

SUBJECTIVE CONSTRUCTION OF LANDSCAPES IN EVERYDAY LIFE: CASE STUDY OF A POST-MINING LANDSCAPE

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There recently has been a growing interest in landscape both in academic and non-academic discourse. Notions of landscape open a wide range of definitions and expectations. The focus of this paper is on the subjective constructions of landscape to gain insight into the way meanings are conferred to landscapes by the people who live therein.

The results of qualitative face-to-face interviews with people who experience different landscapes in everyday life will be discussed. The focus will be on a post-mining landscape which has been subject to dramatic alterations in recent years. It can be assumed that perceptions and attributions of significance are particularly intense when changes concern the individual's everyday life. The aim of the paper is to deepen our understanding of people's subjective construction of landscape.

Introduction

In recent years, we observe a growing interest in landscape, by scientists and other experts as well as by people who live in or make use of it. Moreover, notions of landscape open a wide range of definitions and expectations, reflecting the influence of different philosophical and political ideas. For most of us, landscape is an essential part of everyday life, being regarded as our natural surroundings. By focusing on the inhabitants, landscape can be understood as representing the lasting background of everyday life.

The starting-point for the exploration of subjective construction, e.g. perceptions and

emotions, of landscape was an individualist perspective, leading to the questions how and why people characterise certain areas as "landscapes".

My study makes use of an individualist perspective to gain insights into the way in which meanings are conferred to landscapes by the people who live therein. Therefore, it is fundamental to understand that the subjects' notion is a projection of values and meanings to landscapes. The importance of the subjective approach proposed here is that it focuses our attention on the experience of landscape as well as on the construction of landscape as a symbolic environment. Thus landscape

may be thought of as an area as well as the appearance of an area, with both material and representational aspects.

This paper has two main points of departure. First, I wish to present some thoughts my research is based upon, i.e. various approaches to landscape research from material to representational and non-representational. Second, I will briefly outline some philosophical origins exploring everyday experience of landscape. Focusing on the everyday life means drawing attention to both “ordinary” people and “ordinary” landscapes. Based on these assumptions, an empirical study was conducted to sharpen the awareness of what landscape means, namely the values and meanings attributed to it.

Conceptual approaches to landscape

In cultural geography, in particular following Carl Sauer and the Berkeley school of landscape studies, landscape has been traditionally defined as the product of interactions between natural conditions and cultural practices (Sauer, 1996). From the 1920s on, research was primarily concerned with how people transformed the earth. Cultural landscape back then was a physical material reality, primarily factual and objective. Subsequently, only some academics took the human imagination and perception into account, considering landscape a mental construct rather than a world of physical features that can be empirically accessed and described (e.g. Lowenthal, 1961; Tuan, 1974). It was David Lowenthal who first investigated “the relation between the world outside and the pictures in our heads” (Lowenthal, 1961, 241).

Hereafter, the New Cultural Geography of the 1980s re-interpreted and re-theorised landscape as representation, as a symbol of something rather than as the emergence itself. Since then, landscape studies have discussed landscape as a “social construct”,

making use of a term coined by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967). Landscape is now understood as a product of specific cultural values and meanings resulting from individual, institutional and societal processes, as an image, a representation or a perspective. Furthermore, it was critically argued that a relationship between the way of seeing a landscape and the material conditions must be taken into scrutiny. Against this background, studies have focussed on symbolic meanings of landscapes, emphasising, for instance, aspects of power, social identity, gender, in- or exclusion, and thus to be analysed by means of interpretative and discursive, representational approaches (e.g. Cosgrove, 1998 [1984]; Cosgrove and Daniels, 2002 [1988]; Duncan and Duncan, 1988; Rose, 1993).

Moreover, many cultural geographers have criticised the traditional accounts of nature-culture relations — dividing landscapes up into objective facts, on the one hand, and layers of subjective meaning, on the other. They argued that landscape should not simply be seen as a set of observable material cultural facts. Instead, research should also focus on the qualities of landscape — “landscape as a milieu of cultural practices and values” (Wylie, 2007, 5).

Recent work on landscape in human geography and neighbouring disciplines has started taking a closer look at practices, i.e. the ways people do things in landscape (Merriman *et al.*, 2008). Initiated by Nigel Thrift (2007), there has been a shift towards non-representational approaches. Those studies — whose approach has also been termed phenomenological or performative — criticise the narrow focus on symbolic meaning and on dominant discourses (Neumann, 2011). Instead, they suggest taking everyday practices, habits, actions etc. into account, such as walking, gardening or working on the land (e.g. Brace and Geoghegan, 2010; Cresswell, 2003).

Landscape in everyday life — ordinary people and ordinary landscapes

Focusing on “ordinary” people, subjectivity of social actors in everyday life and the everyday experience of landscapes have increasingly gained importance. Subjective construction in everyday life is now considered the result of an interpretative process based on personal experience and knowledge.

So far, after the cultural turn of the 1980s, research on landscapes as seen by individuals has been conducted mainly from the perspective of academics, planners and politicians, perceiving the phenomena as elite representations. Thus, ordinary people and their everyday experience of landscape have often been neglected. Ordinary people are the people that inhabit and work in the landscapes which entails going for a walk, cycling, walking the dog, doing the garden etc.

Focusing on “ordinary” landscapes primarily means having a closer look at the sites of everyday life. Already in the 1950s, John B. Jackson attempted to explore people’s encounters with landscape. He “opened out the concept of landscape ... by writing from the inside and pointing to the symbolic meanings which arise from social life in particular geographical settings” (Cosgrove, 1998, 34). Moreover, Jackson established the notion of what he called the vernacular landscape, the geography of everyday places and plain-folks architecture. In doing so, he referred to “the world of houses, cars, roads ... the local, inhabited world of those who Jackson saw as ordinary Americans” (Wylie, 2007, 43).

My starting point is landscape as the surroundings of people, their everyday environment. From this point of view, landscape is the place or space people inhabit and work in (cf. Cresswell, 2003). This is to respect the inhabitant’s point of view in valuing everyday contemporary landscape.

Landscape phenomenology

Examining the subjective construction of landscape, I refer to phenomenological ideas in order to discover the world as it is experienced by those immersed in it. The emphasis of phenomenological thoughts may also mean a shift towards a more empirical approach to landscape. In its most basic form, phenomenology attempts at creating conditions for the objective study of topics usually regarded as subjective: consciousness and experiences such as perception, thought, judgment, memory, imagination, emotion etc. Adopting this approach, I would like to draw attention to the subjective experience of the individual, namely the way environment is perceived, intellectually and emotionally, as landscape.

The key idea of my approach originates from Alfred Schütz — regarded as the founder of the sociology of knowledge. Schütz claimed that knowledge is derived from people’s practical experience of the world. He thus developed a theory of meaning and action, starting with the individual’s conscious awareness within the intersubjective realm of the “natural attitude” (Husserl, 1913). Drawing upon Edmund Husserl’s work, Schütz and his follower Thomas Luckmann developed the “Structures of the Life-World”, pointing out the relevance of the subject’s perceptions and interpretations of the life-world (Schütz and Luckmann, 1975). Fundamental ideas of the natural attitude deal with the ordinary person who questions neither the experience of reality nor the meaning of things. He or she acts pragmatically and naively takes the objects — natural and social — for granted. The subject regards his/her own body as the starting point of being, which in turn facilitates the individual’s spatial orientation. The notions of being-in-the-world and embodiment are the basis of experience and fundamental to phenomenological thought. The subject’s confidence in its experience of reality might be questioned when changes affect everyday

life, e.g. by the loss of familiar surroundings. The experience then has to be scrutinised and reinterpreted where needed.

In order to gain access to subjective experiences of landscape, I employed a qualitative research method. First of all, case studies were carried out for detailed examination; second, qualitative interviews were conducted for understanding people's perceptions, meanings, feelings and emotions concerning landscape.

The case study of a post-mining landscape

The empirical research is based on a case study approach in order to cover various types of landscapes as well as a range of development stages. Three case studies had been chosen for detailed examination of single examples (concerning case studies, cf. Flyvbjerg, 2011). The landscapes were selected due to their changes in function,

design and use in the course of the last decades. It is assumed that perceptions and attributions of significance are particularly intense when changes touch the individual's everyday life, e.g. experiencing the loss of familiar surroundings.

The case study to be portrayed in the following is a post-mining landscape, more precisely a former uranium mining site near Ronneburg in the German federal state of Thuringia where uranium mining had taken place for decades. The site was chosen in order to examine the ways of conferring values and meanings to a rapidly changing landscape. The rapid change makes individuals more aware of their everyday landscape, since the perception of this new landscape competes with memories of the previous landscape. Due to its changes in function, design and use over the last decades, the post-mining landscape is a good example for dramatic alterations and the need for re-defining the area.



Fig. 1. Ronneburg old town and new "balcony", 2009



Fig. 2. The New Landscape Ronneburg 2009: landfill and “WISMUT” lettering remind of the mining



Fig. 3. Gessen valley 2009: reconstruction of the former valley along a newly created hillside which refers to benches of the open-pit mine

Ronneburg is a small town east of the city of Gera in rural Thuringia. Formerly a spa town, it became the source of precious uranium ore in the Cold War era. Run by the Soviet–German mining company WISMUT, local uranium deposits were exploited for the Soviet nuclear programme from 1952 to 1990. In fact, Ronneburg was the most important site for the Soviet uranium production and as such a high-security area not accessible to the public. After German reunification, the mines were closed down on 31 December 1990.

Today, the former mining area has mostly been restored. WISMUT became a federal government-owned company in charge of the development of the site, its principal task being the decommissioning, cleanup and rehabilitation of the area. A new landscape has been designed by recent planning processes. For this, the exhausted mines were converted into landfills for disposal of solid waste. A valley was reconstructed (Figs. 1, 2 and 3), a new bridge was built and a new mountain was shaped, i.e. a waste rock pile even higher than the natural hills around it (Fig. 2). From a planning point of view, the landscape's shape is complete and the site has been converted into a park. The emerging new landscape was named "Neue Landschaft Ronneburg" (New Landscape Ronneburg), and in 2007 the popular German federal garden exhibition was held on the site.

Everyday experience of landscape: Empirical findings

Drawing upon phenomenological ideas, the social scientist has to develop an unprejudiced justification of his/her basic views on the world and him/herself. Therefore, the researcher is urged to get as close as possible to what the participants are experiencing, their perceptions, meanings, feelings and emotions concerning landscape: "Phenomenology demands that we seek to discover the world as it is experienced by those involved

in it. It is about the nature of human experience and the meaning that people attach to their experiences" (Wilson, 2002). The basic point of qualitative research is to get behind constituted meaning. Therefore, the communication between the researcher and research participant is regarded crucial for understanding people's experiences.

In summer 2009, the author and four research assistants interviewed 60 individuals about what landscape meant to them. The interviews were conducted at different places in and around the town. The interviewees told their own story in their own words. In the guideline-based interviews, the range of questions covered landscapes related to various places and times: inhabited landscapes, childhood landscapes, recreational landscapes and landscapes of dreams. However, the main focus was on the landscape at the site of the interview, while mention of other landscapes helped to reflect on the topic when talking about experiences.

In order to analyse the qualitative data, all interviews were transcribed and the text then hermeneutically examined by a qualitative content analysis (cf. Mayring, 2010). The material was analysed along the following key research questions:

- What is 'landscape' in everyday life?
- What does 'landscape' mean in everyday life?
- How do ordinary people adopt to their surroundings/environment?
- How do they create a sense of landscape?

A traditional perception of landscape

Overall, the survey results show a very traditional perception of and orientation towards landscape as rural and remote place. The key point here is that landscape denotes a certain idyll — pre-modern and in some ways nostalgic. This idyll is associated with tranquillity and beauty. In a long-established and deep-rooted sense, landscape is a visual form of spatial knowledge that emphasises

the ideal of the picturesque, centred on the scenery and the pastoral. In the course of the interviews, notions of romanticism were articulated, most commonly by implicitly valuing rural, pre-modern and pre-industrial ways of life. The traditional connotation expresses values and meanings of landscapes such as beauty, naturalness or tranquillity as well as positively loaded terms like 'beautiful', 'green'

or 'amazing'. Yet due to the recent redesign, the new landscape is also characterised as 'man-made' and 'artificial'. The German adjective most often attributed to landscape is 'schön' (beautiful, nice). This is not surprising since 'schön' is the best suitable word to describe landscape positively, as demonstrated by Gerhard Hard in his study on landscape and language (Hard, 1970). However, the

Table 1. Concepts of landscapes according to statements of the respondents (survey in summer 2009)

	Concepts of landscapes	Topoi	Narratives
I	Landscape is nature	'green', vegetation ('flowers', 'trees' and 'forest'), relief ('lowlands' vs. 'hills')	metaphors for naturalness; 'green' as indicator of unadulterated nature
II	Landscape is not a built-up area	'wide open spaces' vs. 'buildings', 'tranquillity' and 'peacefulness', 'solitude'	antipode to a town or to modern infrastructure, too much noise and waste/pollution; too many people
III	Landscape is recreation	'tranquillity', 'beauty', 'harmony'	emphasis on the scenery; meeting the needs for recreation, beauty and harmony
IV	Landscape is identity	, <i>Heimat</i> ' (home), symbols, landmarks	mental construction of belonging to a place
V	Landscape is a place of memory	childhood, working life, holidays	emotionally touching experiences; romanticising childhood
VI	Landscape is region	borders and boundaries, place names	typification of landscape features; drawing borders and naming the region
VII	Landscape is an artefact	object of planning and design, rehabilitation, business development, marketing	object which can be built and rebuilt just like a building; condition for regional development

post-mining landscape is not always delineated as 'schön' in terms of aesthetic quality. It rather means "it has become 'schön'", implying that "the situation has improved", so 'schön' here means 'good': "They have done a very good job. Now, it is great and everything has become so beautiful. In former days, we had nothing. We even didn't know where to go for a walk" (female, 65 years).

Underlying concepts of landscapes

The interviews have been analysed to identify the underlying concepts: In which contexts was landscape mentioned and which topics were used when referring to it? Examining the interviews' everyday language by means of content analysis, various concepts of landscape emerged, the following being the most significant.¹

Principles of subjective construction

The benefit of the phenomenological thought considered here is that it focuses our attention on the subjective construction of landscape as symbolic environment rather than as nature or scenery.

The survey results reveal how individuals take recourse to knowledge and experience as a basic principle of their subjective construction in everyday life. This becomes especially vital when changes affect everyday life. Experiences of landscape then have to be scrutinised and reinterpreted.

The recently redesigned post-mining landscape still shows features of its industrial past and includes memories of destruction as well as of a once thriving economy. Despite or because of this recent history, people appreciate the efforts that have been made to rehabilitate the landscape.

Our interviewees' statements also show that the perception of the new landscape competes with perceptions of the former industrial landscape. Specific values and meanings assigned to landscape become evident, especially when impressions and images of

the landscape are compared to other landscapes. For this reason, the man-made post-mining landscape can be perceived as natural in comparison to former environmental damage. Concerning the present landscape, certain visual elements have become important since they represent nature and naturalness, e.g. 'green', 'flowers', 'trees', 'forest' (Concept I, Table 1). As a matter of fact, 'nature' is the word most often used as synonym for 'landscape' in German everyday language (e.g. Lehmann, 2003, 148): "There is nothing artificial because everything is natural" (female, 45 years). Or, as a resident, who has been living in the region for all his life, put it: "I feel very comfortable. Looking at all the green, I feel that it is something healthy. That's because nothing reminds you of the uranium mining" (male, 59 years).

Besides the perceived healthiness, values of beauty and harmony are assigned to the newly designed landscape (Concept III): "I am pleased with the landscape, everything looks so beautiful" (female, 71 years). While these are visible values, there are also features such as tranquillity which can be sensed emotionally: "You will have some peace and quiet, everything is fine, actually" (female, 61 years). Both statements show an evident longing for a quiet, peaceful place. Peace and tranquillity might also be antipodes to busy urban spaces or modern infrastructure, especially given the senior age of the individuals quoted here (Concept II).

Another very important value of place referred to in our interviews is its ability to create identity (Concept IV). Landscape plays a key role in the mental construction of belonging, e.g. in calling it 'home' (see Bender and Winer, 2001). It is the memory of good experiences such as a happy childhood or good holidays that generates a positive attitude towards landscape in general. This does not only mean identifying certain features of the past landscape but also valuing the quality of social relations: "The main point is that

I am at home here, I feel comfortable and my friends live here” (male, 59 years). This statement, again by the person who has been living in the region for all his life, might also indicate re-interpreting the traditional concept of landscape, shifting it from material to immaterial values.

However, material artefacts like the conical waste rock piles are still the prevailing features of the landscape in question. They had already become landmarks both for the inhabitants of the region and for drivers on the nearby motorway A4: “Already from a distance, especially on the motorway, you could see the waste rock piles, and you knew that you were at home” (woman, 62 years old). Once visible from afar, these peculiarly shaped hills indicated a high potential for identification and were referred to as ‘twin pyramids’ or ‘bowling pins’. In 2006, they were filled into the exhausted mines. People who appreciated the special visual shape express their disagreement with the change: “The only thing I don’t like is the demolition of our nice pyramids” (man, 66 years old).

Furthermore, the case study shows that structural alterations in the physical appearance indeed challenge the meanings of landscape and might thus lead to irritation and dissonance. Yet they do not give rise to a different attitude towards traditional values and meanings. In fact, reflecting on ones’ “own” landscape, namely the relation of self and world, even strengthens traditional orientations. As described above, the interviewees value the rural, pre-modern world associated with tranquillity and beauty. Nonetheless, changes of the physical appearance of landscape are more often than not pragmatically accepted and may even be seen as an improvement. Generally, the way landscape disruptions are perceived strongly depends on time. The more time has passed since the intervention, the higher people think of its effects. Thus massive yet old man-made structures like bridges or viaducts can be

symbolically transformed into monuments or traditions that perfectly integrate into the present perception of landscape.

Conclusions

Everyday experiences as studied in this paper are the experiences made by ordinary people in everyday landscapes, the landscapes they inhabit. Adopting a phenomenological approach enables us to discover the world as it is experienced by those immersed in it. Thus landscape becomes a world to live in, not a scene to view. Along with this perspective, ordinary landscapes are part of the daily, routinely experienced and unquestioned everyday life. They are taken for granted and there is no thought about their character. The phenomenological notion of being-in-the-world characterises a significant aspect of the role of everyday landscapes. The individuals are embodied in them, their perspective on the landscapes is what Husserl would term ‘natural attitude’.

In conclusion, I would like to call attention to two points for further research. Firstly, I would suggest focusing on the role of landscape in everyday experience. Secondly, I would like to draw attention to the individual and the importance of his/her emotions while experiencing landscape.

First, landscape can be examined as made through representations, yet is also a practice. Therefore, further research should increasingly take everyday experiences and practices into account in order to understand the subjective construction of landscape. The proposed ‘practice of landscaping’ means a shift from representations of landscape towards the ongoing shaping of landscape via practice and performing (Wylie, 2007, 166), i.e. familiar and recognisable things such as walking, running, cycling or gardening.

Our post-mining landscape case study shows that a majority of the respondents takes landscapes and free access to landscape for granted. Having become accustomed to the

new landscape, they do not call it into question. The new landscape has already become a familiar standard, given and natural. While traces of mining are vanishing, the new landscape has become familiar and recognisable: a part of the daily, routinely experienced and unquestioned everyday life.

Second, the subjective construction of landscape is not only based on visual experiences but is also shaped by emotions and feelings. Although landscape continues to imply visual connotations, in particular the perception of what is termed the picturesque, research should no longer be confined to this kind of single-framed view. Emotional responses may just as well define landscapes (Davidson and Smith, 2003). Human emotions and perceptions like well-being or the sense of belonging as well as the sensation of being left behind are always part of lived experience. Therefore, while examining the subjective construction of landscape, research should consider the role of emotions, feelings and the unconscious in everyday practices along with the visual aspect of the material world. Thus it may be useful to adopt what the cultural anthropologist Tim Ingold called 'dwelling perspective': "The landscape ... is not a totality that you ... can look at, it is rather the world *in* which we stand in taking up a point of view on our surroundings" (Ingold, 2000, 207, emphasis in original). Then, further research should rather take into account that we are always already emotionally engaged beings-in-the-world, both as researcher and as inhabitant of this world.

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Note

¹ This is a subjective classification made by myself, based on my own knowledge and experience of landscapes, and as part of the interpretation process.