



Conceptualisation and perception of the landscape and its changes in a transboundary area. A case study of the Southern German-French borderland

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ABSTRACT

The interaction of human civilisation with nature is reflected in landscape that we consider as a model of totality, a micro-cosmos, providing us a perfect terrain to analyse and systematise knowledge on relationships of its elements. Since we consider humans as constitutive part of the landscape, the way of thinking of stakeholders is crucial in landscape formation. In this study, we present the perception of local professionals on the landscape character and landscape changes in a German-French transboundary area, in the southern section of the Upper Rhine Valley between Freiburg/Breisgau and Colmar. Broadening the knowledge about the common and different attitudes and motivations of local professionals helps transboundary cooperation in order to preserve the unique landscape qualities and avoid landscape degradation. The research was an inductive social study based on in-depth interviews. Respondents' narratives on present characteristics and changes of the landscapes have been analysed, compared and theorised by the grounded theory method. The assessment led first to the definition of seven interpretation axes, (ontological, epistemological, temporal, operative, causal, spatial, and personal), that gave a logical structure to order the information of the interviews and to describe the results. These dimensions also served as a red-thread for the formulation of thirteen concluding theories emerging from the assessment of the narratives. They answer the questions: What is landscape? How landscape characteristics can be captured? What happens, why, when and where in the landscape? The study revealed the similarities and differences of the attitudes, and the patterns of thoughts of German and French professionals. The study brings new insight in the field of transboundary landscape study while confirming existing results on the main topics of landscape changes and driving forces. The paper proves that future strategies have to deal with often-contradictory landscape concepts in neighbouring countries, while their understanding facilitates communication and helps harmonise goals in policies and management.

1. Introduction

The future of our civilisation depends on understanding the relationships that create reality and drive processes in landscapes, as in all other environmental systems. The deeper and more completely we know them, the fewer conflicts between human and natural systems occur. Landscape is a micro-cosmos, a model of totality, providing a perfect terrain to analyse and systematise knowledge about the interactions of its elements. Landscape is both a state, mirroring the consequence of the processes and also a changing, dynamic reality. The speed of the changes, their continuity or transformation are important characteristics of landscapes. Since we consider humans as constitutive part of the landscape, the mentality, the value systems, the prevailing paradigms, and all in all the way of thinking is crucial in landscape formation.

In this study, we present approaches of local professionals toward landscape character and landscape changes in a German-French transboundary area in the southern section of the Upper Rhine Valley between Freiburg/Breisgau and Colmar (Fig. 1). Studies of the different concepts in this borderland allow gathering knowledge that helps to understand the common and different attitudes, motivations, and goals in the two countries. Broadening the scope of mental reflection helps transboundary cooperation in a harmonised landscape management and common actions.

The concepts we are dealing with are landscape perception, landscape character, landscape change and border landscapes. Landscape was first conceived in the Renaissance when the gates of the closed cities and castles as well as the mind of artists first opened toward the larger natural space and it was represented in art (Antrop, 2006). Landscape – according to the old Dutch word 'landskab' – was

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understood as territory that refers to community, property and justice. It denotes ‘a nexus of law and cultural identity’ (Olwig, 1996, 2002). Later Humboldt, having a biogeographical eye, looked at landscape as an object of scientific research, without denying its human aspects and aesthetic qualities (Antrop and Van Eetvelde, 2017). In France Vidal de La Blache (1922) recognised the role of the local community in organising landscape, saw the holistic unity of landscapes and aimed at giving a synthetic ‘tableaux’ of idealistic landscape models (Claval, 2004). In the first decades of the 20th century, philosophers and artists in Spain conceptualised landscape as a space co-created, perceived and represented by man, where nature is the raw material that is experienced, formed by man and art plays a basic role in its representation (Csejtei and Juhász, 2012; Ortega y Gasset, 2008). According to the German philosophical theory, *landscape* is created by perception of the nature in its entirety (Ritter, 1963; Simmel, 1913). This philosophical concept diverted the idea of landscape clearly toward nature, contributing to the mainstream geomorphological landscape research in the 1970s (Geipel, 1978; Pécsi, 1967–1988; Pécsi, 1967). This physical geographical emphasis in landscape geography was clearly visible as highlighted also by Antrop and Van Eetvelde (2017). Afterwards, in the 1980s” primarily in North America, geographers have sought to reformulate landscape as a concept whose subjective and artistic resonances are to be actively embraced. They allow for the incorporation of individual, imaginative and creative human experience into studies” (Cosgrove, 1985). Recent French studies also emphasize the role of human perception through artistic landscape representation (Raymond et al., 2015). According to the English concept, landscape comes into being from the relationship of people and place (Swanwick, 2002). All these concepts include anthropogenic features influencing nature as well as human perceptions and representations.

Perception is the experience of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Ingold, 2000), which inherently belongs to landscape, representing the mental connection between man and his living space. As perception of the space intends the totality, it allows capturing the character. *Landscape character*, emphasised in the European Landscape Convention and defined as a perceptual reality of factual combination of landscape elements, emerges through human-nature interactions (Antrop, 2005; Council of Europe, 2000; Konkoly-Gyuró et al., 2010; Swanwick, 2002). Identification of the present state of a landscape draws on the character concept in that perception plays a basic role.

Nevertheless, landscape is a dynamic, living entity, thus knowledge on changes are also crucial for research (Antrop, 2005; Konkoly-Gyuró et al., 2010). *Landscape transformation* is a result of manifold interactions that can be best represented by complex issues, as land cover and land use (Konkoly-Gyuró et al., 2017). Land cover pattern reflects the state of an area, it is the result of land uses. This latter is a continuous process using the actual potentials of a particular area to fulfil various human needs. Beyond natural factors, land use is widely influenced by underlying socio-economic drivers (Plieninger et al., 2016), amongst others by the geopolitical situation. *Transboundary landscapes*, divided by state borders are especially good examples of a comparison of the similar or divergent processes, often resulting in different characters in the same biophysical landscape (Konkoly-Gyuró et al., 2010).

Borders in space delineate areas with special character. Natural borders of habitats and physical geographical landscape borders are transitional. On the contrary, artificial, administrative borders are strict lines; however, border zones along borderlines always have certain particularities and transitional features. Both transitional and strict borders signify divisions, but they have an important function in the formation of the identity of an area. Borders represent not only separation but also connection between the neighbouring entities. In our study, we have landscape borders being mainly transitional and state borders formed by the River Rhine. One of our research questions focuses on the differences within the same geographical landscape types on the opposite sides of the German-French border. Borders and borderlands are the subject of manifold studies. Some studies stress their

complexity (Homburger, 2012; Leimgruber, 2005; Paasi, 2011; Roll et al., 2010; Rumley and Minghi, 1991; Wastl-Walter, 2011), while others deal with special aspects of the borderlands. In our study areas, there are complex descriptive studies of ‘Oberheinde’ (Metz, 1925) and comparative physical and phytogeographical descriptions of the Black Forest and the Vosges from the second half of the 20th century (Eggers, 1964; Frankenberg, 1979), as well as more recent ecological (Gallusser and Schenker, 1992; Stadelbauer, 1991) historic (Krieg, 2008), economic (Euba, 1990) and integrative (Herrbach-Schmidt, 2012) studies. Identifying the character of a landscape requires a complex assessment of natural, cultural landscape elements and their perception. Perceptual issues are especially challenging; thus there are limitations in adopting this concept in borderland research and only rare examples can be found that include them (Cancela d’Abreu et al., 2004; Konkoly-Gyuró et al., 2010).

Landscapes have their own character, and co-evolve with people living and acting in them. Thus landscape is an integral part of the regional, and national identity (Antrop and Van Eetvelde, 2017; Schama, 1995; Van Mansvelt and Pedroli, 2003). Landscape perception matters as it reflects the value system of inhabitants, influences decisions, and represents their satisfaction or demands. Their requirements show how far they feel responsible toward the state of a landscape and its driving forces. Knowing each other’s opinions initiates communication and participation in decisions. That is why social research on landscape conceptualisation and valuation have recently become more frequent (Bieling, 2013; Buijs and Elands, 2013; Felber-Rufer, 2006; Hook, 2006; Hunziker, 2000; Hunziker et al., 2008; Jaago et al., 2008; Rogge et al., 2011; Soliva and Hunziker, 2009; Pinto-Correia and Azeda, 2017). Our research on perception of transboundary landscapes belongs to the series of qualitative studies that highlight concepts and attitudes of local professionals.

2. Materials and methods

Landscape perception, our core issue, is a form of man-nature interaction that has been analysed amongst theoretically selected professionals, in a concrete study area, where respondents represented two nations with different cultural approaches and attitudes. The research method was an inductive social study, resulting in concluding theories that emerged from the responses of in-depth interviews (Babbie, 2016). The process of the research started by the definition of the study area and the formulation of the questions that served as a red-thread for the in-depth interviews. The questions were the following:

- How do you perceive the character, the main natural and cultural characteristics of the landscape units (Rhine plain, piedmonts and Middle Ranges) in France and Germany?
- What are the most important landscape features in your eyes that you consider as heritage, worth preserving and what are the conflicts, and threats in the landscape?
- What are the main transformations in the landscapes that you have experienced in the study area?
- How do you consider the changes; what is positive or negative for you?

Descriptions of the present characteristics and the oral history narratives of the landscapes (Perks and Thomson, 2006) have been transcribed. It became clear that the content of the narratives is richer than the pure responses to the questions. Recognising this fact led to the interpretive methodology (Khan, 2014) of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Research questions were not answered by simple addition of the statements categories, but they were interpreted by their logical structure and relationships. Thus, the qualitative content analysis was a theoretical assessment in that the main logical structure and distribution of the statements was defined. A basic statistical analysis backed up the theoretical assessment. It was followed

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