, objects/non-humans can take an active part. They attract the attention or sparkle the imagination of people. Their physical and metaphorical porousness allows them to absorb both cultural and natural influences with which they interact. They physically merge with the landscape, get old, rust, crumble, sink into the ground and so on, which gives them an old industrial look – something many find aesthetically appealing. They also absorb the changing meanings and interpretations of people – not only in linear, historical biography (from mining tool, through garbage, to cultural heritage) but also change within these categories more non-linearly, in changing contexts and relations within, depending on, e.g. aesthetic preferences, discursive values and their own particular character or relation with other non-humans (e.g. animals).

Still, looking at coal mining remnants in the middle of the Arctic landscape (expected to be pure people-less wilderness) can be, at first, a disturbing experience. What might be, at times, perceived as messy garbage disrupting the pristine environment, changes with the knowledge of its history, and with surrounding

narratives of skilful men, their hardships, solitude and isolation far in the dangerous and rough environment of the Arctic. The objects and narratives open imagination in a way that allows the mining remnants to become a valuable part of the wilderness imaginary, an object with which stories about the past and imaginaries of the present are created.

Temporality is a crucial factor in naturalising the mining remnants in such a way that they become part of the wilderness. The fact that these remnants are objects of the past helps to replace the endangering character of coal mining with their historical value. Temporality shows not only in the changing of meaning but also in their changing physical form. While the objects persist in the landscape, they are not fixed – in a large scale they endure but the elements destroying them, although slow, are at the end, more powerful. And this process of decay is, yet again, a process which consequentially brings up its naturalisation into the wilderness.

As the Arctic is widely imagined as a place of pristine wilderness, a variety of practices and non-humans, including the human-made non-humans, are deployed to maintain this imaginary. The practice of transformation into a nature-based destination is not necessarily only about making the environment as pure of human activities as possible. It can also be done through the transformation of relations with remnants of human activities. Such relations have to be established in a way which de-problematizes the objects, incorporates them into the environment through legislature, wilderness-appropriate narratives, their own agency and agency of the landscape. It is just this collaboration of both humans and non-humans, together with the influence of time and temporalities, which establishes the transformation from the extractive industry to a nature-based tourism destination.

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