

GHOSTLY ENCOUNTERS AND TRACES OF HOPE IN THE SNOW

Exploring lost ski areas beyond modernity

Monica Nadegger

LMU University of Munich (Germany) & MCI - The Entrepreneurial School (Austria)
monica.nadegger@lmu.de, monica.nadegger@mci.edu

ABSTRACT

The decline of ski areas worldwide, driven by rising temperatures, reduced demand and competitive pressure, has led to an increasing number of "lost ski areas". These abandoned ski areas with their ruins of cable cars or ghostly presences of nostalgic skiing accounts challenge the linear narratives of progress and growth embedded in modern skiing. Focusing on the lost ski area Super Saint-Bernard, this paper explores how lost ski areas continue to "live on" through discursive, material, and affective entanglements and offer opportunities to hospice modernity. Using archival data and a narrative analytical approach, the study identifies three key themes: navigating responsibility, bearing witness, and speculative worlding. These practices highlight community efforts to care for and compost modernity's waste and ruins, the continued engagement with nostalgia and critique, and the playful reimagining of abandoned infrastructure. Rather than viewing lost ski areas as failures, they are reinterpreted as spaces for learning, grieving, and fostering alternative futures beyond modernity. They provoke critical questions about responsibility, care, and the possibility of a 'good death' for modernity. They invite us to stay with uncertainty and loss while exploring plural, embodied, albeit more ephemeral futures in winter tourism. This research shows how lost ski areas as ruins of modernity can inspire new ways of organizing, living, and being in the Anthropocene, by offering sparks of hope and creativity amidst the remnants of capitalist progress and modernity.

INTRODUCTION

Facing declining demand and rising temperatures (Steiger & Scott, 2020), ski areas all over the world need to shut down their operations as they are no longer profitable. However, these ski areas continue to exist as ruins (Edensor, 2005; Pullen, 2023), ghostly presences (Tsing et al., 2017), and lively edgelands (Hirst & Humphreys, 2013). These ski areas are often framed as

failed projects of modern skiing as they cannot pursue the promises of growth, innovation and technological progress (Denning, 2015; Groß, 2019). In the advent of the climate crisis, demographic change and an increasing struggle for economic profitability in a highly competitive market (Heise & Schuck, 2020; Schlegel & Schuck, 2024), the coming decades show an increase in such lost ski areas in mountain regions.

HOSPICING MODERNITY IN LOST SKI AREAS

Despite their perceived failure, the mountains show aging infrastructure and traces of slopes, and the ski culture often lives on in tales of the local community. In some areas, the absence of fast-paced, commercial and industrial rhythms of the winter tourism industry gives way to new entanglements with mountains, leisure and skiing. In this assumed failure, however, these places make visible the failed promises of progress but also the violence, harm and burdens that modernity unequally distributes. As such, these lost ski areas become spaces where we can learn beyond modernity (Machado de Oliveira, 2021): where we can enable a 'good death' and midwife something new in the ruins. This study aims to understand how these lost ski areas 'live on' or hospice modernity within the discursive, material and affective entanglements they cast. How might these 'capitalist ruins' (Tsing, 2015) and 'blasted landscapes' (Kirksey et al., 2013) create the possibility for alternative forms of winter tourism where the promises of an ever-growing winter tourism industry no longer hold (Groß, 2019; Nadegger, 2023, 2024)?

EMPIRICAL EXPLORATIONS

Empirically, the research focuses on stories and tales of lost ski places through archival data (such as documentaries, videos, reports, and historical accounts) and adopts a narrative analytical approach that looks for joint speculations, practices, and themes. The empirical illustration are based on the case study of Super Saint-Bernard in Switzerland. Super Saint-Bernard once featured three lifts and 25 kilometers of slopes. The ski area closed in 2010 after 48 years of operation. Based on online material, newspaper article and documentaries, I sketch three different practices related to hospicing modernity: *navigating responsibility*, *bearing witness*, and *speculative worldings*.

In navigating responsibility, the lost ski area surfaces important questions on caring and taking responsibility for these ruins and their disposal. The lack of care shows the difficulty of pinpointing responsibility by firms and operators, who often turn away to the next infrastructure progress. At the same time, it also surfaces instances of grass-roots responsibility in communities, who organize to compost modernity's waste from the bottom up. In bearing witness, we see how the community, skiers and adventures still visit and engage

with lost ski areas, rather than leaving these ruins behind. The empirical material prominently features postcards, nostalgic memories and oral stories of the 'glory days' before the closing. Yet at the same time, all these stories critically engage with these failed promises of modern skiing as well as the dark side of mass tourism. Lastly, speculative worlding emphasizes the future orientation that can emerge from such ruins. Abandoned infrastructure gets re-used in a playful and artistic manner, and former ski huts become stables for sheep and cattle. These patchy, less strategic and directed developments in lost ski area surface often more community-based, ephemeral yet locally grounded instances of future making.

CONCLUSION

Concludingly, these lost ski areas invite questions on responsibility for modernity's end between care and neglect, witnessing endings as navigating nostalgia and critique and playing with speculative futures as patchy, embodied and plural possibilities. They challenge linear-unidimensional narratives of progress through relations of navigating responsibility, bearing witness, and speculative worlding emerge and provide initial sparks (rather than clear cut solutions) on how to organize, live and be, when modernity 'ends' (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). Rather than seeing such lost ski areas as failed, left-behind, empty spaces, we can see how they help us to understand and stay with uncertainty, loss and grieving when the promises of modern skiing no longer hold. They provoke questions on how to not just turn away but develop the capacity for responsibility beyond and a 'good death' for modernity

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