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Sweet home Alaska

Alaska as the ultimate home in the series Men in Trees
and Northern Exposure

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1 Introduction

Sweet home Alaska – what the title suggests evokes quite opposite notions. Can such a remote and vast place become a place one calls home and if this is the case, what factors come into play here? This is exactly what I want to find out in the course of this thesis and the two television series I have chosen mark the starting point for my investigation. Both series, ‘Men in Trees’ and ‘Northern Exposure’ (hereafter MIT and NE), center about their protagonists, who suddenly find themselves in the middle of Alaska, the complete opposite of New York, their former home. This sudden uprooting of the two characters is strongly influenced by nature and how they experience the surrounding they are suddenly confronted with and therefore I want to focus on the reasons and effects this setting, namely Alaska, has.

I have already mentioned that Alaska is the starting point for my analysis and the pictures that are evoked when it comes to that place are quite clear: nature in its purest form. Therefore it will be an important part of my thesis to look at the representations of Alaska and in turn nature. While the term nature is a frequently used one, its meaning and definition is not quite as straightforward. Therefore I also want to investigate the various meanings that are related to the word nature and explore the concepts as well as the binary pairs or oppositions it evokes, which can also be seen in the following quote:

“[...] nature is a paradise, the idealized home the civilized, urbanized human spirit has lost and longs for.” (Bergman, 282)

While nature is seen as something quite different and even opposite to our urban life, it remains something that we originate from and that we want to

return to in a way. Therefore the investigation of the oppositions such as nature vs. Alaska and nature vs. home will be an important part of my thesis.

It also seems that the return to nature is equal with returning home, therefore nature can be seen as the ultimate home. Accordingly my hypothesis is that nature is the ultimate home and I want to figure out what is necessary to achieve or rather arrive at this ultimate home and what effect this return has on the people returning. This is the point where the notion of the sublime comes into play. Nature plays an important role when it comes to the sublime or sublimity because it is a phenomenon that can almost exclusively be found in a natural environment due to its vastness and the impossibility to get hold of it. In the course of my thesis I want to investigate the concept of the sublime that has its roots in the field of philosophy and is – similar to nature – hard to define to all its extent. Therefore I want to focus on the basic notion of the sublime and especially its almost inseparable connection with nature.

My attempt is clearly beyond the immediate and common-sense view of the series which would be their consumption as entertainment or their appreciation and has the focus on questions that this common-sense would not ask. (see Elsaesser and Buckland vii) Accordingly it is not the aim of this thesis to give a comprehensive analysis of the series that sheds light on all possible aspects but concentrate on the representations of Alaska in the series and the way in which the characters cope with it. I will focus on various scenes from the series that provide information supporting my research questions about Alaska and nature in order to arrive at a possible answer to the question how nature resembles the ultimate home.

Consequently, the structure of my thesis is going to be the following:

The first part will cover the theoretical background, starting with the chapter on television studies that introduces the concepts of textual analysis and close reading, which are especially relevant for my thesis. A synopsis of introductory works on television studies by Bignell, Creeber and Allen constitute the starting point.

Alaska and how it is represented is an important guiding question throughout my thesis and therefore I will deal with cultural geography, which will provide some insight into this field. It will also give an overview on the concepts of space, place, and landscape that are of particular interest in this field of research.

It has already become clear in the previous lines that nature is one of the central concepts of this thesis. The section about nature should give insight into the very broad field of nature and the various aspects it can be approached from. The central question here is clearly “What is nature?” and it will be part of this chapter to arrive at a sufficient answer to that seemingly straightforward question.

To introduce the location in which both series take place, the chapter on Alaska will give a summary of Alaska’s history as well as it’s geographical facts that seem to be relevant for the thesis. Part of this chapter will also deal with the question why and how Alaska depicts nature to such a great extent and how it is represented in the series.

The last concept I will introduce will focus on the notion of the sublime and present this rather philosophical concept. It will show that the notion of the sublime has been around for centuries now and that it is still relevant when it comes to depicting nature.

In the last and most comprehensive chapter I will focus on the analysis of the television series 'Men in Trees' and 'Northern Exposure'. This chapter will first of all provide some general information about the two television series such as the broadcast dates, a plot summary and some reviews. The greater part of the analysis will deal with particular scenes from the series that show Alaska/nature and its various ways of depiction. The analysis of these scenes should allow the application of the theoretical concepts that were introduced before in order to arrive at a conclusion that sums up and supports the major arguments that were brought up in this thesis.

2 Television studies

The following section will give an overview of the methodology I am going to employ and apply in the course of my thesis. As I am investigating material from the field of popular culture, it is apparent to look at these texts from the angle of cultural studies, more precisely television studies.

Over the last decades television has developed from a medium only available for a small number of people to a mass medium. Although the new media based on the internet and telecommunication networks has gained more and more impact in this field, television still remains an important medium today. We are surrounded by television everyday and it is part of almost everybody's life. Therefore it is not surprising that the variety and the format of programs that are available today have changed dramatically over the last years and new television programs are emerging quickly (see Allen 27-29).

As television is one of the most widely spread mediums today it became a field for research and consequently the area of television studies has emerged largely throughout the last century and has become an important part of cultural studies as well because this part of popular culture transports and reflects our culture or rather cultures to a great extent. The recent development in the field of communication media has also left its mark on television and in the future it will certainly be necessary for the television production companies to customize accordingly.

What becomes clear through what has been said about television so far is that this field grew enormously since the invention of the TV set and the beginnings of broadcast and therefore it cannot easily be delimited. This has not only to do with the variety of different television programs but also

with the various areas that go along with television and are of importance when looking at a certain aspect of it in detail, ranging from the audience to its rather young history. Depending on the particular field of investigation or problem under consideration, all these areas have to be considered when looking at television in any greater detail.

When we look at television, it becomes also obvious that what we finally see on the screen is the result of numerous considerations. Television is strongly influenced by its consumers namely by its audience. In order to find out what should actually be broadcast and whether the program suits the ideas of the consumers it is important to do some research on the consumer's needs. This audience and reception studies (see Creeber 6) will not be part of my thesis because what I am concerned with in my thesis is the representation of Alaska and nature in the series and the plot itself. Therefore I am not going to investigate the series' impact on the audience although this is a quite common field of research as we can assume that any text that can be encountered on television is principally addressed to the audience and constitutes a medium of communication. (see Mikos 24)

After all the area of television studies I will focus on in order to get hold of the central questions of my thesis is concerned with the text itself and the possible interpretations and readings the text offers. As I have already mentioned, television and thus television studies is an extensive field of study and consequently the ways to approach this area are manifold. This has partly to do with the fact that reading and analyzing a text always brings intertextuality to the scene:

The reading of texts takes place in an intertextual landscape and is made possible by a wide range of cultural codes, social practices, discourses and expectations which facilitate the production, circulation and consumption of texts. Intertextuality, then, refers to the interconnection of meanings across different media texts, but it also

refers to the connections between meanings across different media and other cultural experiences. (Casey et al. 158-159)

What this definition suggests is that it is impossible to read a text in an isolated manner without looking at other texts. Apart from that it is also necessary to consider that texts are always produced in a certain cultural setting that constitutes its subtexts. Considering intertextuality as well as the assumption that analyzing any sort of text presented on television is a way of communication, it becomes obvious that television studies is an interdisciplinary field of study. In order to get hold of the various aspects these texts present it is necessary to employ various theories and approaches. Accordingly, the following sections will provide an overview on the fields of television studies and cultural studies that are relevant for the analysis of MIT and NE.

2.1 Textual Analysis

Investigating a television series means investigating a text in the broadest sense and this is also the reason why the approach of textual analysis appears to be most effective here. The main idea is to find out in what ways Alaska is depicted in the TV-series under investigation, in how far this Alaska resembles nature to its full extent, and how this place and accordingly nature can resemble the ultimate home.

I will elaborate on the method of textual analysis in greater detail here because it is central for the following analysis.

This approach to television has its origins in subjects such as Literary and Cultural Studies. It is partly defined by its tendency to analyse actual television programmes, particularly focusing on issues of

form, content and representation (for example, the televisual construction of class, race and gender). In terms of methodology it can take a number of critical forms that include semiotics, genre theory, narrative theory, ideological analysis, discourse analysis, feminism, postmodernism and so on. Although undoubtedly 'qualitative' in approach this interest in programmes can also assume slightly more 'quantitative' methodologies such as content analysis. (Creeber 6)

This definition shows clearly that the method of textual analysis is a qualitative approach, which means that it is speculative in research and not scientifically verifiable (Creeber 26). Obviously, this method relies on interpretation and not on figures and numbers and depending on the focus of analysis, it will also lead to various results although the text might be the same in the first place. It seems to be very important to point out here that it is impossible to end up at a "real" meaning of a text, but rather offer a preferred or dominant reading. It is clear that from a different angle and with a different research question in mind the results of textual analysis will not look very much alike though the research method in general remains the same. As I have already mentioned in the introduction, the reading and interpretation of the text under consideration does not go along with the common-sense view of the series. Going beyond this common-sense view also means to employ various methods of reading a text and considering approaches that offer further information for the analysis. Therefore, it is necessary to be more precise here and to define the method of textual analysis in greater detail.

As I have already mentioned, I will focus on certain parts of the text, i.e. the television series, that are relevant for answering my research questions and support my thesis. Hence, there is also a part of the text that I will not analyze in the course of my thesis because it might not be helpful for answering my research question. As my focus lies on the question of how Alaska is depicted in the series and why it can be seen as the ultimate home and why the ultimate home is resembled by nature respectively, I am only going to focus on the parts of the text that seem appropri-

ate and helpful to accomplish this purpose. Therefore I also have to delimit the method of textual analysis itself because it includes various approaches such as semiotics, narrative theory, genre study, ideological analysis, psychoanalysis, content analysis, linguistic analysis, discourse analysis to name but a few. As this list shows, textual analysis itself cannot be taken as one distinct approach but the combination of textual methodologies and critical perspectives (see Creeber 26-29). What I will focus on is the close reading of selected scenes that depict nature and the character's encounter with nature.

For the topic under consideration it does not appear useful to include all the mentioned approaches that are part of textual analysis. As I have mentioned before, it is on the one hand impossible to end up with the 'real' meaning of a text and on the other hand such an approach would never reach a level of completeness because every step of interpretation evokes another field of research, let alone it would go way beyond the scope of this thesis.

Another part of textual analysis I will include in my thesis is content analysis, in which I am going to look at a chosen set of scenes. According to its approach, content analysis can be seen as a more quantitative research method because the starting point for any content analysis is the collection and categorization of a sample of material. (see Bignell 219) Here, the sample is composed of the scenes in the series that depict nature in order to find out to what extent this depiction of nature is part of the series and if any divisions or categorizations can be made here.

The shot-by-shot analysis, i.e. the close reading of selected relevant scenes, will also be part of the analytical section. This type of analysis includes the examination of some basic codes used in television and therefore considers the following components: camerawork, lighting, editing, sound and music, graphics and *mise en scène*¹. (see Creeber 2006:38-42)

A close reading of the selected scenes is intended to reveal the various notions of nature in the series and provide material for further analysis. At this point it is important to consider the following:

The conventions of representation in television most often rely on the iconic nature of television images to convey an impression of realism [...]. But this acceptance of the realism of television's denotative signs is reliant on the conventions of composition perspective and framing which are so embedded in Western culture that the two-dimensional image seems simply to convey three-dimensional reality. (Bignell, 89)

Accordingly, it is necessary to identify the conventions as well as the connotations that go along with the representation of nature in the scenes.

It is also necessary to apply some genre theory here in order to point out the parallels between the series under consideration and in how far the genre influences the setting of a series or vice versa. What is important to mention when it comes to genre is that it is a changing concept and that it can even be seen as defying any categorization of genre. The reason for the difficulty of defining very clear cut categories for genre can be explained with the fact that most series employ the characteristics of more than one genre and at times only employ certain characteristics of a genre while disregarding others. Accordingly, it is obvious to regard television series as a hybrid of several genres. (see Creeber 2006:82-83)

¹ *mise en scène*: literally meaning 'putting on stage', all the elements of a shot or sequence that contribute to its meanings, such as lighting, camera position and setting. (Bignell 154)

What I want to find out are the reasons for Alaska being the setting of the TV-series MIT and NE and in how far the notion of the sublime can be found in the depiction of nature in these texts. Accordingly this is also linked to the question what Alaska as such stands for and what it evokes and whether it is just a wildcard for any other similar territory. These considerations will always be accompanied by the central question of how nature is depicted in the series and what influence nature has on the setting and the characters. After all it seems more practicable to choose a specific method and to present one possible interpretation of the text.

2.2 Series or serial?

It has already been shown that the field of television has developed quickly within the last decades and therefore it is not surprising that this development did not spare the area of television series.

The television programs I have chosen to analyze can for the moment be put into the category of “television series”, which are typically broadcast in several episodes and – provided that they are successful – over multiple seasons. The plot of the individual episodes is loosely connected, basically through the recurring characters and the general outline of the story.

Usually series are split into seasons, every season has its own thematic frame that is completed at the end of one season (yet, there are exceptions to this general rule with seasons that end in a cliffhanger-episode). Television series are normally broadcast regularly on a certain day of the week and at a certain time, in order to establish a connection between the audience and the television network. The format of the television series is

very appealing to the audience because it has a high recognition value and very often the viewers tend to identify with the individual characters of the series. It is also interesting for the audience to watch the progress of the central theme in the series, which is developed in every episode and keeps the audience in suspense because it hardly ever comes to a final conclusion before the season's finale.

Considering these features of the television series a little closer, it is problematic to label them as pure series because of their narrative structure. Of course, the term television series seems to be appropriate to categorize MIT and NE but there is an actual distinction between the terms series and serial².

While a serial is traditionally "a continuous story, set over a number of episodes that usually comes to a conclusion in the final installment" (Creeber 2004:8), series are "continuous stories (usually involving the same characters and settings) which consist of self-contained episodes possessing their own individual conclusion (8). There is an ongoing discussion whether these definitions for series and serial can still be used without any problems when it comes to categorizing recent television programs. Apparently, this clear-cut distinction cannot be applied to most of the shows that are produced and broadcast today because they are rather a "hybrid" version of the two forms. Consequently, the term flexi-narrative³ has been coined in order to describe the actual format. (see Creeber 2006:82)

Looking at the question of series or serial in MIT, it is evident to use the

² This distinction in terms does not exist in German because the translation for both terms is "Fernsehserie", including both variations.

³ 'Flexi-narratives' are mixtures of the series and the serial form, involving the closure of one story arc within an episode (like a series) but with other, ongoing story arcs involving the regular characters (like a serial). This hybrid form maximizes the pleasures of both regular viewers who watch from week to week and get hooked by the serial narratives and the occasional viewers who happen to tune into one episode seeking the satisfaction of narrative closure within that episode. (Creeber 2006:82)

term 'flexi-narrative' because there is a general story that goes beyond the length of each episode, even beyond the boarder of the seasons. Within every episode we can find shorter stories that eventually come to a conclusion at the end, but the general tendency here is to develop several strands of the narrative that do not come to an end so quickly. An example for such a slowly developing story would be the relationship between Marin and Jack or Marin's settling in Elmo that basically lasts for the entire time of the series.

It seems appropriate to locate MIT and NE in this field of flexi-narratives accordingly although I have referred to them as TV-series up to this point and I am going to continue using this term for the rest of the thesis due to consistency.

2.2.1 Genre

When it comes to the categorization of genre it is likewise difficult to arrive at one distinct class not so much because of the blurred boundaries between the different categories but because of the ongoing changes in this field. "Genres are cultural products, constituted by media practices and subject to ongoing change and redefinition." (Mittell 2004:1) This is the central point in many attempts of definitions in popular culture because the texts that are investigated are the product of a very fast changing surrounding that hardly ever comes to a halt and it is almost impossible to consider all recent developments in an analysis. One cannot assume that the categorization of the various genres simply exists but it has been established over time in order to identify intertextual relations between several texts. These relations are nothing inherent in the text itself, they are identified by putting them into a certain cultural framework. (see Mittell 2003:41) According to this view, it is necessary to establish the category of

genre for the purpose of categorizing texts by means of intertextuality and by identifying similarities between the texts.

The similarities on the level of genre for both series MIT and NE can be found in the category of drama and comedy. This mixture of the two is very typical because there are hardly any series that get by with only one genre. Why these series can be categorized in this way, the way in which features are typical for the genre becomes clear when we have a look at the plot and the most important characters in these series.

It will be shown in the plot summary (see chapter 7) that in both series the structure of the plot focuses on presenting the structure of the community in the Alaskan towns of Elmo and Cicely and at the same time the audience experiences how individuals react and behave within this given structure. This principle provides for the not only comic but sometimes also tragic effect in the series and therefore they can be classified as drama-comedy series (see Mikos 148).

As mentioned before, television studies has emerged as a field of studies within cultural studies over the last decades. While great parts of television studies focus on the actual production and broadcast of programs, the focus of my thesis lies within the text itself and therefore on textual analysis, which I have explained above. Up to this point it should be clear that this approach to the texts is my 'preferred reading' of it and one way of interpreting the text, which does not mean that any other interpretation of it is less important or even wrong. Yet this approach appears to be the most effective one to support my assumptions on Alaska, nature, and the sublime.

3 Cultural geography

Apart from television studies there is another very important field of research that is essential to incorporate in my thesis, namely cultural geography. It is strongly related to cultural studies and provides some very interesting concepts that are concerned with the issues of nature and culture and therefore the following pages provide an overview on this field and its aspects relevant for this thesis.

Generally speaking,

[...] cultural geographers now routinely engage with complex but important questions about social processes such as identity formation, the construction of cultural difference, citizenship and belonging. These processes also challenge our understanding of such core geographical categories as space and place, landscape and environment, public and private. (Atkinson vii)

This quotation already gives away much of what cultural geography is generally concerned with and what thoughts are necessary to consider for the eventual analysis of the two TV-series. Yet the quote also shows how many different ideas are relevant in the discipline of cultural geography, including social, economic and political studies as well as philosophy, psychoanalysis and many more. Most of the literature on the subject of cultural geography states that it is hard to define partly because it has undergone significant changes during the last decades. Therefore it is no surprise that there is no single valid definition when it comes to cultural geography but undoubtedly, it is a very rapidly growing discipline and the reason for this has already been mentioned above – it includes so many different issues and locations and it can be seen as a discipline that incorporates many others with a special focus on the links between them. (see Crang 2-3)

Cultural geography is circulating around the idea that social interaction and social relations create meanings. Hence it is necessary to connect these meanings to space, place and landscape in the course of cultural geography. In doing so, it is also essential to look at the relationship of power and resistance in this field, that is to say how these power structures work. This means also to find out, who has power to make meanings, who can call them into question and whether these attempts can be successful. Considering that those meanings are basically made through representations, it is crucial for cultural geographers to study the representations of space, place and landscapes in various media (see Longhurst et al. 110).

This brief glimpse into the field of cultural geography has shown that its concerns and topics are almost innumerable. Yet it seems to be useful to gain some further insight into the concepts of space, place and landscape and to connect them to the assumptions on Alaska and nature.

3.1 The concepts of space, place, and landscape

The previous section has already shown why cultural geography is a vital approach for the analysis of the two series set in Alaska. The way in which space, place and landscape are represented in the series will be analyzed in order to establish parallels between them and to find out in how far nature and landscape influence the characters surrounded by it. Accordingly, it is necessary to stay a little longer with the concepts of space, place, and landscape in the field of cultural geography as this discipline is particularly concerned with these issues.

3.1.1 Space and place

Space and place are mentioned as two separate terms in this discussion, although they seem to be very closely related and have been used interchangeably for quite some time. Yet a dip into the thesaurus shows that space can only be replaced by place in a rather restricted scope, namely when the area it defines is limited: “space: indefinite space – place: limited space” (Roget’s Thesaurus 72-73). Sauer approached this issue in an idiographic manner by describing the specifics of a place and by seeing the purpose of geography in seeing the uniqueness of place. Opposed to this view, there was a quantitative approach that tried to predict regular patterns for space in a nomothetic manner, being very popular in the 1960s. What this approach basically did, was to categorize the world around us in order to create a well-ordered and efficient system, which led to the reduction of any diversity and the restriction of individuality as such. Marxists, who stated that such a prediction automatically led to the deduction of social laws, soon criticized this nomothetic geography. It is not difficult to see that this approach disregarded any specific human qualities and cannot be seen as being anywhere near holistic. The criticism of the approach carried out by the so-called positivists led to the development of humanistic geography in the late 1970s that set its focus on the relationship between people and places, also considering social relations and the factor of creating identity through these relations (see Crang 101-102).

Turning back on the two central terms of this chapter, namely space and place, it has already become clear that there is a distinction between them that at the same time unites them, as the following quotation shows.

[...] the meaning of space often merges with that of place. “Space” is more abstract than “place”. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. [...] The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of

the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Tuan 6)

According to these lines from Tuan, place results from space, after it has undergone the process of some kind of acquainting. Space can therefore be experienced as place after it has lost the qualities inherent in space, being vastness, openness and also some kind of threat. This is achieved by attaching meaning and value to a certain space which can only be done after experiencing a location thoroughly. Another circumstance that comes into play here is the factor of movement. While space is the surrounding that permits movement because this is one of its major qualities, place is rather the area where everything comes to a halt. This quality of movement and pause can be seen in a positive and negative way on either side. If we feel locked up in a certain place because there is nothing to do or everything has become dreary, it might be a welcome change to experience the vastness and unknown of space. On the other hand, exactly this vastness and unknown might turn into something threatening that makes us long for a cozy and well-known place.

According to this definition of place and space a home can only be some kind of place after the process of experiencing it. In the television series both protagonists, Marin and Joel, are confronted with this process of experience and find themselves in an unfriendly and unpleasant space they cannot relate to due to several reasons. Therefore the struggle of finding a new home means finding oneself in the middle of a framework that includes factors such as the surrounding, i.e. nature, the social relations, and the meaning that is attached to it as the following figure shows.

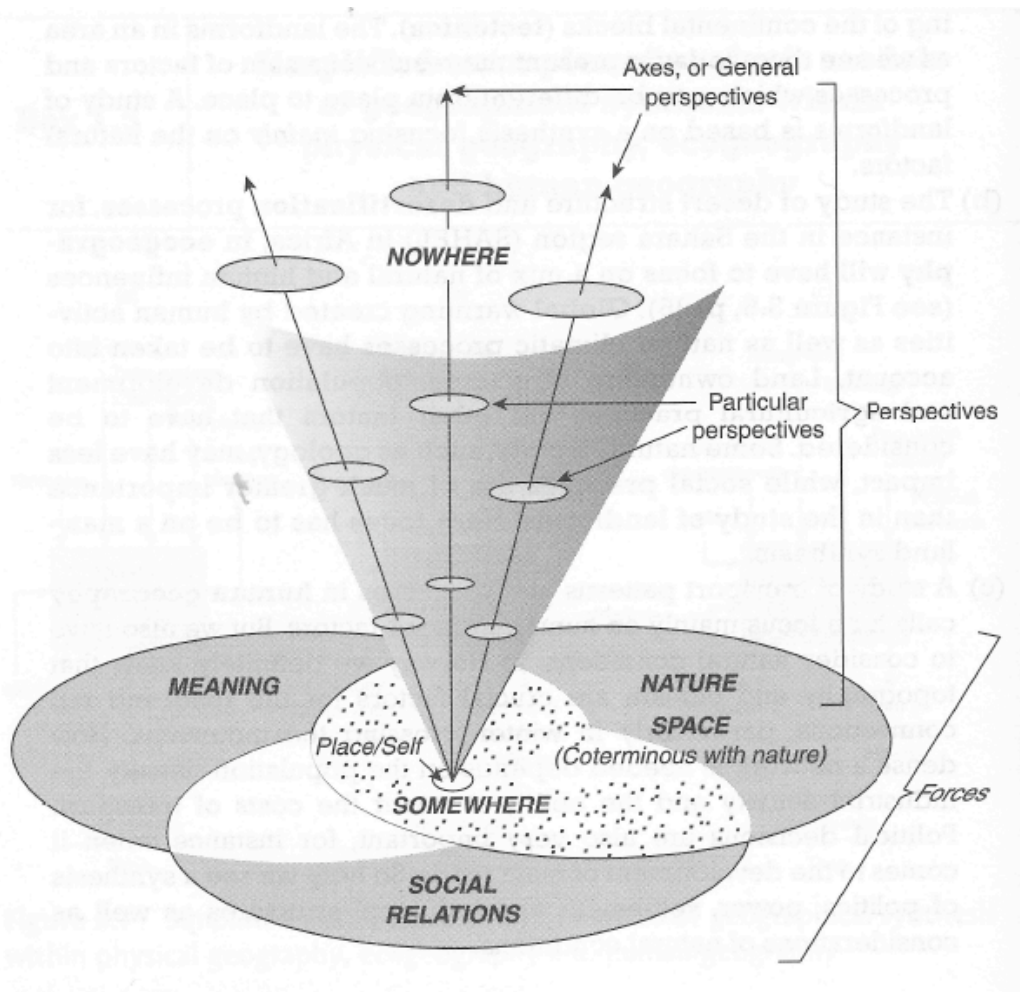


Fig. 1 The relational geographical framework (Sack qtd. in Holt-Jensen 20)

This illustration already reveals how multi-layered the conception of place and space is and how many different factors interact here. An interesting point is that space here is seen as coterminous with nature, which will be important in the later analysis. Together with any social relations and meaning, place can be seen as deriving from space and at the same time it remains within the scope of space. It is clear that enormous forces are necessary to establish the notion of place that is here equal with the self. While there are quite large overlapping areas within the three forces of meaning, nature, and social relations, the least common factor is place. What this illustration depicts as well is the relationship between place and

self and that “place becomes an active agent in the forming of our ‘self’. There is a reciprocal (or dialectic) relation between ‘self’ and place” (Holt-Jensen 24). This close connection between the self and place already suggests that an area can only take the qualities of place if there is a certain connection between the self, i.e. the human being. On the other hand space and place constitute opposing terms because place cannot be space and vice versa. This notion of a term that in one way is different and even the opposite of the other, i.e. space and place, also comes up in the distinction between nature and human which will be discussed in the chapter about nature in greater detail. It is striking though that both of these binary oppositions have the same roots and cannot be completely separated from each other because they depend on each other.

The following figure (fig. 2) adds another aspect to the notion of space and place, namely that of time. Clearly, an individual does not spend their whole life in one place but moves between several places throughout time. At the same time it is possible that the same places change their qualities over time and become different places though remaining in the same position. The following quote illustrates this more explicitly:

All the time we must relate to the physical world, to existing things which we use and to distances between things. Our social relations take place and lead on to social influence and the establishment of territories, at least in our own room or home. [...] A place means something because we relate special events to it. Place then constitutes and integrates forces from the realms of nature, meaning and social relations. (Holt-Jensen 23)

We decide what factors are relevant for the construction of our place or rather places over the course of our lives. The decisive point here is that meaning is added to the concept of place because if there was no meaning to it, it would remain within the realms of space. Accordingly it is necessary to relate the spatial and place-related development of any individual if it is the subject of our studies. (see Holt-Jensen 24) Exactly this rela-

tionship will be part of the analysis because the characters in the series are strongly influenced by their surrounding and undergo this process of turning space into a place and moving from one place to another through time as it is depicted in figure 2.

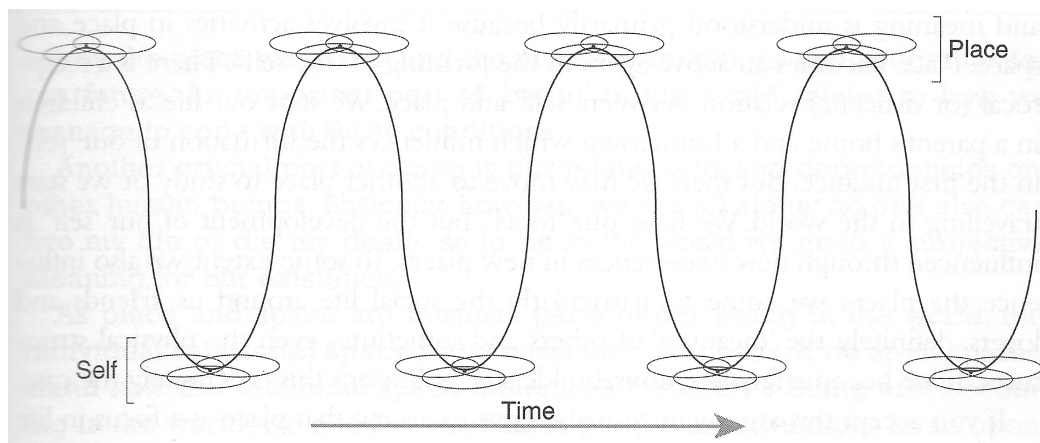


Fig. 2 Relations between 'self' and 'place' through time (Sack qtd. in Holt-Jensen 23)

As mentioned above, the discipline of geography has undergone significant changes over the last decades that also affected the study of space and place. Carl Sauer was especially concerned with the study of what makes a place unique and tried to establish models that provided regularities and patterns that could be found in certain places. This approach tried to arrive at spatial laws that could be imposed on certain areas. (see Crang 101-102)

The opposite approach that rather concentrated on what constitutes the individuality of a certain place seems to be more suitable as it takes account of the close connection between space and place and that both terms cannot get along without the other. "The meaning of space often merges with that of place. 'Space' is more abstract than 'place'. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better

and endow it with value.” (Tuan 6) This fusion of the two concepts is also shown in the illustration above because place lies within space and is not depicted separately. What creates the difference is the human factor again and this is also the reason why space and self are so closely related. Clearly this approach does not allow a general assumption when it comes to a certain place because every person has different connotations and connections to it. This process of connecting to a place is an important element for the analysis of the series in which both main characters are undergoing this process and eventually end up at a place they can call their home. The analogy Harrison and Dourish (qtd. in Shaw et al.) provide comes in handy at this point to outline the difference a little further: “We are located in space but we act in place. Furthermore places are spaces that are valued. The distinction is rather like that between a house and a home; a house might keep out the wind and the rain, but a home is where we live.” Consequently only place can achieve the qualities of home while space will always remain outside this area. Whatever remains at this outside is an area that we might know something about but we have not developed any feelings towards it (see Tuan 6). It is possible though to recognize a number of places as such, depending on the various stages of our lives or the context we are confronted with. As for the characters in the series, it is clear that in the beginning of the series they are confronted with a new sort of space that gradually becomes their home through various processes, which will be part of the analysis.

The following aspects seem to be relevant when we want to investigate the factors that are responsible for the creation of space. William Norton mentions five different key aspects that appear to be important in this regard. Clearly, place is perceived as an area of meaning and not a mere term that only refers to where it is located. This can also be seen in the word ‘home’ that does not only point towards a certain place but also strong emotions and feelings that go along with it. The second factor in-

volves the social aspect that is “being known and knowing others”. While there might not be any social interaction in the areas of space and landscape, it is essential when it comes to space. Another point that has to be considered here is that the construction of place takes place in our mind and involves our memories and certain values and experiences. The fourth assumption that Norton brings in here is that place is intersubjective meaning that the importance of a place be shared and communicated between individuals. The last point he mentions is that a place is created by the occupation of space for a certain period of time (see Norton 274). What these aspects obviously show is that the process by which space turns into place is connected to a certain amount of time, interpersonal relationships, and experience and value.

Moving on from these definitions and assumptions about place it seems that space is an empty container that is filled by the human: “By ‘space’ is meant a neutral, pre-given medium, a tabula rasa onto which the particularities of culture and history come to be inscribed, with place as the presumed result” (E. Casey 14). In this quote the notion of culture comes into play and it seems that space can only turn into place when the inscription of any cultural information takes place. On the other hand this allows any random place to turn into a culturally important place as soon as the respective meaning and information is attached. The definition by Longhurst et al. also supports this assumption:

Considering space means considering the ways in which, in ‘reality’ or ‘representation’, the distribution of things and activities, the formation of boundaries and patterns of movements are both culturally produced and part of the construction of culture. The spaces that we inhabit, whether they are the sacred and profane spaces of an African village or of Wall Street, are intimately bound up with the ways in which we live out our lives. (Longhurst et al. 108)

This remark shows clearly that there is a mutual influence between the human and the space they are located in. Consequently it is impossible to live the same life in such different areas as New York and Africa because of their different cultural construction. Hence the series' characters that leave their normal lives in New York are also not able to continue their familiar lives and have to adapt to different cultural settings that is strongly connected to space as well.

Summing up what has been said about space and place on the previous pages it becomes clear that every relocation goes together with the process of creating place. As soon as we are uprooted and put into some other space, it is necessary to establish a connection by attaching meaning and value and by taking some time to do that. Only this can allow any unfamiliar space to turn into a personal place or home eventually.

3.1.2 Landscape

In the beginning of this chapter the term landscape was mentioned along with those of space and place and the following quote allows to stress the aspect this third term brings into play here:

Considering landscape means considering how both an area and the look of that area are laden with meaning. 'Reality' and 'representation' are not easily separated here and the object of study can be a city skyline or a country scene in oils. What is at issue is the ways in which areas and representations of them are part of our cultural worlds. (Longhurst et al. 108)

Exactly this notion of representation is important for the analysis of the TV-series because what I want to investigate among others is the way in which Alaska is represented on screen. Therefore the concept of land-

scape is of special importance here because it describes how the representation of a certain area works and in how far reality is constructed through these representations. As the following chapter on Alaska will show, the way in which Alaska is depicted in the series is closely related to how it is represented in all sorts of media, not least in its state seal⁴.

What has been said so far includes the assumption that any land turns into landscape as soon as certain qualities are imposed on it. Similar to the transformation from space to place the area also gains certain qualities through inscription. The difference, however, is obvious in that a landscape reflects a common sense of view of an area whereas place must be seen on a more individual level.

A landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings ... Landscape is a social and cultural product, a way of seeing projected onto the land and having its own techniques and compositional forms; a restrictive way of seeing that diminishes alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature. (qtd. in Johnson 3)

This definition of landscape shows clearly that it is a sort of representation and that it dismisses certain features of the place it depicts. As I have already pointed out before, this is a very important issue because the representations of Alaska in the series rely on exactly that concept of representation, which will be investigated in the respective chapter.

The previous pages only provide a brief glimpse into the vast field of cultural studies and cultural geography and the concepts that are of relevance for the analysis of the chosen texts. It has been shown that there is an important difference between the terms of space, place, and landscape although especially space and place are very closely related and cannot

⁴ see fig. 4

be separated easily. It is crucial to note the role the individual plays in these concepts because following the assumptions about place, it can only exist because of human presence. Without it and without the connection to any cultural context and values, it remains space. Moreover space is everywhere place is not, hence place can be seen as being surrounded by space.

To what extent these concepts matter in the depiction of nature and Alaska and how they contribute to turning a random space into place will be investigated further in the following chapters.

4 Nature

My thesis revolves around the word nature (represented by Alaska) and therefore it is necessary to investigate the meaning of this word in greater detail. As opposed to words that are related to a concrete thing in our reality (e.g. an apple), the word nature does not relate to a specific thing in our world that can be delimited very easily. It is inevitable to ask the very central question here, namely “What is nature?”. Evidently, this is not such an easy question to answer and as I have mentioned before, one of the reasons for this difficulty lies in the fact that nature is not a mere thing but rather a concept that is not easy to delimit. Nevertheless it is central to answer this question or at least to arrive at a possible answer in order to support my basic assumption that nature can be seen as the ultimate home. Furthermore it should support the hypothesis that in the texts under consideration this nature is resembled by Alaska or its representations.

As the question about nature is a very broad one due to several reasons, the following sections will give an overview on the topic and try to come up with possible answers. Even though this chapter will not provide one distinct and universal answer, it will examine the aspects that are relevant for this thesis.

The following picture (fig. 3) is a typical example of the concepts of nature that are familiar to us. The qualities of the sublime, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6, can also be found in this image. Furthermore, this picture is very similar to the representations of nature and Alaska in MIT and NE where snow-covered mountains are a distinct feature.

4.1 Considerations on nature

At first sight, the word nature that comes up so often in things we talk and think about seems to be a very straightforward term because it is used so frequently. Having a closer look at it though, it is not so easy to find a definition that includes every possible meaning the word entails. The word nature is a very good example for polysemy in the language and illustrates quite well the semiotic assumption that “the meaning of something is never permanently fixed.” (Casey et al. 208) Even physical objects are subject to this concept of polysemy and not always straightforward in their meaning as the following example shows: “[...] even a natural object like a mountain might be regarded as something to be climbed, a scenic backdrop or a source of food for sheep grazing, while it might be a metaphor for a challenge, a sense of mystery, an obstacle or the grandeur of nature.” (Casey et al. 209)

This example perfectly illustrates the importance of denotation and connotation when it comes to investigating a word or rather a concept, as in the case of nature. A word always comes with one or several connotations, deeply depending on the perception and experience of the person decoding the text. It might certainly happen that this object of the mountain is perceived differently, although two people see it at the same time and under similar conditions. What cause the difference in meaning here, are the different ways in which these two people make sense of the world and what relationship they have to the mountain in the first place.

The concept of polysemy together with connotation is relatively easy to grasp in this example of the mountain but becomes a little more treacherous applied to the concept of nature. Although nature surrounds us and is part of everything we encounter, it is not a *given* and clearly defined thing but rather a delineation that humans have made. The following citations

illustrate this notion of polysemy in nature that makes it hard to define on the one side and opens up an enormous range of denotation on the other: "Nature also carries an immensely complex and contradictory symbolic load; it is the subject of very contrary ideologies; and it has been represented in an enormous variety of differing ways." (Soper 2)

Soper's statement points at the fact that the problem of defining nature is also an ideological one. Considering this leads back to the assumption that everything must be seen in a certain context and that this context can vary. The industrialized assumption or description of nature will vary to a great extent from a notion coming from a so-called developing country where the relationship between people and nature is a different one right from the start.

The notion of ideology that comes into play here is very important for my thesis because the starting point here is the nature how it is conceived by people that are usually surrounded by a highly industrialized and modernized world and who have somehow lost the connection to the original notion of nature their ancestors might have had. What I am saying here is that nature, the way it is encountered by the series' protagonists, can only have such an impact on them because they come from a different ideology and face a very contrary one in their new homes.

Burke, on the other hand, approaches the problem of definition differently, by stating that it is almost impossible to grasp a comprehensive notion of nature by simply defining it. He rather goes for investigation in the first place without the limitation of set up boundaries, as the following quotation shows. "For when we define, we seem in danger of circumscribing nature within the bounds of our own notions [...] instead of extending our ideas to take in all that nature comprehends, according to her manner of combining." (Burke 12) Taking his quotation a little bit further, one could argue that we can only describe something that we have experienced or seen

already and by consequence this does not include everything that our world has to offer. According to Burke, it is necessary to adjust our concepts to what is really out there in the nature we want to describe.

The last quote I want to mention here is by Bergman, who believes that a definition of nature serves ourselves because of the relationship we have with it. This also implies that thinking about nature also means thinking about ourselves.

We make out of nature a text, a set of symbols, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, and out of those symbols we can learn about ourselves, our own desires in nature, and the meanings we write into nature. This is the first and most important step in the process of restructuring our relationship with nature. (Bergman, 283f.)

This relationship we have with nature is a given one and this is a reason for the ongoing process of reorganizing our concept of it because we are also part of it. Locating our place in this big picture is not that easy because, as Bergman puts it, our desires in nature are not obvious and need to be researched by this act of textualization.

Taking these various thoughts about nature into consideration, it becomes apparent that humankind has a great impact on the meaning of nature and vice versa and although these thoughts about nature have been investigated for some time past now, the conclusion does not seem to be a matter of time but rather a matter of perspective. However that may be, there is no doubt that there is a certain connection like an invisible tie between nature and the individual, which can also be seen in the following definitions of nature and its etymology.

4.2 Definitions of Nature

Etymologically, the word nature derives from the Latin word *natura*, which is the translation of the Greek word *physis* (φύσις) that relates to the natural growing of plants, animals and other features of the world as they tend to develop without external influence. The word *natura* belongs to the participle *natus*, meaning born and can also be translated with birth. The etymology of the word nature already reveals that there is more to it than a single meaning and that it is not easy to give a definition that incorporates every notion of it.

So if the term *birth* is part of the etymology of the word nature, it supports the assumption that there is a strong connection between humans and nature, as our existence starts with our birth. This is also an explanation for the tie that remains between the individual and nature because our very first encounter with the world is normally the most natural situation in our life, no matter if it takes place in a highly sophisticated delivery room or at your familiar home. Therefore nature is a part of every human being because it incorporates the notion of growth (in our case inside our mother's wombs) and the act of birth that both do not require anything artificial.

However, it cannot be denied that many concepts of nature do not include the human in the first place or at all and that seems to be the reason for the ambiguity of the word. We are part of a system that we constantly try to define as something different from us, although the connection is undeniable. The following definition from a dictionary shows this ambiguity quite well: "Nature is all the animals, plants, and other things in the world that are not made by people, and all the events and processes that are not caused by people." (Pons, English Dictionary, p.1023).

What this definition suggests is that everything made or caused by hu-

mans is no longer natural, although humans are part of nature, as we have seen before. What is important to note here too, is that such a definition tells us that everything that is made by humans cannot be natural. This would also include goods or products that only consist of “natural” ingredients and developing this thought further, it means that once something is touched by humans, it is no longer part of nature. This concept is very important here because it distinguishes nature definitely from everything that is man-made or artificial and brings in the notion of unspoiled nature that will be discussed at another point.

Webster’s revised unabridged dictionary also provides numerous definitions for the word nature of which the following adds some major aspects to the ones previously mentioned:

The personified sum and order of causes and effects; the powers which produce existing phenomena, whether in the total or in detail; the agencies which carry on the processes of creation or of being; -- often conceived of as a single and separate entity, embodying the total of all finite agencies and forces as disconnected from a creating or ordering intelligence.⁵



Fig. 3 Typical picture of ‘nature’

⁵ see: <http://machaut.uchicago.edu>

This definition gives a rough outline of the term regarding to what it means in connection to the topic at hand. It states that nature is a power everything on earth (and beyond) is made from and is reliant on at the same time. Hence nature is almost everything there is and the basis for everything as well as some force that has the power to create and destroy. Yet it has to be mentioned that this definition does not exclude the human as such but puts nature on a higher level that cannot be grasped to its full extent, emphasized by the word phenomenon.

Looking at these definitions it becomes obvious that this term has more than one meaning and that it does not define something clear-cut. Every definition leaves room for further investigation because of its broadness or impreciseness, leading back to the original assumption that this word is always dependent on its reader. This is also conveyed by the way Evernden describes it: "For nature is, before all else, a category, a conceptual container that permits the user to conceive of a single, discernible 'thing'."(89)

What is important to note, however, is that there is a metaphysics lying behind the simple existence of the word nature. It is not simply a description of a found object: it is also an assertion of a relationship. Furthermore, it plays a role, [...] , in the daily life of a society through the social use we make of it. If there is nature, one can speak of things belonging to nature, or of being "natural". And if there are things that are natural, one can also speak of others as "unnatural". (Evernden 21)

The main point of this quotation is that nature is nothing that we can touch or hold, rather it is something that only exists through definition and description and at the same time this definition states the nature's connection to the person it encounters. What becomes clear as well is that the way in which we conceive of nature is highly dependent on the environment we live in and how it is influenced by nature. Evernden also mentions the term

“natural” as opposed to “unnatural” that connects it to the definition above where everything that was made by men was defined to be artificial. This binary pair of artificial and natural comes to be worthy of great interest when one looks more closely at it, especially the fact that the definition allows us to turn something natural into something artificial.

Taking a bouquet of flowers as an example of everyday life; one could argue that the flowers themselves are originally something natural and represent nature, but this way of dealing with flowers in our society is not natural at all. Therefore, it can be argued that objects which are natural in the first place can lose their naturalness, or at least a certain part of it, through the transfer into a surrounding other than its place of origin.

Remaining with this example it is also necessary to mention that not only the act of dislocating the object plays a role. Thinking of a common bouquet of flowers, it is not very likely that one goes out into the field and picks the flowers but rather steps into a florist’s shop and chooses from the range they offer. Those flowers, offered by the florist, were originally intended to be put into a vase and this leads to the question whether those flowers are natural at all. This example shows quite well that there is a difference between natural and unnatural and that this difference can even be found in originally natural objects and what is more is that humans seem to play a big part in contributing to this distinction.

The crucial point here is that although we are part of nature, it seems that everything loses its naturalness once we touch it. To put it a little less extreme, one could argue that the naturalness is lost once something gets involved in our culture. Of course, flowers being no longer natural when they are brought into a cultural setting are only the starting point. Developing this thought any further leads to the assumption that through its birth, the individual loses its naturalness because it is surrounded by a specific cultural setting and in this case, the setting is an industrialized one that is

per se the or an opposite of nature. One thing we have to keep in mind here is the “invisible” tie between humans and nature that remains within and that plays a major role when it comes to the encounter with nature in its unspoiled and untouched manner.

The area of tension that has become obvious so far and that this thesis deals with is the constant endeavor of returning back to nature while attempting to survive nature at the same time. The issue at stake is whether the only possibility to return to nature is to die or if there are other ways of connecting with nature. The definitions above have shown that nature is usually defined as being different and delimited from any other concept and from this a number of binary pairs can be developed, which might illustrate the concept of nature a little further: nature vs. culture, nature vs. human, nature vs. developed, nature vs. artificial, and many more.

These dichotomies show again that everything that is human and has been developed by humans or made by humans cannot be found in the category of nature. So one reason for the urge to grasp and limit the scope of nature might be the fact that it is something that cannot be controlled by humans or rather, once it is included into our culture and concepts it is no longer natural.

With regard to my thesis these dichotomies are especially relevant because they mark the starting point for my investigation. For both characters suddenly find themselves in a natural surrounding although they have experienced the complete opposite, namely the city of New York, before. The second aspect here is that as humans they constitute a dichotomy with nature themselves and what is of importance here is how they can connect to nature and find their new home there in spite of that opposition. Following on from here, the next section will investigate the obvious relationship between human and nature and reveal the problems this indisputable connection brings along.

4.3 Humans and nature

Following on from these observations on nature, it is interesting to see what C.S. Lewis states in his essay “The Abolition of Man” (149): “We reduce things to mere Nature in order that we may “conquer” them. We are always conquering Nature, because “Nature” is the name for what we have, to some extent, conquered.” This perception of nature follows the assertion that we must name what we want to bring under our control, that is to say nature. This assumption is quite contrary to what has been said so far because until now, everything that got connected to humans was no longer natural and now the opposite seems to be the case.

Remaining at this statement a little longer and looking at it in greater detail, it is justified to question whether everything we have not yet “conquered” is nature as well and whether something that we have already conquered remains nature or rather turns into something else. If we argue that nature is everything that has not been conquered yet, there is no possibility to ever turn back to nature or to find a place that resembles nature to its full extent. The question that remains here is whether we can measure the naturalness of a certain place or area that has already been conquered but not yet completely been included into our culture. Maybe it would be legitimate to talk about unspoiled nature here in order to describe a place that can be considered as being natural but has been discovered or conquered but not adjusted to human needs. Following these assumptions it is necessary to ask whether there are various shades of nature or naturalness and consequently of culture and if this is the case, how these can be measured.

In order to answer the questions mentioned above, it might be useful to investigate another term that makes this question visible as well. The notion of C.S. Lewis leads to the term of “unspoiled” nature that has been

brought up before and that could be put on a level with “unconquered” here. In both cases it is something that remains untouched by humans but the moment we touch or conquer it, it changes its qualities. While the term of conquered nature seems to be rather unproblematic, the opposite of unspoiled, which would be spoiled nature, evokes certain difficulties. On the one hand, this implies that the moment any sort of nature is touched or maybe even discovered by humans it is somehow spoiled and therefore it becomes very difficult to get hold of this unspoiled nature as it can only exist without the presence of humans. This term also allows us to add a scaling to the term nature. When we put nature to one end of the scale and culture to the other, we assume that there are different shades between the two extremes, depending on the extent to which nature has been spoilt or conquered. The mere presence of humans in “unspoiled nature” could serve as an example for minor spoiling while the construction of roads and buildings in a former natural area constitutes the other end of the scale. Another question that seems to be obvious here is whether something spoiled or conquered can ever return to being unspoiled or unconquered and what effect that would have on humankind.

It appears to be necessary to point out these different shades and notions of nature because in the texts under consideration the protagonists are dealing with those various levels of nature and culture as well. The questions will serve as a guideline to differentiate the various notions of nature they encounter and also to get hold of the different effects these varieties might have.

What remains is the question of how we can be part of something that we are rather opposed to? Bergman puts the idea of their intertwining like that: “The two bodies – the physical body of humans and the physical body of nature, the flesh and the planet – are written upon and through each other.” (282) This quote supports the argument that the one cannot

exist without the other and that both parts influence each other. The following considerations might clarify this problem a little further.

The source for the idea of nature has been traced back to ancient Greece (see Evernden 25) that can also be seen from its etymology and although it is a concept created by humankind, it cannot be denied that it includes humankind at the same time. As there has obviously been the need to invent such a concept as nature, it becomes clear that it is defined as being different from humanity.

[...] an a priori discrimination between humanity and “nature” is implicit in all discussions of the relations between the two, and thus far it is correct to insist that ‘nature’ is the idea through which we conceptualize what is ‘other’ to ourselves. (Soper 15f.)

Looking at it in that way, the concept of nature acts as an instrument to define ourselves and to delimit us from everything else. Of course, this view is also problematic because without nature nothing would exist in the first place, meaning that there was no humankind if there was no nature. Accordingly, there are certain adjustments to that notion as the following quotation shows:

Two closely connected distinctions have been central to Western thinking about nature: that between what is naturally given and what is contrived (the artificial) and that between what is dictated by nature and what is humanly instigated (the cultural or conventional). (Soper 37)

This remark on nature includes the notion of culture and convention and that of the artificial, summing up what has been part of the other quotations above as well. Although the quotation suggests a clear distinction between the poles, it has become clear that all the categorizations leave a margin and that nature is no clear-cut term.

Most of the mentioned quotations and considerations about nature center on the relationship between humans and nature and the question whether

humankind can be part of this nature. Considering that nature has been “made up” in order to delimit the space other than human, it is obvious that the terms are separate from each other. On the other hand, humans originate from nature and in that way they are part of it. These various notions lead to the supposition that it is not possible to consider either one way or the other but that it is necessary to incorporate both perspectives when it comes to nature.

The various definitions and concepts of nature have shown how difficult and even unsatisfying it is to come up with one distinct concept of nature. To a great extent nature gains its meaning through saying what it is not, as has been outlined in the previous section. Nature is not human, it is not artificial, it cannot be made. Dissociating nature from other concepts often results in binary pairs that are an important factor in understanding the function of nature. On the other hand it is striking that everything human that originates from nature and therefore constitutes a part of it, is typically depicted as being one of its opposite as well. This phenomenon of something being part of its opposite has already come up in the section about space and place as well. There it has been shown that place is clearly the opposite of space but at the same time it remains within the scope of space and is surrounded by it. This can also be seen in the binary opposition of human vs. nature. The assumptions above have shown that every human individual derives from nature and therefore remains part of it. It can even be stated that everything human is surrounded by nature although this varies depending on the place. The unity between place and self has already been established in fig. 2 and becomes evident in this chapter as well because what surrounds place in this figure is space that is equal with nature. Arising thereby is the assumption that the concept of space and place works similar to the concept of human and nature and that both constitute a binary opposition.

4.4 Nature as home

The considerations above have already shown that much about the discussion about nature also has to do with the human longing for a place we can relate to and ideally turn into a home. This desire for the ultimate home can already be seen in the creation story and 'The Fall of Man' because this episode suggests that there was an initial connection between nature and human which got lost due to other human desires.

According to the well-known biblical story, Adam and Eve live a very pleasant and sheltered life in the Garden of Eden that comes to a sudden end after eventually eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Consequently they are expelled from the Garden of Eden and while Eve has to suffer from painful childbirth from now on, Adam has to work hard in the fields to feed his family. Apart from that, they are also faced with the cruel outside world, more precisely all the shapes of nature that God had created before. Comparing the Genesis to what has been said about nature so far, the following parallels become evident.

Adam was originally part of nature because he was made out of dust and because Eve was made out of one of Adam's ribs, she was natural too. During their time in the Garden they live as part of nature, nature is their home that comforts them and offers everything they need, as long as they abide the rules. Consequently there is no reason to be afraid of their surrounding because it is Paradise and here everything is perfect. But after the banishment from this Paradise they lose their original connection to nature, which becomes most obvious through punishment of birth God imposes on Eve: "in pain you shall bring forth children"⁶. This process of childbirth plays a major role because the act of giving birth can be seen as the process through which a great part of nature is lost. Before that the

⁶ Genesis, chapter 3 <<http://www.bibleontheweb.com/Bible.asp>>

only existing humans were made directly from nature and the will of God, now there is still a small part of nature remaining within the humans handed down from generation to generation, following the biblical account. Yet, the process of birth can be seen as the disconnection from the original relationship to nature and according to the Genesis we can then only return to nature through death: “till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”⁷ The expulsion from Paradise shows quite well that this urge to discover nature to its full extent also has to do with the assumption that we lost our initial connection to it, so the longing for nature can also be seen as the human striving for paradise.

Following on from this assumption, “nature is a paradise, the idealized home the civilized, urbanized human spirit has lost and longs for.” (Bergman 290) It seems that especially the urbanization has had a great impact on this need for the revival of paradise and this notion goes together with some idea of escape.

Open landscapes attract because they offer a clear vista, secluded areas (woods, caves, somber or shadowed reaches, etc.), because of what they promise in the way of possible retreats and look-out posts. An instinctual, ‘animal’ structure of responses is thus said to underlie aesthetic experience even when the instincts themselves are no longer essential to survival. What we like and dislike about ‘nature’ is in the end an effect of our assessment of its potential as habitat. (Soper 224)

I would like to end this chapter on nature with another quote by Bergman (99) that sums up most of the aspects of nature that have been addressed in this chapter and provides an apparently “easy way out” solution to the problem.

⁷ ebd.

[...] there is only Nature, and once again, Nature is everything. Or so it seems. But again, we must remember that nature was itself our creation. [...] But in fact, the absorption of ourselves into Nature is simply the absorption of ourselves into ourselves, or rather, into our own conception of how it “ought” to be. The paradox we encounter, of this perpetual oscillation between the domains of nature and culture, arises from a fundamental error. The dualism cannot actually be resolved, because it never existed. The dualism we fret over exists only because of our own decision, not only to constrict the nature-tube into two domains, but to create the container in the first place. One might even say that there is no “nature,” and there never has been.

What the considerations about and definitions of nature have shown is what I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter – there is no universal answer to the question “What is nature?”. Nature, similar to the other concepts presented so far, is a term that involves various cultural aspects and defies any straightforward interpretation. What has become clear, though, is that nature is very often defined through being opposite to something else and this quality has already been shown at the concept of space and place that are defined through saying what it is not. It seems to be remarkable though that although nature can be seen as an opposition to human, both concepts cannot be completely separated from each other as it is the case with self and place.

What is important for my research question here is that nature is something humans long for due to several reasons but that is almost impossible to reach because of its ambiguous qualities. When it comes to the series under consideration it is clear that nature is initially encountered as something terrible the characters cannot relate to at all. Both, Marin and Joel have clearly lost their connection to anything natural and this is stressed by their origin. The fact that they end up in such completely opposite places marks the beginning for their journey back to nature because “[...] nature is a paradise, the idealized home the civilized, urbanized human spirit has lost and longs for.” (Bergman, 282)

5 Alaska

Drawing on a variety of literary and historical source, I argue here that the scenic and natural wonder that is Alaska is a deeply cultural phenomenon. The fact that at one time in its history the region was regarded as “Seward’s Folly” – a frozen wasteland thought to be of little national importance [...] indicates the degree to which ideas of nature shift and change throughout history, [...] (Kollin xiii)

As I have already mentioned, there is more to Alaska than a certain state or place and this is also the reason why the setting of the two television series is so important. The way Kollins puts it in her introduction to “Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier” already suggests that a variety of factors matter in order to grasp everything that is connected to this area.

Hence, this chapter introduces some geographical and historical facts about the region to approach the reasons why Alaska seems to be so perfect for depicting nature. Another part deals with the representation of Alaska in the series and how nature is shot.

5.1 Key facts

Alaska is often referred to as “The Last Frontier” while the name itself derives from the Aleut⁸ word meaning “great land” or “that which the sea breaks against”. Etymologically speaking, the original word Alayeksa or Alakshak changed into Alaksa, Alashka, Aliaska and finally turned into today’s Alaska. The name refers to the entire state, including the Peninsula. Apart from the Last Frontier, Alaska is also referred to as the “Land of the Midnight sun” because of its far north location. This is of course only true during the summer months, when the sun never completely sets and can also be seen at midnight.

Alaska is the largest state in the United States of America and takes up one fifth in size of the lower 48 states, with 586,412 square miles or 365,000,000 acres, and is home to approximately 700,000 people. The fact that it is the least densely populated state in the US (app. 0,91 people per square mile) clearly suggests that most of the area is unsettled and that a huge part of the territory is rather barren and not appropriate for settlement. On the other hand, this low density of cities and other settlements is set in a landscape shaped by innumerable lakes, huge mountains and extensive forests, which offers vast amounts of untouched nature and which will be an important factor in my analysis. Almost half of the inhabitants live in Anchorage, Alaska’s biggest city, though not the capital, which is Juneau (the third largest city).

Alaska is located on the northwest end of the North American continent and is bordered by the Beaufort Sea and the Arctic Ocean to the north, the Yukon Territory and British Columbia to the east, the Gulf of Alaska and the Pacific Ocean to the south and the Bering Sea, the Bering Strait and

⁸ Aleut is a language of the Eskimo-Aleut language family, spoken by the indigenous people living on the Aleutian Islands, Pribilof Islands and Commander Islands
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleut_language>

Chukchi Sea to the west. Apart from Hawaii, Alaska is the only state not adjacent to the other states, which puts it into a special place as well. Alaskan's tend to nickname the other American states "The Lower 48s", already suggesting a separated but also elevated position.

Apart from its vast size, Alaska also presents a variety of other impressive facts, among them the highest peak of the United States, Mount McKinley (20,320 feet above sea level). It also counts over 3,000 rivers and more than 3 million lakes. The Yukon river, that runs throughout Alaska, from its border with Canada in the east to the Bering sea in the west, is Alaska's longest river and the third longest river of the United States. Approximately five percent of the state are covered in glaciers, which count more than 100,000 and make Alaska special again because there is no other part of the populated world that has more glaciers or ice fields of that enormous size. Additionally, there are about 70 volcanoes to be found in the territory of Alaska.

5.1.1 Alaska state seal

The state seal of Alaska (see fig. 4) was originally designed in 1910, when Alaska was only a territory but not a state. It precisely depicts its great variety in nature with a view of the seashore and the forests framed by a mountain range against the background of the sunset. The image conveys an infinite view and by this also suggests the vastness of the land.

The rays that can be seen above the mountains represent the Northern Lights, also called aurora borealis. The smelter symbolizes mining and the train stands for Alaska's railroads, while the ships point towards transpor-

tation by sea. The trees, of course, symbolize Alaska's wealth of forests and the farmer on his wagon represents its agriculture. The fish and the seals demonstrate the importance of fishing and wildlife to the Alaskan economy.

Everything that is and has been important for Alaska's identity is reflected in this state seal and although this depiction is a century old by now, it has not lost its validity. Of course, the last century has also left its mark on the state of Alaska, as the following section about its history shows.



Fig. 4 – Alaska State Seal⁹

⁹ see <http://www.statesymbolsusa.org/Alaska/Seal.html>

5.1.2 Alaska's history

It was only in 1741 that the first Europeans set foot on Alaskan territory, namely the Dane Vitus Bering who worked for Tzar Peter, together with Alexei Chirikof. In the following years, Spain, Britain and France also sent out their expeditions to explore the coast of Alaska. The vast fur resources of this area attracted settlers from many regions and consequently led to an uncontrolled exploitation until Alexander Baranov established the Russian post and unique trading rights to the Russian American Company in 1799. After this, the Russians continued to explore the mainland of Alaska but soon found that it was complicated and difficult to secure their fur trade monopole and agreed on negotiating the sale of the area. In 1867 Alaska was sold to the United States for 7,200,000 dollars and because the state's secretary William Seward put special effort into the purchase, it was often referred to as "Seward's Folly" for the reason that his efforts were considered to be of no use and ridiculous. After the discovery of gold the Klondike Gold Rush started in 1896 and eventually lasted until the end of the century, during that time thousands of people were seeking for gold along the Yukon river and this led to a number of settlements.

In 1900 Juneau became the capital of Alaska but it was not until 1912 that Alaska gained official territorial status and was also allowed to have its own legislature, before that it had been controlled by the United States Army and the United States Navy.

In World War II Dutch Harbour became an important position in the defensive system of the United States because it resisted a Japanese attack and occupation in 1942. The increase in air traffic and the influence of the military led to a tremendous growth of the population from 1950 to 1960 and of course the interest in becoming a state of the United States also grew enormously during this period. In 1959 "We're in!" was finally proclaimed, when Alaska became the 49th state of the United States of Amer-

ica.

Alaska's economy basically relies on seafood, oil and timber and partly on tourism, although Alaska had to face some dramatic natural disasters. One of them was the Good Friday Earthquake in 1964, which destroyed a dozen of cities around Prince William Sound. This is the largest earthquake recorded in the United States, with a magnitude of 9.2. Only three years later, the Fairbanks Flood forced thousands of people to leave their homes and this caused millions of dollars of damage again.

The last big catastrophe in Alaska's history took place in 1989 when the oil tanker Exxon Valdez struck a reef and accordingly grounded. The tanker carried 53 million gallons of oil, spilling 11 million of them into Prince William Sound. It is needless to say that this accident was a big disaster for the ecosystem of the sea and consequently the survival of the fishermen in this region.

This rather young history of Alaska shows clearly, what has shaped the region and the culture over the years. The enormous resources this state has to offer contributed to its development a lot and it is obvious that part of its history also entered the storylines of the television series set in Alaska, which will be shown in greater detail in the analysis section.

5.2 Alaska resembling nature

Although both series covered in this paper are set in Alaska, it is easy to see that this location acts to some extent as a sort of wild card for something else. That the series were not really shot at the various locations actually portrayed tells a lot about place itself. In order to make the story work, it is not necessary to depict a real Alaskan scenery in the series but a place that resembles it in its major features and overall grandeur. Alaska is exemplary for such a place that has become out of reach: “For increasingly we are coming to know nature through what is no longer available to us – through lack and absence and loss.” (Bergman 282)

It has been mentioned before that both series were not shot in Alaska but in different places of the US, yet this fact does not influence the way in which the audience reacts to the area that is shown because what we encounter on the screens appears fairly realistic. The reason why this concept of replacement actually works is because television makes use of iconic signs¹⁰ here. In the case of Alaska the shots do not show a scenery or landscape that is actually located in the state of Alaska but that is recognized as depicting it. In the case of these reality-like representations, iconic signs resemble an object in the real world and this in turn suggests an effect of realism. As I have already discussed in the section about close reading, the reason why this form of denotation works is because the images that are shown follow the conventions the audience recognizes from the language of television. Among these conventions television employs are perspective, proportion, light and shade, and shot composition, all of them establishing the codes that are used to represent a world that audiences can believe and relate to. (see Bignell 89) I will explain how these iconic signs work in the case of Alaska on the basis of the analysis of sev-

¹⁰ iconic sign: in semiotics, a sign which resembles its referent. Photographs, for example, contain iconic signs resembling the objects they represent. (Bignell 89)

eral shots from the series in a moment.

Of course, this is a very simplified explanation of how reality is constructed because there are numerous factors that influence reality. Automatically the question appears what reality actually is and who is able to define it and whether this is possible at all. Obviously, the question for what is real or reality goes beyond the scope of this thesis and for the time being this television studies approach will do in order to get hold of the reasons why Alaska can be represented by another location.

Following the assumptions that have just been mentioned above, it does not matter whether the mountains and forests on the screen are really located in Alaska or if they are some hundred miles away from it. This is possible because what is shown on the screen is a construction of Alaska either way and it is primarily important to create an Alaskan reality that the audience can relate to and that serves the series' plot. Huge mountains, endless seashores, dense and large forests automatically limit the setting to a handful of places for the audience. Together with some typical animals as the caribou, lumberjacks, and some other features, it is soon clear, where the series is located. It is also clear that this kind of creating reality works especially well with places such as Alaska because a handful of items are enough to establish the desired setting. Additionally it is also necessary that the audience can relate to the represented area, which is only possible, if the cultural preconditions are the same and the audience shares the same image of a place.

For the later analysis it is important to point out which images show Alaska as a natural place and why Alaska works so well for depicting nature. From what has been said so far about Alaska and the general images that come with it, it can be said that it is automatically connected to nature and everything that is associated with it. Yet the construction of a natural scenery is much more important here than that of a typically Alaskan one.

The reasons for Alaska being the ideal setting are obvious: it is automatically associated with nature in its original form: huge mountains, vast lakes, an uncountable number of various species of trees and plants, and animals of all kinds – and only a few humans who have adapted to this nature. Setting the location in such a remote area suggests an escape from the city, the opposite (or one opposite) of nature. It seems that this behavior is something that we have already internalized:

“The escape to nature is a cultural trope, a great myth of Western literature. Nature in the pastoral becomes linked with “stranger” desires, and a deeper personal energy that is opposed to the city, with its emphasis on law and reason and authority.” (Bergman, 291)

As Bergman suggests here, there is something that actually draws us to nature as if we were following desires that we cannot name but only feel. He describes it as something coming from deep inside of us as if it wanted to tell us which way to go and in this case this would be any place where we can find nature.

“This genre (poetry) shapes one of our main myths of nature, a central trope for the relationship between humans and nature – nature is a paradise, the idealized home the civilized, urbanized human spirit has lost and longs for.” (Bergman, 282) This is particularly true for the representation of nature in the two series under consideration in which nature is depicted as exactly that lost place where the city dwellers come to stop and step away from their restless life in the city.

5.3 Shots representing Alaska respectively nature

In the previous section the notion of iconic signs was brought up and that these are strongly reliant on several conventions. I will now examine these conventions in greater detail on the basis of several shots that are meant to represent Alaska.

The section about Alaska's geographical information has shown that great parts of it consist of nature in its purest form – vast forests, mountain chains and lakes. Accordingly, any connotation that comes up when we think about Alaska is similar, we associate a very natural and untouched area and rather cold weather according to its geographical location. Yet it is not surprising that various establishing shots from the series also depict such a scenery as the following examples show.

nature shot #1:



Fig. 5: nature shot #1 (MIT season 1, episode 2; min. 00:01)

This extreme long shot is the very first one in this episode and it is a tracking shot from a bird's eye view. The dominating elements in this shot are clearly the huge forest and the lake that is lined by the fir trees. In the back of the frame the huge snow-covered mountains are visible and the fact that they are not in the frame completely supports their height even more. In the course of the shot, the camera moves quickly further across the forests and the water. The notion of water is important here because in the next shot that is joined to the first one by a cut, a water plane is landing. This suggests that the previous shot was the perspective out of the plane's windows. What becomes clear from this shot is that the setting cannot be reached easily and that it is obviously surrounded by various natural elements.

nature shot #2:



Fig. 6: nature shot #2 (MIT season 1, episode 3; min. 00:48)

The second nature shot is another shot from the beginning of the series that sets the scene right into Alaskas vast snowy mountain chains. This

extreme long shot from a bird's eye view is different from the first shot due to its framing. Three quarters of the frame are filled with the mountaintops but the last quarter depicts only the clear blue sky that forms the horizon. Opposed to the first nature shot it supports the sheer endlessness of this scenery while in the first shot the forest was delimited by the mountains. Another distinguishing feature here is the speed of the camera. While it moves very quickly in the first shot, suggesting that it is racing towards its actual destination, the camera moves rather slowly in this shot. Together with a piece of music¹¹ that supports this unhurried atmosphere, this tracking shot slowly dissolves into the next extreme long shot that shows one single mountain top behind a tree covered hill.

nature shot #3:



Fig. 7: nature shot #3 (NE season 1, episode 1; min 31:57)

¹¹ title: Singular Girl by Rhett Miller

This extreme long shot from NE offers another nature setting although there are characters/humans involved here. In the beginning of this shot we can only see the boat on the right and the second boat moves into the picture as the whirled water behind the boat suggests. The dominating element in this shot is clearly the lake as it takes up more than half of the frame. Yet, the other natural elements, such as the huge fir trees and the distant mountain chain also create a very natural place in which the humans play a rather subordinate role. The only noise that can be heard in this scene is the twittering of birds and the sound the paddles make on the water.

nature shot #4



Fig. 8: nature shot #4 (NE season 1, episode 7; min. 15:50)

The fourth shot I would like to use as an example here is an extreme long

pan shot that slowly moves from the left to the right, supporting the endlessness of nature that is depicted here. The deep focus in this shot allows recognizing the single leaves in the front of the frame as well as the mountains wrapped in by clouds in the back. A little less than one third of the frame is filled up by the clear blue sky while the rest of it is filled with the green of the close fir trees or the distant mountain chain. A thin strip of water cuts right through the middle of the frame that supports the notion of a valley at the top of the hill from which the shot is taken.

These four shots of the series' setting illustrate quite well the way in which Alaska is depicted in the series and how iconic signs work. One key feature that seems to be of great importance when it comes to Alaska is the mountain and the mountain chains, typically snow-covered to stress their height. All of the above shots include mountains and therefore they can be taken as an iconic sign for Alaska. Typically, the mountain scenery is connected to vast forests and water, being either a lake or the sea. Compared to Alaska's state seal, these shots feature most of the elements that are also part of it and accordingly the state seal also works on the basis of iconic signs. Hence it is comprehensible why it is possible to shoot these series in another place than Alaska although this is meant to be their setting.

Another thing that these shots show quite well is that Alaska is seen as a place that represents nature in its purest form. These establishing shots do not include any humans (apart from the one on the lake) and support the idea that nature is very powerful and overwhelming because humans have not conquered this area (yet). All of the shots point out the vastness of the area and compared to the geographical description of Alaska this is exactly what constitutes it – the ungraspable size of nature. The only shot including humans also emphasizes the vastness of the surrounding nature

and stresses how small humans are compared to it. It seems that in this area it is not possible to conquer the place but rather to accept the subordinate role and that the only way to survive is to live with nature.

This chapter on Alaska has shown why it is a very natural place not only due to its history and its geographical presuppositions. The way in which Alaska is depicted in its state seal reflects much of its history and the way Alaska is seen by its inhabitants and also by people living outside of it. This shows how much power lies in the way a certain area is represented which has also been exemplified in the nature shots from the series. According to what has been brought up in this chapter it has also become clear why Alaska can act as a sort of wildcard for nature even if the area that is depicted on screen is only a representation of Alaska.

6 The Sublime

The concept of nature is hard to grasp as the preceding considerations have clearly shown and when we want to find out how the relationship between the human and the natural world works, a very important question appears: “what is [it] that draws us to nature, what desire drives us to seek beautiful creatures in the forest, lovely vistas in the mountains, and strange forms painted and engraved in the recesses of caves.” (Bergman 282). I have already tried to answer this question to some extent in the section about nature because the way in which we define nature already reveals the connections between humans and nature. What this section focuses on are the reasons why we feel so attracted by nature, especially when our original surrounding is urban. Therefore it is necessary to have a closer look at the concept of the Sublime at this point although it might not lead to a completely satisfactory definition. According to Shaw (13): “[...] the sublime is beyond definition; we cannot point to a rule that will govern its regulation [...]. What we can do, however, is point to its effects.” Exactly these effects Shaw mentions here give reason to the assumption that nature, respectively Alaska, inherits some power or qualities that trigger these sublime effects that let us fall for a certain place or region.

6.1.1 The origins of the sublime

The term sublime derives from the Latin word *sublimis*, which means suspended, levitating in the air above the earth, and basically describes something as being of physical, aesthetic or metaphysical greatness or vast magnitude. “Producing an overwhelming sense of awe or other high emotion through being vast or grand.”¹²

Early discussions on the sublime dealt with its appearance in the art of rhetoric and how a speaker can evoke ecstasy, i.e. wonder and astonishment, in the hearer. Yet the notion of the sublime has changed over the centuries and shifted its focus in a large part towards nature, especially from the eighteenth century onwards (see Shaw chapter 1).

We can find the sublime in nature, discovering extraordinary places that we do not normally encounter, for example the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls. Of course, Alaska also offers a great source for the sublime due to several reasons, in particular its vastness and virtual infinity of natural spectacles, as we have seen in the chapter on Alaska. This state acts as a perfect example “for the contrast between limitations of human perception and the overwhelming majesty of nature” (Shaw 4). Exactly this notion of the sublime is the starting point for my analysis because that is what the series’ characters encounter in various ways. The following reflections on the sublime and the concepts it supports should provide an overview of the topic and connect it to the main arguments of this thesis.

At first glance, the word sublime and what it describes is hard to grasp and the dictionary entry as well as Shaw’s assumptions above already list the problems we encounter when we deal with this concept in greater detail. What it basically describes is what we lack any other words for:

¹² see <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sublime>>

[...] whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime. As such, the sublime marks the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits [...] (Shaw 2).

It is needless to say that it is hard to name or describe a feeling that lies beyond everything we are able to describe either because we do not understand what we are faced with or we have never encountered anything comparable before. The reasons for this lie at hand: we either lack the words for any sufficient description or we are too overwhelmed by its sublimity or both. Clearly, this experience is nothing new but rather a phenomenon mankind has been faced with from the beginning and therefore it is not surprising that several philosophers have tried to establish an explanation and theory on the subject of the sublime. Though after everything that has been said so far it is also useful to keep in mind that “we are never certain of the sublime” (Shaw 11). In a way this is contrary to the assumption on the sublime that puts it as “[...] something that the elevated individual instinctively knows: one does not learn the sublime; one catches it, like a divine contagion.” (Shaw 13) These two very different statements and the assumption that the sublime causes specific effects give reason to investigate the concept a little further as it seems to offer various readings, according to the approach under consideration.

6.1.2 Burke and the Sublime

The British philosopher Edmund Burke was one of the first to develop a concept of the sublime in his "Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" published in 1756, which had a great and lasting impact on the discussion of the sublime. What is especially remarkable about his enquiry is the fact that he sets up a dichotomy between the sublime and the beautiful, which will also be relevant for the analysis of nature in the television series being analyzed. In his enquiry Burke prefaces his considerations on the passion that is caused by the sublime as follows: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those cases operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror." (Burke, 53)

What becomes clear from this quote is that the effect that anything sublime causes is that of passion, hence this is the reason why we develop passionate feelings towards certain places or objects that appear sublime to us. Investigating the notion of the sublime therefore also means investigating the reasons why the spectators fall for what they encounter and which concepts of perception intertwine here. Burke also brings in the notion of horror that appears strange when we think of the sublime as being something that pleases us. These different concepts that are united in this notion justify Shaw when he says that we are never certain of the sublime.

To move a little further in the subject of the sublime, it is necessary to consider the concept of the beautiful opposed to the sublime. According to Burke, this is necessary because the beautiful is different from the sublime and it is helpful to investigate where the line between anything beautiful and sublime can and must be drawn. The distinction Burke makes here is that anything sublime is seen as being masculine whereas the beautiful

shows female qualities, such as being small, pleasing, tender and lovely. As opposed to the power the sublime possesses, the rather small power anything beautiful possesses is that of pleasure. Yet what relates these two opposed concepts is the fact that anything sublime can turn into something beautiful by customization. There is no doubt that everything – no matter how overwhelming it might be at first sight – gradually loses its vastness and therefore also its sublimity (see Shaw 59-61). What remains is the notion of beauty and following on from here one could argue that the core of everything sublime is the beautiful that we can only perceive after a process of decoding the sublimity of any object. This assumption allows considering that the sublime works as a trigger to connect us to a place. Initially we encounter a certain place as being sublime. Then, we become acquainted with it and the sublime qualities of it fade. Finally, the only thing that remains is the beauty of the place.

Returning back to Burke's enquiry and his considerations on the sublime, it is also important to draw the attention to the fact that he states that terror is the ruling principle of the sublime and therefore every sublime emotion is followed or rather accompanied by some sort of horror. As I have already mentioned, this seems to be a little irritating when we think of the sublime as being something that pleases us and therefore needs some further attention.

Burke enhances his assumption of the connection between the sublime and horror by analyzing the Latin and Greek words for astonishment or admiration and terror. Both languages use words that can describe either one or the other concept, for example the Latin word *stupeo*, meaning either the effect of fear or astonishment (see Burke 54). The examples he gives in his observations show clearly that it is only a fine line between fear and wonder but also that the initial feeling of fear can turn into delight as well, after realizing that there is no actual danger emanating from the

sublime object and this in turn shows how the qualities of the encountered object change. With these reflections in mind it becomes clear that there is an obvious relationship between the feeling of fear and pleasure and that there are situations in which both depend on each other.

A very good example of this ambiguous quality of the sublime can be given when it comes to animals. Especially night-time encounters with animals are hardly something enjoyable: "The angry tones of wild beasts are equally capable of causing a great and awful sensation." (Burke, 77) This appearance of the sublime is partly relevant for the analysis of the series because the characters feel frightened by uncommon sounds and the actual normal behavior of animals they are suddenly confronted with. Through their process of adaptation they also get used to the animals and their sounds in their new surrounding and therefore encounter initially frightening animals or their noises as part of their new home.

To turn back to the sublime as such, it is still necessary to investigate what effects it has on the spectator and when something appears as being sublime. Obviously nature is the place where we are confronted with sublimity. An important quality when it comes to the sublime is infinity:

There are scarce any things which can become the objects of our senses that are really and in their own nature infinite. But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so. (Burke 67)

Confronted with the sight of such magnificence we discover the notion of infinity and how this impression is created remains within the scope of a physical reaction. However, it does not make any difference whether something is really infinite because as soon as we recognize it as such, it becomes infinite to our perception and evokes the same reaction as if it was. This traces back to the reflections that have been made before about

the different ways in which we perceive things and also supports the fact that every reaction is dependent on the beholder. Clearly, we cannot derive one valid definition or categorization for sublime objects or places because sublimity can for one thing only exist if there is a spectator.

Apart from that, the sublime is not only vast and enormous but also powerful; a power it gains largely from terror, as Burke puts it: “[...] I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power. And this branch rises as naturally as the other two branches, from terror, the common stock of every thing that is sublime.” (59) In terms of nature, or rather certain encounters with nature, it can be said that nature is also equipped with a certain amount of power. Burke ascribes this power again to the notion of terror because for him this is a quality everything sublime has.

As mentioned previously the notion of the sublime also sets up the dichotomy between the sublime and the beautiful. Here Burke contrasts the sublime with the beautiful via the major difference, in that the sublime is founded on pain and the beautiful is founded on pleasure (see Burke 113). All the same it cannot be denied that there are occasions in which something beautiful is at the same time sublime, but this does not lead to the conclusion that these two things can be said to be the same.

Kant, who is said to have written the first proper philosophical text¹³ about the sublime, employs the same principle as Burke for distinguishing the beautiful from the sublime as the following example shows.

The sight of a mountain whose snowcovered peak rises above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or Milton’s portrayal of the infernal kingdom, arouse enjoyment but with horror; on the other hand, the sight of flower-strewn meadows, valleys with winding brooks and covered with grazing flocks, the description of Elysium, or Homer’s portrayal of the girdle of Venus, also occasion a pleasant sensation but one that is joyous and smiling. In order that the

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Analytic of the Sublime* 1790

former impression could occur to us in due strength, we must have a *feeling of the sublime*, and, in order to enjoy the latter well, a *feeling of the beautiful*. (Kant 47)

This quote supports the fine line between beautiful and sublime once again. It has been shown that the sublime that does not necessarily get through to every spectator and therefore the sublime might remain concealed at times.

From what has been said about the sublime it is clear that there is a strong connection between this concept and that of nature because the sublime is usually encountered in nature. Another important notion that has been brought up here is that the sublime is nothing that can be retained because any place that is encountered as being sublime in the first place tends to use this quality over time and repeated encounter. This has become clear through the notion of the beautiful and the sublime that are closely related concepts that become blurred. It is valid to say though that the beautiful might be what is left of the sublime after the process of adaptation.

What remains here, though, is the fact that the sublime works as a kind of trigger that establishes a certain connection between the human and the scenery or place that is encountered as being sublime. Hence it also plays a great role in the process of space turning into place because it is one of the factors that add value and experience to a certain space.

7 Alaska and nature on the screen

This section will provide an overview of the series MIT and NE, including some general broadcast information and a plot summary as well as a brief look on the series' reviews. Especially the plot summary of the series should disclose the apparent similarities between the two series and clarify why I have chosen them for the analysis.

The close reading of selected scenes and shots in the second part of this chapter will indicate whether the various definitions and depictions of Alaska and nature are represented in these series. What I want to find out as well is whether all of the assumptions that have been made about nature so far are reflected. The episodes under consideration were taken from the first seasons of both series and were chosen according to the frequency of scenes that include shots of and involving nature.

Clearly, the selection of the scenes itself already suggests a certain reading and disregards parts of the series that are not relevant for the previously mentioned questions.

7.1 Men in Trees

The TV series 'Men in Trees' first aired on the ABC¹⁴ network for two seasons (season one: 17 episodes and season two: 19 episodes) between September 2006 and May 2008.

Due to several changes in the program, the series could never really gain a broad audience that would have been necessary for more seasons. As mentioned before, it is very important for the success of a series to establish a certain connection to the audience that normally starts with a regular time and day of broadcast. Additionally, the series also suffered from the writer's strike in 2007¹⁵ that led to the cancellation of originally planned episodes and consequently to the early closure of the series. Such a change in the outline of a series does not remain unnoticed by the audience and can consequently lead to a lack of interest, as it was the case with this series.

7.1.1 Plot summary

Marin, a successful relationship coach from New York City and main character of the program, intends to hold a talk about her latest book for a handful of lonely Alaskan lumberjacks in Elmo. However, before she reaches her destination, she finds out that her fiancé is cheating on her and this is – at least initially – the reason for her to temporarily stay in

¹⁴ American Broadcasting Company (ABC) – an American television network founded in 1943 <<http://www.abc.com>>

¹⁵ The writer's strike took place between November 2007 and February 2008 and was a strike of the Writers Guild of America that sought to get better wages for people working as film, television, and radio writers. Their main issue was that the large studios (including CBS, MGM, NBC, ABC, Fox, etc.) should pass their enormous profits to their employees. According to estimates, this strike cost \$500 million in opportunity costs. Cf. *2007–2008 Writers Guild of America strike* <<http://en.wikipedia.org/>>

Alaska. Marin believes that a timeout at such a far-flung place, away from her work and the people she knows, could help her to start over. She soon comes to realize that life proceeds at a different pace in her new home and that the people she meets are not always so understanding of her urban behavior. Over the course of time, Marin is confronted with the difficulties of relationships involving herself and the people in Elmo. During the first episodes Marin's unfitting behavior is in the center of attention and only after a short return to New York in the ninth and tenth episode she realizes that she has found a new home in Elmo now. From this point on the tension between Marin and the Alaskan surrounding lessens and the several lines of the plot and the various characters become more complicated.

For a list of the major characters in the series see appendix.

7.1.2 Reviews

The reviews of the show already suggest that there is an unmissable resemblance between MIT and NE that does not only surface in the setting but also in the characters which will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. According to Biancully¹⁶ the series is a mixture between "Sex and the City" and "Northern Exposure" that gives room to several "quirky characters" around Marin, the fish-out-of-water. Anne Heche is described to be perfect for the leading role, as she seems to bring in some of her experience from "Six Days Seven Nights"¹⁷ and a cameo role in

¹⁶ Biancully, David. 'Trees': Heche branches out. <<http://www.nydailynews.com>>

¹⁷ In the movie „Six Days Seven Nights“ (1998) Heche plays the role of a New York Magazine editor who ends up on a South Seas island after a plane crash, together with the pilot of the plane (Harrison Ford) <<http://www.imdb.com>>

“Everwood”¹⁸.

The all too obvious similarities between MIT and NE are the major point of criticism and it seems that the series employs too many features from other series, “this all feels a little too much like “Anne’s Anatomy”, as Lowry¹⁹ refers to Marin’s voice-over at the end of each episode.

Other reviews already suggest that this series might not survive very long as it is full of “silly coincidences and ridiculous developments”, as Maureen Ryan puts it in the Chicago Tribune.²⁰ And although the original intention of the series seems promising, “there are limits to location. “Men in Trees” has potential, but for the moment it suggests a different road sign: “Thin ice.” (Stanley²¹)

Apart from these rather critical reviews there are also more positive comments on the series such as: “*Men in Trees* is now offering up the lushest postfeminist fairy tale on TV.”²² Yet the author does not ignore the evident parallels between MIT and *Sex and the City*. The obvious resemblance is clearly related to the fact that Jenny Bicks, a former *Sex and the City* screenwriter, was the executive producer of the series.²³

After the rather abrupt ending of the first season, there were many fans that wanted the show to come back as soon as possible and the producers promised to air 27 episodes in this second season. It seems that although MIT had had quite a few followers (9.2 million in season one), the

¹⁸ This TV series aired between 2002 and 2006 and is about a family that moves to a small mountain town in Colorado after the mother’s death. Anne Heche played the role of Amanda Hayes in 10 episodes from 2005-2006. <<http://www.imdb.com>>

¹⁹ Lowry, Brian. Men in trees. <<http://www.variety.com>>

²⁰ Ryan, Maureen. Half-baked Alaska: A ‘Men in Trees’ review. <<http://www.featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com>>

²¹ Stanley, Alessandra. Beached in Alaska, Where Men Are Men (and Weird). <<http://tv.nytimes.com>>

²² Flynn, Gillian. Men in trees TV review.

<<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20009616,00.html>>

²³ see IMDb

long break between season one and two as well as the channel's greater interest in supporting more profitable series obviously led to the sudden end of the series. It seems that the audience's patience was finally tried too hard.²⁴

Clearly, the opinions on MIT are divided; some critics believe that we have seen it all before, others think that it offers a new aspect of the old story between men and women. Comparing MIT to other television series it becomes clear that it did not have the choice for an all too deep development due to its rather short broadcast time and limited number of episodes. It takes quite some time to develop the individual characters and to establish a certain basis in the plot. As far as the audience is concerned, there has clearly been a certain interest in the show right from the beginning, partly certainly due to the cast. But what becomes evident from the broadcast figures is that the quality of a series is not the only factor for its success and that factors such as scheduling and budgetary decisions on behalf of the channels might play an even bigger role here.

²⁴ Wheat, Alynda. Men in trees is back.
<<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20055079,00.html>>

7.2 Northern Exposure

The award winning²⁵ series Northern Exposure was produced by Brand-Falsey Productions between 1990 and 1995 and includes a total of 110 episodes over six seasons. It first aired on CBS²⁶ and was intended to be a summer-replacement series with only eight episodes in the beginning. The show was quite successful and finally made its way into the network's schedule.

7.2.1 Plot summary

The central character of the series is Joel Fleischman (played by Rob Morrow), a young doctor who has to practice in a small Alaskan town called Cicely for four years. In the first episode Joel goes to Anchorage and believes that he can work in a modern hospital but his expectations are soon belied when he has to move to the remote town Cicely. Joel is not pleased with this situation: he signed a contract in order to get a student loan and now he has no other choice than to stay in this place and to make the best out of it. The main plot centers on how Joel gets along with people of very different backgrounds while gaining experience and managing his life in such an exceptional place. He slowly adjusts to his new life and Cicely gradually becomes his home. In the course of the series the supporting characters develop alongside Joel (see Epes 47-48).

For a list of the major characters in the series see appendix.

²⁵ Emmy and Golden Globe Awards

²⁶ CBS Broadcasting Inc., former legal name Columbia Broadcasting System, is one of the major American television networks and was founded in 1928. <<http://www.cbs.com>> <<http://www.cbcorporation.com>>

7.2.2 Reviews

Nobody expected the great success of Northern Exposure, as it was originally intended to fill the summer months, a time when the interest in TV shows and TV in general is rather low. Nevertheless, the success of the series speaks for itself and it seems that it “proved popular to U.S. audiences at the time not only because it declared itself different from everything else on television and was broadcast during an era when the networks were touting what became known as ‘quality television’.” (Kollin 163) The great response to the series might also be grounded in the fact that during the time of its first airing Alaska was only known for the negative headlines connected to the Exxon Valdez oil spill. The series offered a different view of the country, by showing its breathtaking scenery and a different interpretation of the region (see 163).

The fact that NE was not meant to run longer than for the summer months is also reflected in the length of the first two seasons. Both of them only consist of eight episodes and were initially produced on a very low budget. After the show’s great success the producers naturally asked for a budget that was comparable to other prime time series. Yet it took another season to produce full-length seasons of more than 20 episodes. It can be said that the first part of NE was a “standard fish-out-of-ice-water show” and only embarks on developing the relationship between the quirky characters in the course of the second season.²⁷

Another secret of the series’ success might be the unique way in which the characters are developed throughout the story, offering an accomplished combination of quirkiness and weirdness.²⁸

²⁷ see Television’s second season. <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20180624,00.html>>

²⁸ see Boudreaux, Jonathan. Northern Exposure: The complete first Season DVD Review. <<http://www.tvdvdreviews.com>>

In his review on NE Frank McConnell compares the series to pastorals because of the myth of the Spacial Place it brings into play. Together with the philosophical voice-overs by Chris, the deejay of Cicely's radio station he believes that the great success of the series also has to do with the fact that it creates a myth and invites the audience to find out about its secret. It almost seems as if this remote little town can be compared to the garden Eden, although the show always reminds the viewers that this is only a show, making it even more authentic. Joel does not take everything for granted and perfect and exactly his role of being rather skeptical helps the series to remain down-to-earth and at the same time depict this perfect place.²⁹

Although the plot NE presents is not a new one, it seems that the charm of this series lies in the development of its characters and the relationships that develop between them. Together with rather sophisticated dialogues and voice-overs it presents a perfect way to immerse into an almost perfect place represented by Cicely and its quirky but still loveable characters.

7.3 Similarities between MIT and NE

What clearly unites the two series from the beginning is their setting in such remote places as Elmo and Cicely that are both set in Alaska. Both series construct their narrative on the binary opposition of urban and rural in the first place and this is clearly the most obvious similarity between them. "Oppositions like these [...] are the underlying system of relationships and conflicts which give structure and meaning to narratives"

²⁹ see McConnell, Frank. Television program reviews. Commonweal.
<<http://findarticles.com>>

(Bignell 94). Of course, many of the funny scenes are the result of the culture clash, the protagonists are confronted with and the unknown surrounding they suddenly find themselves in.

Another feature that clearly unites the series are the main characters who are both from the metropolis of New York and are used to the fast moving and exciting life there. For both of them it is a culture clash to find themselves in the middle of “nowhere” – on the other hand they also manage to settle in their new surroundings. But before it can come to that, the first reaction to their situation is to escape as quickly as possible but exactly this is not possible due to similar reasons – those remote places cannot be reached easily and leaving them is a greater quest than it seems at first. While Joel simply has no other choice than to stay in his new home because of legal consequences, Marin is only prevented from leaving Elmo when she first tries to, due to the weather. She then decides deliberately to stay because she has the feeling that the place is good for her and a change of scenery would be a good idea to overcome the recent changes in her life.

Another feature that unites the two characters is the fact that they have just ended their relationships and this fact opens the door for the romantic part of both series when they eventually fall in love with another character from their new homes.

An element that is typical for the narrative structures of television programs (see Bignell, 92) are binary oppositions³⁰ and these can also be found in both series, specifically the contrast between the Alaskan towns of Elmo and Cicely and the city of New York. The opposition is on the one

³⁰ two contrasting terms, ideas or concepts, such as inside/outside, masculine/feminine, culture/nature. (Bignell, 318)

hand village vs. metropolis but also another aspect is revealed, namely that of nature vs. culture. As we have already seen in the chapter on nature, it is often defined through such binary oppositions by stating what it is not. In the case of MIT and NE it can be said that the small villages in Alaska and their remote setting resemble nature, whereas New York (as well as other large cities) are rather seen to be places of culture. In every of the few scenes that show New York, the dominating elements are skyscrapers and large streets with many cars.

This becomes especially clear in one episode of MIT³¹ in which Marin longs for some culture and convinces Jack to go to Anchorage with her. This binary pair is central for the further analysis of the series because it is obviously the core of my hypothesis. Only because Marin and Joel are confronted with a place so completely different from what they have experienced before, they can experience the notion of the sublime and undergo the process of turning a newly encountered space into place and finally into their home.

The 'fish out of water' role that Marin and Joel adopt is another characteristic feature of the two characters. They only slowly adjust to their new surrounding as they have to discover that everything works very differently to what they were used to in regard to almost every aspect of their everyday lives. While Joel can hardly believe that his new neighbors do not even know what a 'bagel' is, Marin has problems in explaining her needs for a 'soy latte'. While both characters slowly adapt to their new surrounding, there is one major difference remaining between them and that is their reason for staying. As mentioned before, both Marin and Joel react in a refusing manner to Elmo respectively Cicely but while Marin somehow starts to connect to her new surrounding of her own accord, Joel remains very skeptical and if his contract would not make him stay, he would take

³¹ MIT, season 1, episode 9

the first bus and leave town. What remains open here is whether Joel would have stayed in Cicely without his obligation and the danger of a huge penalty, even including a prison sentence. In comparison there is Marin, who eventually decides to stay because she thinks that this might be a good way to start anew.

As the reviews on MIT have shown, there is reason to believe that NE has had a strong influence on the outlines of the MIT plot, the similarities are all too obvious. The major difference is clearly that Marin, as a woman, adds another factor to the story. It can be observed that Joel is accepted by Cicely's inhabitants without many problems, clearly his profession as a doctor supports his role here. On the other hand, Marin has a little difficult start in Elmo because her profession does not seem to be accepted by all the characters and therefore they observe what she does rather skeptically.

As far as my thesis is concerned, it is clear that both characters are confronted with the same situation and either want to or have to find a new home in Alaska. How they finally achieve this construction of a new home will be the issue of the following analyses.

7.4 Analysis of Men in Trees

The basic structure of the series is the same for each episode and starts with a short summary of what happened in recent episodes (“*previously on Men in Trees*”). Although this not only includes a review of the previous episode, but – depending on the topic that is going to follow – the most important scenes that are relevant for the audience to follow what is going to happen are summed up . A scene that introduces the topic of the current episode follows. Next the opening credits of the series and the typical MIT logo and signation follow. As the story unfolds, various problems are revealed, usually involving several constellations of characters and at the end of each episode (with only a few exceptions which are known as cliffhanger episodes) it comes to a (temporary) resolution.

At the end of each episode the main character Marin sums up her insights on what has happened and gives her opinion on the themes that were brought up. This is done by a voice-over and, again depending on the series’ major topic, several scenes or characters that were involved before are shown. The tool of the voice-over has been very popular in recent TV-series, such as “Sex and the City” and “Grey’s Anatomy”. While in the first episode Marin speaks this voice-over from the perspective of the relationship-coach on Elmo’s local radio station, this perspective is lost through the following episodes. What remains is the voice-over on its own that allows Marin to sum up the series’ events and to reflect and comment on what has happened. In doing so, the thoughts and wishes of the character are revealed and sometimes offer a glimpse on what will happen in the upcoming episode. It is remarkable that all these voice-over summaries are accompanied by very slow and sentimental music, suggesting a rather thoughtful mood.

7.4.1 The series' structure

Each episode (after the summary) begins with a pan shot that depicts a typical Alaskan landscape with huge mountains, a view into the vastness of the land and sea, a seaplane landing in front of a natural setting or the scene is brought to the audience from a bird's eye view. These shots are accompanied by a piece of music that supports the mood the pictures should convey. For example when the weather is depicted as foggy and rainy, the music supports this, whereas a scene in which the sun shines brightly and everything is in bloom is followed by some refreshing and cheerful music.



Fig. 9 – Men in Trees

At the beginning of each new episode, as well as between distinct scenes (usually after a commercial break) a teaser (fig. 3) is shown. This consists of the very distinct yellow road sign that depicts a man holding a chainsaw

in front of a fir tree along with the words “Men in Trees” which has a tree growing out of the letter "N". The background of this teaser is filled only with nature, being framed by two fir trees, a strip of untamed grass and a huge lake, with nothing behind it but the clear blue sky. Apart from the traffic sign what is shown reflects what is also depicted on the Alaska state seal – there are the trees, the lake or sea and the mountains in the distance.

This is the clearest connection between the series' title and what is shown in the series itself because – apart from one scene in the very first episode – there are no actual men in trees involved in the series. What this picture and the title support nevertheless is that this part of the country is in men's hands, at least when it comes to its population. It seems that only men can cope with the harsh environment of this place and that the men's strength is necessary to conquer this part of the land or at least to secure the borders between nature and the civilized world. The man on the traffic sign, holding his chainsaw and standing there in a very casual manner, also emphasizes this as if he wanted to say that there is nothing he cannot cope with.

It seems that the nature that one can encounter at this place is or has already been tamed by men, men that got rid of any undesirable wilderness but not to the extent that a place of nature does not exist any longer. It remains a place that needs further treatment and it is almost natural that men are responsible for that. The interesting notion that comes into play here is that of unspoiled nature because one is clearly faced with nature in one of its purest forms here, although it is not completely untouched or unspoiled. The image of the men conquering nature by taming it, suggests that one is at the border between unspoiled and already conquered nature, marking some kind of border or frontier. It has already been mentioned that Alaska is often referred to “as the ‘Last Frontier’, a region

whose history has yet to be written and whose 'virgin lands' have yet to be explored." (Kollin 2)

On the other hand, one might also associate some negative aspects with the image of 'men in trees' that is already suggested by the series' title. It also evokes the picture of men actually sitting on trees, not so much because they have to do their work there but because they got stuck in the course of evolution. Of course, this is a very polarizing way of interpreting the title as well as the sign but it is partially confirmed, when Marin goes to her lecture in Elmo where she is faced with all these men who seem to be incapable of finding a woman. This inability does not only derive from the fact that men highly outnumber women in this area but also because they got stuck in their typical gender roles. It seems that men are simply overwhelmed by women because they appear to be more a rare phenomenon to them which can also be seen very clearly in the first episode of MIT when Marin runs through a group of men that have just finished their work. Almost all men stare at her and turn their heads after she passes them and Marin clearly feels irritated by this rather rude behavior. This way of depicting the men's behavior towards women goes together with the notion of men being stuck in trees that can also be read as a symbol for their outdated understanding of the relationship between men and women.

Between some of the scenes of the individual episodes there is a connecting shot inserted that leads to the next scene. Typically this is a pan shot that provides – similarly to the shot at the beginning – a view of the mountain chain or the woods. It is striking that most of these shots that connect the distinct scenes show nature instead of introducing the next location of the scene by depicting the outside of a house or the bar for instance. Examples for these shots are quite similar to the ones that were analyzed in greater detail in the chapter on Alaska although it can be said that they are much shorter than the ones presented.

7.4.2 Nature encountered by Marin

Generally speaking, Marin is a typical New Yorker and has not had too many encounters with nature; this becomes clear in the way she behaves when she first arrives at her new home. She gets to Elmo by plane and one gets the impression that not even the weather – that is rainy and foggy – is welcoming her.

Marin attracts the attention of the residents because she looks like a rare bird and therefore stands out. What is remarkable here is that her clothes are on the one hand outstanding because they are very colorful and fashionable but on the other hand it is clear that they are not at all suited for this kind of environment. It is therefore not surprising that the high heels she wears repeatedly get stuck in mud and that a heel eventually breaks off.

When Marin wants to depart in the first episode, she cannot do this due to an act of God – the plane cannot fly because of a storm – and as there is no other possibility for her to escape, she accepts the situation for the moment and tries to become comfortable with her new temporary home. This scene shows clearly, what impact nature has on our actions and that we cannot always escape the powers of nature.

Before Marin realizes what place she has actually arrived at, Elmo is only depicted as a very boring little village that does not have very much to offer. In the beginning of the pilot episode most scenes take place inside buildings (the little bed and breakfast Marin is accommodated in, the radio station, the bar 'Chieftain', the town's assembly room) and do not reveal much of Elmo's surroundings. Additionally the weather is exceptionally bad, an overcast sky is the setting for the scenes shot outdoors. Therefore Marin's first encounter with nature is a very central scene for the development of the plot and Marin's attitude towards the place because it seems

to be the starting point for her change of mind, which I will now analyze in greater detail.

In this first episode Marin (as she has no driver's license) chooses a bike as her means of transportation although she does not have a clear destination in mind. When she first rides her bike, she also does that to get away from everything, back in New York she would have attended a spinning class to get rid of all her anger. Marin is angry with herself because she missed the flight that could have brought her out of this lonely and unfriendly place and she only starts to grasp the consequences of everything that has happened within the last 24 hours (her fiancé cheating on her, the unfortunate talk in front of Elmo's men, the uncertainty about her future). The sequence of Marin riding the bike is essential for the further course of the story, and it is somehow a little preview to what will happen next and the following shot-by-shot analysis of it will reveal further important features. In this scene Marin has her first encounter with the positive and overwhelming sides of this place that did not offer her a very warm welcome at first. When she cycles around with no destination in mind she ends up at a platform that offers her a spectacular view of the mountains (see fig. 4). She can say nothing but "wow" which is a first glimpse into her later relationship with the environment.

The scene starts with a long shot in the middle of Elmo with Marin riding a bike she got from Patrick as a substitute for her spinning class. In this shot Marin first moves towards a group of men she then almost runs over. This shot shows clearly that Marin is annoyed by everything she is surrounded by and that she only wants to get out of everything. The feeling that she wants to get away as quickly as possible is also supported by the way she rides the bike, she barely sits on the saddle but rather pedals standing and the bike is swerving about a little bit. On the other hand, the way she rides her bike reveals a little of her uncertainty of riding a real bike because a

spinning bike clearly would not move like that even if she rode it that way.

This shot is followed by another long shot that shows Marin still riding her bike and slowly moving up the hill until she can be seen completely. This can be read as an establishing shot that sets the scene into the surrounding of Elmo that is full of hills, forests and gravel roads. With this shot the surrounding becomes nature and nothing else. In both of these shots Marin is right in the middle of the frame, as she is clearly the main character here. These shots are followed by a close up, showing her left side and her steady gaze to the front. As opposed to the long shots the camera now moves along with Marin, and the eye-level shot allows realizing Marin's feelings and establishes empathy for the character. She leaves this shot after a few seconds and moves out of the picture to the left, emphasizing her will to move forward without looking back.

The next shot is a long one again, putting the sign "Elmo 1 mile" into the right corner of the picture, suggesting the distance Marin has already covered on her ride. Apart from the gravel roads this is the only sign of civilization in this scene. Marin herself is the centre of the frame again and moves further along the road that has reached a peak now. In this shot she sits on the bike regularly and she has it under control without shaking. While the previous long shot started out with Marin that was only visible as a rather small figure in the distance moving closer, this shot as well as the following long shot reveal the complete sight of Marin right from the start and both of the following long shots end in a close-up of Marin moving out of the picture on either side. In the latter of the two shots the road already goes downhill, allowing her to ride faster and easier.

The following close-up only shows the front wheel of the bike on the gravel road that starts to slide as she brakes hard on the unpaved ground. The next close-up shows Marin's face and shoulders as she quickly stops the bike and holds her breath. The reason for this is revealed in the next long

shot from a low angle that shows Marin at the edge of a rock and the backward movement of the camera establishes an extreme long shot that emphasizes the height of the steep edge.

The following shot also emphasizes this height and in this medium shot Marin still stands at the edge with the bike between her legs and her back is seen in front of a vast mountain scenery. The lighting of this shot is important because through backlighting only Marin's silhouette can be seen while the rest of the scenery is in bright color, especially the blue sky that takes up one quarter of the frame.

The last but one shot is another close-up of Marin's face that fills the right part of the frame almost completely. Her gaping mouth and the stunned expression on her face support the astonishment. The rest of the frame is filled with the clear blue sky that was already prominent in the previous shot.

The very last shot is taken from Marin's perspective and this extreme long shot reveals what makes Marin speechless, it shows the mountain chain behind an enormous forest (see fig.9). Basically, the picture is divided into three parts here, in particular the green forest forming the base and filling up the lower third completely, the triangular sight of the mountain that is dominating it and the blue sky with some drifting clouds that take up another third.

Marin's first encounter with nature - shot-by-shot-analysis (overview)

(MIT season 1, episode 1, min. 17:22-18:00)

#	distance	angle	movement	subject	audio	transition
1	medium long shot	eye level shot	tracking	center of Elmo, Marin riding a bike, some pedestrians (men) Marin passes, leaves the frame on the right; establishing shot – nature	song: Black Horse and the Cherry Tree (throughout the scene); sound of bicycle bell	cut
2	long shot	low angle	tilt	Marin on her bike, coming up the hill; leafless trees in the back	Marin's heavy breathing	cut
3	medium shot	eye level	tracking	Marin in profile; leaving the frame on the left; trees in the back	breathing; rattling of her bike	cut
4	long shot – medium long shot	low angle	tracking	Marin coming closer on the bike; her long coat streaming; leaving the frame on the left; trees and rocks in the back	breathing; rattling of her bike	cut
5	long shot	low angle	steady	Marin riding downhill; ends in a close-up; leaves frame on the right	rattling of her bike	cut

#	distance	angle	movement	subject	audio	transition
6	close-up	low angle	steady	front wheel, gravel road	crunching of the gravels	cut
7	close-up	low angle	steady	Marin's face and hair jolting		cut
8	long shot	low angle	zooms out	Marin at the edge of the rock; after zooming out the real height is revealed		cut
9	medium shot	eye level	steady	Marin from the back (silhouette through backlighting), standing straight, bike between her legs; mountain scenery in the back;		cut
10	close-up	low angle	tilt	Marin's face: gaping mouth, stunned expression; blue sky in the back	Marin's heavy breathing; breathes "wow"	cut
11	extreme long shot	eye level	steady	mountain chain, forest; Marin's point of view		



Fig. 10 – Marin’s first encounter with nature (MIT Season 1, Episode 1 min 17:58)

It is interesting to see that Marin’s inner development is also reflected in this scene and that it has to do with the change of her surrounding as well. When she leaves the town on her bike she is stressed and needs a break from everything and the way she rides her bike suggests that she wants to get away as quickly as possible. On the other hand, her uncertainty and aimlessness are also part of the way she is depicted here. The route she chooses shows that this escape is not easy in the beginning because the way is unpaved and uphill and demands a lot of strength from her. As her steady gaze suggests, she is intent on going on, no matter what it takes and it seems that her effort in the beginning pays off later on because in the second part of the scene she seems to move on much easier and without any additional physical exercise.

A very central element for her inner development in this scene is also the depiction of the weather. When Marin takes off to her bike trip, the sky still looks all cloudy and rainy but as she moves up the hill she arrives at a bright blue sky at the end of the scene. This change in weather can be put on a level with the change of her mood, following the saying “Every cloud has its silver lining” and suggesting that things can only get better from now on.

A further aspect that is very helpful for the analysis of a scene is the music because it is very important for clarifying and even creating connotative meaning in a shot (see Fiske & Hartley 29), which can be seen in this scene quite well. The following lines of the song “Black Horse and the Cherry Tree” by KT Tunstall that accompany the scene fit the situation perfectly and support its previous interpretation.

I came across a place in the middle of nowhere
With a big black horse and a cherry tree.

I felt a little fear upon my back
He said "Don't look back, just keep on walking." (1-6)³²

The situation that is described in the song is exactly the situation Marin is faced with when she comes to Elmo, the ‘place in the middle of nowhere’ and the certain shift in her life, she has not fully realized yet. One can also see that she is afraid of what is going to happen next from the phone talk with her manager in which she even lacks words to explain what has happened or how she feels. Nevertheless there is something that tells her to move on and to “keep on walking” although there is no sign yet that the way she has chosen will end up right here in Elmo. The impression that remains here is that the course is set for Marin’s future – she is on her own and she has the power to cope with everything that she will be faced with.

Apart from this change of atmosphere, the scene is also central for Marin’s relationship with nature and her first encounter of a sublime scenery. The very last shot (see fig. 4) presents the power of nature to its full extent. The enormous mountain that takes up a big part of the shot as well as the sight of the vast forest leads to Marin’s astonishment. The aspect of danger is brought in here quite well because she is terrified when she almost overlooks the edge of the road and comes to an abrupt halt. This terrifying moment is followed by the notion of astonishment when she beholds the

³² see for example <<http://www.songtexte.com>>

full extent of nature she is confronted with here. This scene shows the qualities of the sublime quite well because what frightens Marin in the first moment turns into a source of pleasure in the next. It is also clear that she lacks any words for describing what she encounters because the only thing she says repeatedly is “wow”.

The importance of this place she has conquered – according to the theory of how nature is approached by humans – is also shown in one of the last scenes of the first episode. She returns to the place to symbolically free herself of her past by throwing her wedding dress over the edge of the rock. This shot is very similar to the one described above in which she stood in front of the breathtaking panorama and is depicted from the back. This highlights her silhouette again (see fig. 5 below), only that time she does not appear motionless because she is so impressed by the view but performs this important act of freeing herself.



Fig. 11 Marin freeing herself (MIT, Season 1, Episode 1, Min. 41:06)

It seems that she has already found some comfort in her new environment that also strengthens her and gives her the feeling of being free again. This notion of freedom becomes especially clear when Marin tells her editor Jane at the end of the first episode: “I have to breathe.” Obviously this

remote place gives her the possibility to find herself and come to a halt in her busy life and her encounter with nature and the breathtaking scenery marks the starting point for this shift in her life. Apart from the first scene in which Marin is riding the bike, where she simply wants to get out of the place and work off her anger, this means of transportation allows her a different notion of experiencing the environment. On her bike, she can only cover rather small distances and everything moves slowly and at an unhurried pace. Through Marin riding a bike, one gets the impression that there is no rush here and that this exercise allows her to experience the environment and enjoy herself at the same time. This is also an important fact when it comes to displaying the difference between the urban and the rural or rather natural places Marin encounters. In her new home there is no reason to hurry because nobody is under time pressure or anything similar. The busy atmosphere of Manhattan clearly makes way for a new and much more unhurried way of life, a way Marin also slowly adapts to.

While there is an assumption that everything is close by, Marin soon finds out that there are other places that cannot be reached quickly – and least of all by bike. This she must learn when she is desperate to smoke a cigarette and has to drive several miles with a like-minded man to reach the only cigarette seller in the area. Yet Marin puts a sudden end to her limited mobility at the end of the first episode when she buys herself a truck. This action suggests that she regains part of her independence and self-confidence after the huge disappointments and humiliations she had to face since she arrived in her new surrounding. This brings her a step closer to finding her way around in this place. One has to keep in mind that although the town itself is rather small and cozy, Marin is still confronted with a huge and vast place that cannot be accessed as easily as a big city with hundreds of cabs and fully developed public transport. The notion of independence is a different one in the two locations and this is also expressed by the means of transport to some extent.

7.4.3 Animals

A very distinctive feature of the series is the recurring appearance of animals. Of course, the animals are no pets but instead wild animals, which have their natural habitat in this place and sometimes also find their way into the houses of the people living there. The animals indicate that the boarder between nature and humans is obviously blurred at this place because animals clearly belong into the category of nature. What the crossing of this boarder or frontier suggests at this point is that humans are no longer completely in charge of the place or rather that they have not entirely conquered the place as the analysis of the following scenes shows.

One of her first encounter with animals in her new surrounding is that with a raccoon that has chosen her closet as its new home. When she discovers the unfamiliar animal she is afraid because as a 'city girl' she is not used to animals of that size that do not live in a cage. After she loses her fear because she is told that the raccoon will not harm her, her emotions turn into anger because the animal eats her obviously very expensive shoes and even ruins her wedding dress. The fact that this animal destroys parts of Marin's old life finally helps her to recognize that she needs to rethink her background and especially the values that go along with her old life. In a way the animal's invasion helps Marin to let go of her past and she slowly starts to settle in her new place that also require different clothing and a different attitude towards natural life.

This animal appears again in the following episode, when she is followed by a raccoon on her way to the radio station³³. At first she can only hear the clatter of small feet followed by an unfamiliar animal sound. Marin stops and tries to figure out where the noise comes from and what causes it but she cannot see anything at first. The following shot shows the raccoon that picks up Marins scent and apparently wants to follow her. When

³³ MIT, season 1, episode 2, min. 04:20

Marin stops again and turns around she is surprised and irritated about this animal following her. Although she has been told that the animal is basically harmless and of no danger for her, she does not feel comfortable. It is clear that she does not know how to react to this unfamiliar situation and therefore she tries to chase the animal off by saying: "Shoo, shoo. Go away. Shoo". As Marin does not face the animal she is confronted with but runs away from it, her attempts of frightening it away clearly fail. What this scene shows is that Marin is still out of place and does not fit her new surrounding because of her exaggerated reaction to such an everyday situation.

Another scene in the first episode involves an encounter with a far more dangerous species, namely wolves. In this scene Marin not only gets in touch with animals again but also has to feel the enormous power nature has and at the same time reveal her helplessness. When Marin returns from buying cigarettes at night, she decides to walk the last part of her way home and as she is unfamiliar with the area she ends up on a frozen lake. She did not see the danger signs because she was too occupied with lighting her cigarette and moves along unaware of the danger she places herself in. Although Jack sees her and also tries to warn her from breaking through the ice it is too late and the next scene shows Marin all wet in Jack's observation hut. This scene shows very well how powerless Marin (together with other humans) is when the forces of nature act on her. As Jack knows that the way back home would be too dangerous, they decide to spend the night in his hut. In the morning Marin sees a pack of wolves that stray around their hut and although there is a certain danger radiating from that wild animals, Marin is pleased by their sight³⁴. This can be read as another sublime encounter of nature because of this tension and it is clear that the situations in which Marin encounters nature are of a dangerous kind in the first place and only later turn into delight.

³⁴ MIT, season 1, episode 1, min. 35:50

7.4.4 Turning space into place – arriving home

When Marin arrives at Elmo everything is new for her and there is nothing in this space she can connect to. As the section on space and place has shown, it is only possible to recognize a certain place as home if a connection has been established and this is a result of certain factors. One of these factors is time and it is clear that Marin also needs some time to arrive at a stage where she can call this newly encountered place her home. Some of the steps that help her towards this new home will be analyzed in the following section.

The starting point for the series is clearly Marin's fish-out-of-water role that has been described before. On the one hand she is a welcome change in the life of Elmo's inhabitants, on the other hand it becomes clear pretty soon that a 'city girl' like her is not familiar with the rough Alaskan world that she is confronted with. This awkwardness becomes especially clear in the first episodes when Marin walks around in her high heels that are more than inappropriate because she constantly steps into mud cannot move along accordingly. It takes her several steps into this mud before she realizes that her old equipment is no longer sufficient. When she puts on her boots in the fourth episode, she suddenly notices that it does not matter in what condition the roads are or what the weather is like. She has finally found her way of conquering the nature in her new surrounding that is much less tamed than it was back in New York.

Marin is not the only one who returns home in the series. As I have mentioned in the chapter on nature, according to the Bible the only possibility to return to nature completely is after our death. This is depicted in the quote "you are dust, and to dust you shall return"³⁵ and the phrase from the burial service deriving from it: "ashes to ashes, dust to dust". This typi-

³⁵ Genesis, chapter 3

cal picture of returning 'home' after death can be found in the closing scene of episode four when the ashes of a departed citizen are spread over the lake. This is a very common way of taking farewell of beloved people and many people wish that their ashes are spread at a certain place because this place resembles their ultimate home. Through this act of spreading the ashes the impression is evoked that the dead person can rest in peace at a place they are strongly connected with and they can find their peace at that place.

Turning back to Marin it has become clear that she had problems facing her new surrounding and that she did not fall in love with the place from the first moment on. But when Marin returns back to New York in the episode "New York Fiction", she soon realizes that she misses a decisive element in her former home. This becomes clear when Marin finds a dove next to her apartment's window that she sets free in Central Park, the closest place to nature one can find in New York City. Her sudden urge to care for that animal that would not have been of any interest for her some weeks ago opens her eyes and she decides to go back to Elmo. The following lines from the episode's end suggests that Marin has found a new home:

Voice-over Marin: But I have somewhere else I need to be right now. I don't expect you to understand but sometimes you have to do the unexpected thing – the thing that just feels right.

Marin: JFK airport, thanks.

Cab driver: You're going home?

Marin: Yeah, I think so.³⁶

³⁶ MIT, season 1, episode 10, min. 41:20

7.5 Analysis of Northern Exposure

The episode structure of NE is similar to that of MIT and in general typical for this television format. After a short scene that introduces the episode's general topic or that sums up previous episodes, the

7.5.1 The Alaskan Riviera

The pilot episode starts in a plane that brings Joel to its new home and in this scene he talks to the man sitting next to him. What he says about Alaska seems as if he wanted to convince somebody – obviously himself – that the place he is going to and that will be his new home for quite some time is not that bad at all and does offer certain amenities.

Joel: Don't get me wrong, I'm not kidding myself, Anchorage isn't New York City, but it's not Cambodia, right? I mean have you got any idea how many Chinese restaurants there are in Anchorage? There's five, there's fourteen movie theatres, two practically Kosher delis, and if we're talking about freezing our buns off? The median temperature is only five degrees lower than French Lick, Indiana, despite the differential in precipitation. (NE, pilot)

Clearly Joel has done some research about Alaska and points out the facts that seem to be acceptable for him although his hymn of praise is yet interrupted when the businessman next to him reacts to what Joel tells him.

Businessman: You ever been to Alaska?

Joel: Of course, of course! What kind of a schmuck do you think I am?! I mean, Elaine, she's a third year law student at NYU, we came out last summer, we loved the place. Well, alright, not loved, but we both agreed it is definitely doable.

We rented this brand new two bedroom condo on Chiquitako Lane, olympic pool, raquetball, tennis court, sauna, the whole schmear. I mean not to mention a PGA approved 18 hole golf course which in the winter is perfect for cross country skiing.. So whadya think?

Businessman: Not bad. You hunt?

Joel: No.

Businessman: Fish?

Joel: I've eaten them.³⁷

This conversation between Joel and the businessman shows clearly how unconfident Joel is about the place he is going to encounter soon and how easily his few rays of hope can be extinguished. It is important to note though that what Joel says about Alaska in this scene basically refers to Anchorage and should convince him about its qualities of a modern city and that this rather euphemistic picture of Alaska does not resemble his future home at all.

Peter Gilliam, the personnel manager of the hospital in Anchorage, also uses this euphemism. When Joel arrives at his office he asks him: "Have you ever been to the French Riviera?" (min. 3:36) What Peter wants to do here is to evoke a picture of endless shores, mountain chains in the distance and the bright blue sea in front as the following picture of the French Riviera shows.

³⁷ NE, pilot, min. 1:30



Fig. 11 The French Riviera³⁸

Gilliam does that to evoke positive feelings about the region he is going to present Joel because he is not needed in the hospital of Anchorage but has to practice in a little town further north, namely Cicely. He refers to this place as the “Alaskan Riviera” and this expression can clearly be seen as a euphemism. On the surface both of the regions share the same qualities when it comes to the scenery of mountains, shores, and the sea. But it is obvious that there is a big difference in the climate of the two places and it is rather unlikely to find palm trees at the Alaskan Riviera while it is equally doubtful to encounter a fir tree or a caribou somewhere close to the French beaches. Nevertheless Gilliam only uses very positive expressions for this place in order to convince Joel about its qualities:

Peter: So, what we've decided to do is to set you up in Cicely. Situated in an area that we Alaskans refer to as The Alaskan Riviera. [...] Ideal weather, breathtaking scenery, shopping, dining, A..Aspen's got nothing on this place!³⁹

It seems that Peter is convinced about what he says about Alaska and also tells Joel that he was rather disappointed by the French Riviera al-

³⁸ <<http://www.frenchriviera-tourism.com>>

³⁹ NE, pilot, min. 4:48

though it remains in question whether this is Peter's real attitude towards that place. As he is not the person that is going to live there he is in a good position to talk about Cicely and the region in a positive way, however, Joel is the one that has to cope with this new situation and surrounding.

These two scenes are quite similar in what they express because in both of them the men talk very positively about the place (Joel about Anchorage, Peter about the Alaskan Riviera) although it remains open whether they are really convinced about what they say. While in the first scene Joel's conversation with the businessman next to him can be interpreted as some sort of soliloquy in order to calm himself down, the second conversation is more like a sales conversation in which Peter wants to convince Joel about Cicely. So both of these conversations are meant to persuade although it is not hard to find out that there is a certain effort in finding enough positive arguments about the place.

As Joel has no other opportunity than going to Cicely, he soon finds himself on a bus that is meant to bring him to his new home. The scene of this bus ride allows a first glimpse into the region Joel is actually surrounded by. While all the previous scenes took place in the closed rooms of the airplane and the office at the hospital, this is the first to depict the landscape. Similar to the scenes in MIT the whole typical scenery of Alaska is shown, huge mountains and forests together with a vast lake (see fig. 12). The depiction of this natural scene is a little weakened though because of the highway that is shown in front of this landscape. The scenery itself is still breathtaking but as the conquest of nature has already taken place to a great extent, it is hard to get hold of this basically overwhelming site in this way and it seems that Joel does not notice any of its grandeur. Similar to Marin's arrival in Elmo, the weather in this first outside shot is overcast and not very welcoming. The fact that Anchorage does not offer Joel a warm welcome emphasizes the further course of the plot because he is not meant to stay in this place anyway.



Fig. 12 Joel's arrival in Alaska (NE, pilot, min 5:37)

7.5.2 Joel confronted with nature

It seems that Joel is not aware which place he is actually confronted with according to the way in which he approaches Alaska and by constantly telling himself that it is not particularly different from New York. One gets the impression that he has never really thought of Alaska being a very natural place and therefore this notion of nature comes in at a rather late point. Opposed to MIT, where Marin finds herself immediately at a very natural place, it is a slower approach for Joel because he first arrives at Anchorage and only then ends up 'in the middle of nowhere' as the following scene shows.

Joel's immersion into this rather natural area is accompanied by a constant 'sound' of nature, the background noise is composed of a constant chirping and twittering that can be interpreted as the sound of nature. This natural soundtrack which, I will investigate a little further in the next section as well, appears for the first time in the scene in which Joel steps out of

the bus and is left behind on a road that is lined by seemingly endless rows of trees. In his first encounter with nature Joel seems to be more than out of place when he is depicted with all his suitcases and his golf bag and the fish-out-of-water role he portrays is very obvious at this point. This scene marks the actual starting point for Joel's new life in his new surrounding and it is more than clear at this point that he has reached a very far-flung place. The bus stop is set right in the middle of nowhere, the only sign of any civilization is the asphalted road that looks a little bumpy though. All Joel can see from this point are the huge fir trees and it seems that there is nothing but forest that surrounds him (see fig. 13). Although one does not get the impression that he is frightened by what he sees, it is clear that he does not know what to do but wait because he cannot see where he would end up if he followed the road.



Fig. 13 Joel arriving in Cicely (NE, pilot, min 6:32)

Joel is generally not very interested in his new home and all he wants to do is to get out of this place as soon as possible. Due to this refusing attitude he does not really perceive the place that surrounds him and only slowly discovers where he has actually arrived. This becomes especially

clear after the first night in Cicely when he comes out of the house and looks around consciously. At this moment he encounters the first overwhelming sight of the mountain chains and the lake that are right in front of his new place and the vastness of the land he is surrounded by.

Another scene that gives reason to believe that Joel is not at all interested in the beauty of his surrounding but rather in maintaining as much of his former lifestyle as possible can be found in episode four. This episode starts with a pan shot on eye-level that introduces a view of vast fields and slowly turns to the huge mountain. The shot ends with a close-up of Joel's face, looking into the distance and then changing his view to something close by. The next shot reveals what Joel sees here, namely a close-up of a jackrabbit that seems to wait for what will happen next. Another close-up of Joel shows that he is still looking at the rabbit but then looks away into the distance again. Joel then turns his head and looks down and the next close-up of his golf club and a pink golf ball finally reveals what he is actually doing. From the first shots in which Joel is looking at the jackrabbit, one could assume that he might want to hunt the animal or that he is not so sure of how to behave in front of such an animal. The sudden turn to him actually playing golf signifies once again that Joel is a very special character and does not fit this place.

7.5.3 The sound of nature

Looking at the various scenes and shots in which nature is depicted in NE the very striking thing is that there is no music included in most of them. It seems that the notion of nature is supported by the fact that the only noises that can be heard are natural ones. Consequently the soundtrack of these scenes consists of the twittering of birds, the chirruping of crickets and the noise of the woods. This sound of nature starts at the point when Joel arrives in Cicely, as I have already mentioned in the previous section.

Basically this sound has a rather positive effect on the characters, it seems that it leads to a very calm atmosphere and it suggests that there is enough time for everything. It clearly supports the assumption that everything moves much slower at this place and there is no need to hurry, suggesting that nature has its own speed and in the scenes under consideration this is a very slow one. Another thing that is stressed here is that nature works on its own and that it is not dependent on any support, i.e. music in this case. What can be concluded from this is that the depiction of “real” nature does include music but only the one that nature produces itself. Compared to the scenes from MIT it is apparent that in NE the focus is shifted a little further to the attention of nature because it leaves out anything artificial.

Yet it cannot be denied that there are other instances of this natural sound that do not evoke such a relaxed and lovely atmosphere but rather the contrary. As Burke mentions in his reflections on the sublime, there is this fine line between the sublime and horror and this can be caused by the noises of nature. Joel encounters such a situation in the first season’s last episode when his car breaks down on a muddy and bumpy road in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night. In this scene there are several other noises added to the usually calming nature sounds. First of all the hooting of owls becomes prominent in this scene because owls are clearly animals of the night. The connotations of this sound are clearly discomfort and danger and all the typical movie scenes in which characters get lost in an unknown forest employ these features of sound. When Joel cries for help, all he gets as an answer is the howling of wolves and that clearly frightens him and makes him flee back into his car. After Joel finds some comfort again in the safety of his car, he tries to rest a little but is startled up by the unfamiliar noises surrounding him. When he finally comes to rest, the scene ends with a close up of the overcast moon and the howling of a wolf in the distance.

7.5.4 Animals in NE

Similar to Marin's encounter with the raccoon in one of the first episodes, Joel is frightened by a rat in his first night in Cicely. In this scene he lies in his bed and holds tight his flashlight while listening to the squeaking noises of some kind of gnawer in his room. After the animal finally walks into the trap Joel calms down and relaxes and eventually falls asleep. The exaggerated reaction to the small animal does have further consequences though, because Joel wants to get rid of the dead animal. Therefore he puts the rat out to the trash on the fireplace poker to gain enough distance between himself and the obviously still frightening animal. While he does that he is obviously disgusted and repeatedly cries: "Oh God!" What this scene shows quite clearly is that Joel has not at all found his way in this all too natural place and scenes like that support his will to leave the place as soon as possible.

Apart from Joel's encounters with animals there is one central animal that is in a way the mascot of the series, namely the moose. In the opening credits of each episode this moose is walking unhurriedly through the centre of Cicely as if it was the most natural thing on earth. (see fig. 14) What this animal in the middle of a rather civilized place shows is that the borders between exactly this civilization and nature are blurred at this place. While we can encounter a clear binary opposition between any big city such as New York and nature as it is depicted in the series, this opposition is weakened throughout the series. This is where the notion of the last frontier comes into play as well because it shows that this border is not something fixed and that nature does return if it is not eradicated completely, as it is the case at this place. Similar to Elmo in MIT, Cicely marks a boarder between nature and its opposites but this boarder is not clearly defined and obviously has its loopholes. This becomes especially clear when Joel leaves his office at the end of an episode⁴⁰ and finds himself

⁴⁰ season 1, episode 4, min. 46:55

eye to eye with a moose that is looking for something to eat. For a moment Joel seems to be insecure of how he should behave but after a moment he decides to ignore the animal and that is exactly what the moose does as well. Both go their ways and it seems that Joel slowly adapts to his new surrounding, at least as far as encounters with animals are concerned.



Fig. 14: opening credits NE

7.5.5 Sweet home Alaska?

As opposed to Marin, Joel does not take pleasure in the nature that surrounds him and as the example shows, he is not interested in finding himself as the following quote illustrates as well:

Neither Alaska nor Native Americans represent a romantic discovery or resolution of Joel's [his] identity, some transcendent

experience of nature or spirit. Alaska represents nothing but a barrier of wilderness between him and the rest of his life. [...] his closest vision to wilderness, to be wildly successful as a doctor in New York City. (Epes 47)

Although Joel is exposed to a similar natural surrounding as Marin and encounters comparable situations, he does not relate to it in the same way. The trigger of nature that worked in the case of Marin does not work here at all, Joel is not fascinated by nature and the great place he lives in now but remains frustrated and annoyed by the things he has to get used to now.

At the end of the first season, in which he learns about the natural spectacle “Aurora Borealis” – the northern lights, he says that his current location is “somewhere between the end of the line and the middle of nowhere”⁴¹. In a way Joel seems to be immune to the impact the place seems to have on other people in his new home. Looking at the other characters in Cicely, most of them have made their journey to Alaska and “each followed his or her own North Star home, and in so doing, found themselves.” (Epes 47) In a way Joel seems to be a completely differently designed character because he has obviously already made up his mind about how his life should look like and there is no need for him to find himself and a new home. This might also be the major difference between him and Marin because the new location makes Marin rethink her life which is not the case with Joel. He has obviously found his self-fulfillment in his job as a doctor and nothing but an awkward financial situation have brought him to this place. For him there is no need to rethink his life and he puts most of his effort into considering how he could leave this place again.

As the previous chapter on MIT has shown, Marin’s unfortunate situation with her fiancé marks an important point in her life. This sudden change of preconditions make her rethink her previous life and together with the impact the new surrounding has on her self, she decides to stay and get a

⁴¹ NE, season 1, episode 8

new orientation in her life.

What has been said about Joel's attitude towards Cicely so far does not mean that he does not find his new home in the place. Turning back on the relational geographical framework, nature and hence space is only one factor when it comes to establishing a new place and respectively home. When it comes to Joel it seems that the social relations play a bigger role for him and that the space he is surrounded by, i.e. nature, plays a minor role for him. Accordingly Alaska turns into home for Joel eventually but due to different reasons and nature cannot be seen as the trigger that connects him to the new surrounding in the first place.

8 Conclusion

In this paper I tried to analyze in what ways Alaska is represented in the television series MIT and NE and how these representations support various concepts of nature. The introduction to television studies has shown that this field is enormous and depending on the preferred reading one chooses, it offers an innumerable amount of possible interpretations and analyses of which I have chosen the textual analysis in order to get hold of material for my research question.

The chapter on Alaska has shown how its history is connected to the ways in which is represented in the television series as the examples have shown. It has become obvious that there is a clear connection between Alaska's history and clearly its geographical location and its depiction on screen. Because of Alaska's vast amount of nature in its purest form, it is perfect for representing nature on screen. On the other hand it has also become clear that Alaska works as an iconic sign and that the scenery of vast mountain chains, lakes and forests immediately establish a certain picture of Alaska. Exactly these enormous forms of nature bring the phenomenon of the sublime to the scene, a feeling that is evoked when we are confronted with something we are hardly able to describe. The analysis of the series has shown that there is sometimes only a fine line between the sublime – something that rather pleases us – and a feeling of horror. In turn the sublime can also be the trigger for a strong relationship to a certain place.

As I have elaborated in the section on cultural geography and space and place, it is always necessary to relate to a certain space before it can become place at all. The relational geographical framework has shown that one of the relevant areas when it comes to place is space and nature marks an important part of that space. Hence, as soon as we start to connect to a certain 'space' triggered by the notion of the sublime, it is possi-

ble that this area turns eventually into place for the individual that encounters it. Another factor that comes into play here is the urge to return to nature because I found out that although humans are a binary opposition to nature, they are at the same time part of it. This longing for nature and establishing a place that we can call our home was what I tried to analyze in the scenes from MIT and NE.

The two characters, Marin and Joel, that seem to be very similar due to their fish-out-of-water role and the overall similarities between the series turn out to be different when it comes to the way in which they relate to their new homes. Nature does play an important role either way but in the course of the analysis it has turned out that Marin's and Joel's reactions are different. Marin encounters the sublime in nature, she walks the thin line between horror and pleasure and finally connects to nature and accepts it as her new home. In the case of Joel this cannot be assumed equally. Although Joel is confronted with nature in Alaska in a similar way, he remains very disapproving of this surrounding and does not feel the urge to find his new home in this surrounding. It can be seen though that both characters settle in their new place but they employ different factors in the process of turning space into place, yet it can be assumed that both of them find their 'sweet home Alaska' eventually.

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Lyrics

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11 Appendix

1) Character list Men in Trees:

- Marin Frist: the main character, relationship coach and author, later also a radio host in Elmo
- Jack Sluttery: a biologist in Elmo who Marin eventually falls in love with
- Annie O'Donnel: a great fan of Marin who followed her to Alaska; falls in love with Patrick O'Bachelorton and wants to marry him
- Patrick O'Bachelorton: a fan of Marin; runs the radio station and the town inn; loses his memory when he gets hit by lightning
- Jane Burns: Marin's editor, falls in love with Sam ("plow guy")
- Ben Thomasson: owner of a bar called "The Chieftain"

2) Character list Northern Exposure:

- Joel Fleischman: the main character, young doctor practicing in Cicely
- Maurice Minnifield: a former astronaut, now businessman, owns the local radio station
- Maggie O'Connel: a bush pilot who falls in love with Joel
- Holling Vincoeur: the owner of a restaurant called the "Brick"
- Shelly Tambo: a waitress at the "Brick" and the wife of Holling Vincoeur

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German Abstract

Im Zentrum dieser Diplomarbeit steht Alaska, das als Sinnbild für unberührte Natur, endlose Wälder und Seen und beeindruckende Bergketten zu sehen ist. Schauplatz der beiden Fernsehsendungen „Men in Trees“ und „Northern Exposure“ (deutscher Titel: Ausgerechnet Alaska) ist eben dieses Alaska, das von den beiden Protagonisten der Serie, Marin und Joel, zunächst nicht als besonders einladend wahrgenommen wird. Beide stammen ursprünglich aus New York, und schon hier zeichnet sich eine der Dichotomien ab, die im Laufe dieser Arbeit besonders wichtig sind. Stadt – Land, Natur – Mensch, Raum – Ort, diese gegensätzlichen Paare sind der Ausgangspunkt für die Untersuchungen.

Alaska, als Ausgangspunkt für diese Arbeit, bietet ein Beispiel für die ikonenhafte Repräsentation von Orten, und die Art und Weise, wie Alaska in Verbindung damit Natur dargestellt wird, sind die wesentlichen Elemente, die hier Untersuchungsgegenstand sind. Die Natur spielt insofern eine wesentliche Rolle, als dass dieser Begriff ein sehr schwer zu definierender ist, da er ein sehr breites Spektrum an möglichen Interpretationsansätzen bietet. Diese vielfältige Sichtweise schlägt sich auch in den Dichotomien nieder, die in Verbindung mit Natur auftreten, allen voran das bereits erwähnte Spannungsfeld zwischen Natur und Mensch. Besonders untersuchenswert ist in diesem Zusammenhang auch die Tatsache, dass der Begriff Natur eigentlich den Menschen inkludiert, obwohl er gleichzeitig in so einem starken Gegensatz zu ihm steht. Das gilt ebenso für ein weiteres Begriffsfeld dieser Arbeit, nämlich Ort und Raum, hierbei handelt es sich um ein ähnliches Verhältnis, da beide Begriffe nicht ohne den jeweils anderen auskommen bzw. Ort gleichzeitig ein Teil des Raumes ist, sich aber sehr stark davon abgrenzt.

Genau diese Annahme, dass es einen Unterschied zwischen Orten gibt, die mit Bedeutung und Erfahrung gefüllt sind, und dem eher allgemeinen Raum, zu dem das Individuum keinen Bezug hat, steht im Zentrum meiner Untersuchungen. Eine wesentliche Frage ist, welche Rolle die Wahrneh-

mung der Natur bei den beiden Protagonisten spielt, um einen zunächst unbekanntem Raum zu einem Zuhause zu machen, und welche Erfahrungen hierbei eine Rolle spielen. Um das herauszufinden, wird auch das Konzept des Erhabenen näher beleuchtet, das besonders von dem Philosophen Edmund Burke geprägt wurde. Eine der Annahmen in dieser Diplomarbeit beruht darauf, dass das Erhabene, das etwas Unbeschreibliches im Menschen auslöst, das sich an der Grenze zwischen Überwältigung, Schönheit und Furcht befindet, einen Einfluss darauf hat, wie wir gewisse Orte wahrnehmen. Das Erhabene wird sozusagen zum Auslöser dafür, ob ein unbekannter Ort so für uns an Wert gewinnt und schließlich zu unserem Zuhause werden kann.

Mit Hilfe von Methoden aus dem Bereich der Film- und Fernsehanalyse werden einzelne Szenen aus den beiden Fernsehserien genau analysiert, im Hinblick darauf, wie Alaska und Natur dargestellt werden und welchen Einfluss das auf die Protagonisten hat. Das „close reading“ dieser Szenen und Kameraeinstellungen gibt Aufschluss darüber, welche Parallelen zwischen den beiden Serien herrschen und worin etwaige Unterschiede festzustellen sind. Es kann klar gesagt werden, dass die Natur als wesentlicher Faktor in beiden Serien eine Rolle spielt, allerdings im Falle von Joel ihre anziehende Wirkung nicht so sehr zum Tragen kommt und hier das Erhabene der Natur eher in den Hintergrund rückt, auch wenn es immer wieder in den Bildern gezeigt wird. Die Wirkung auf die Protagonistin macht sich bei Marin umso mehr bemerkbar, da sich ihre Beziehung zur Natur verändert und sich dieses enge Verhältnis dazu schließlich auch zu ihrem neuen Zuhause führt.

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Literatur

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