

RAINER KAZIG

## SENSORY ENCOUNTERS WITH LANDSCAPES – ATMOSPHERES AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF LANDSCAPES

### 1. Introduction

At the heart of **Aubrac regional natural park**, **scenery** that you cross are the result of successions of volcanic activity and glacial periods, having shaped the landscape and given its character to the territory. The geology, history, atmosphere of these places, as well as the work of men, have created a unique landscape identity. (L'office de Tourisme Aubrac Laguiole Viadène 2024)

A search for mentions of atmospheres in connection with landscape descriptions will not reveal many results. The introductory quote from the website of a tourism association is one of those rather rare finds. Atmospheres seem to be used predominantly to characterise urban spaces, which is also reflected in the academic literature with numerous books and essays on urban atmospheres (Albertsen 2019, Bille-Schwabe 2023).

In this article, we wish to show that atmospheres and landscape can certainly be linked in a meaningful way, even if the two terms refer to clearly different phenomena. This is because there are indeed considerable differences in the size of the spaces to which they refer, in the conception of human sensuality from which they emanate, and also in the possibility of representing them. In linking atmosphere and landscape, we start from an understanding of landscape as a socially constructed conception of space which has been used since the 1990s, particularly in geographical landscape research. In this understanding, landscape is not – as is predominant in everyday contexts – understood as something materially given that can be seen, for example, from a vantage point, but as a social construction that is characterised by certain contents and that circulates in society. Linking the construction of landscape with atmospheres means focusing on the sensory encounter with spaces designated as landscape, conceptualised in a specific way. The interest in the social construction of landscape raises the question of how this sensory encounter with landscape

flows into the social construction of landscape. We do not answer this question with an empirical study, but with a conceptually orientated contribution that shows how the concept of atmosphere can be relevant in the investigation of individual constructions of landscape concepts. In order to develop our considerations, we will first introduce the social constructivist tradition of landscape research and explain how the sensory encounter with landscape is understood from the perspective of research on atmospheres. We follow this by showing two ways in which atmospheres can be relevant to the individual construction of landscape. Finally, the value of this research perspective for both landscape research and atmosphere research is discussed.

## **2. The social construction of landscapes**

The term landscape refers to a visually recognisable section of the earth's surface, which can contain both natural and man-made elements (Tissier 2003). Historically, the term landscape has both an aesthetic-emotional and a physical-material background (Berr-Schenk 2019). On the one hand, landscape is thus understood as a natural spatial unit of the earth's surface. On the other hand, the connection with aesthetics gives rise to a specific sensory understanding of landscape, which is characterised by the idea of a distanced observer and places the visual perception in the foreground. In addition, the aesthetic-emotional background is linked to the idea of representing landscapes in the form of landscape painting and landscape photography. The development of the aesthetic dimension of landscape is also accompanied by emotional references to landscape, on which the development of landscape protection is based.

In line with the complexity of the phenomenon of landscape, numerous disciplines deal with landscape, each with their own specific approaches. This article focuses on the interest in the social construction of landscape or specific landscapes which has developed as a perspective in landscape research since the 1990s, particularly in geography (Kühne 2019, Wylie 2007). In German-speaking human geography in particular, the analysis of the social construction of landscape has gained in importance over the past 20 years and has remained an important perspective in landscape research to this day. At the centre of the various social constructivist approaches is the idea that the notion of what is understood as a landscape, or what characterises a specific

landscape, is socially constructed. With this perspective, landscape research has on the one hand turned towards texts or other forms of representation. On the other hand, it is interested in constructions of landscape among the population and their differentiation according to sociocultural characteristics.

In English-language human geography, the social constructivist research perspective has developed predominantly as a text-based approach, from which subjects as actors of construction are excluded (Wylie 2007). The previously mentioned sensory dimension of the concept of landscape has thus receded into the background in this type of landscape research. It has not fundamentally disappeared from English-language landscape research, but has found its own place in phenomenological and post-phenomenological approaches, which developed after the text-related social constructivist approaches. However, no bridges were built to the text-related approaches, so that ultimately there is no framework for the question of the significance of sensory encounters with landscape for the construction of landscape conceptions.

German-language social constructivist landscape research has taken a different path. It is particularly interested in landscape constructions among the population. Kühne – one of the protagonists of this field of research – has developed a model in which he distinguishes between different dimensions of landscape construction (Kühne 2019). The distinction between societal and individual constructions of landscape is of particular interest for the purpose of this article. The latter are understood as individual actualisations of societal constructions. Weber (2018) uses a discourse-analytical perspective that also distinguishes between societal and individual constructions of landscape, which are conceived as being in a dynamic relationship to one another.

In order to understand the emergence and dynamics of individual landscape constructions, biographical backgrounds have recently been taken into account and empirically analysed with the help of biographical-narrative approaches (Jenal *et al.* 2019). With this development in landscape research, attention has also been paid to the experience of landscape as a moment of the subjective construction process. Only Crossey *et al.* (2022) have so far explicitly considered the significance of atmospheres for the construction of landscapes. They have made a conceptual proposal and illustrated in an explorative study of an urban landscape how

the conscious experience of atmospheres as a moment of the subjective construction of landscapes can be tracked down.

In contrast to the purely text-based English-language tradition of landscape research, German-language research thus offers a framework that is open to the consideration of sensory encounters in the subjective construction process. The first steps have already been taken towards a concretisation of this perspective, which can be taken up here. As a basis for the development of this perspective, the next step is to clarify how the sensory encounter with landscape is to be understood against the background of the concept of atmosphere.

### **3. The sensory encounter with landscapes from the perspective of atmospheric research**

Thinking about landscape from the concept of atmosphere means starting from a living encounter with landscape. Similarly to how Thrift-Dewsbury (2000) characterised the turn of human geography towards affects in the early 2000s, the consideration of atmospheres in social constructivist landscape research can be understood as a contribution to bringing it to life. Furthermore, the use of the concept of atmosphere means breaking with the visual orientation that is important for the concept of landscape and assuming an encounter with landscape mediated by all the senses. This is because the concept of atmosphere is based on the idea of a subject that is connected to and integrated into its surroundings at all times via all of its senses. With the concept of atmosphere, subject and environment are therefore not seen as two separate spheres, but as connected to each other via the senses.

Against the backdrop of its strong references to phenomenology, research on atmospheres understands the human sensory faculty not as the perception of objects or signs, but as sensing or feeling. It assumes a subject who is elastic in a certain sense, whose state can change under the influence of the sensory qualities of his surroundings. Experiencing an atmosphere therefore means sensing one's own state depending on the sensory qualities of the surroundings. For example, walking through a meadow of flowers can make one feel cheerful. However, atmospheres are not only experienced through one's own state in a particular environment. Böhme (2001, 81) has emphasised that a specific subjective state goes hand in hand with a way of «experiencing the world». The happy feeling when walking through the meadow as a result of the

smells, colours and sounds therefore also contributes to the meadow being experienced as a happy place. Atmospheres are thus also experienced in that spaces appear to be tuned in a certain way (Ströker 1965, 22 ff.) or characterised by a specific affective tonality (Thibaud 2015, 221 ff.). With the sensation of one's own state of mind when encountering a specific environment and the affective tonality of spaces, there are therefore two ways in which atmospheres of a landscape can be experienced.

Atmospheres are however rarely experienced consciously. Even if the sensory involvement of people in their surroundings as described above is to be understood as an anthropological constant – people are always part of an atmosphere – atmospheres remain predominantly a background phenomenon on a preconscious level. However, this does not mean that atmospheres do not influence the subjective state of a person. For example, an atmosphere can be subtly reflected in the type of attention, the change in motor skills and thus also in the performance of activities, without this being consciously registered. Rauh (2012, 158) has introduced the term «special atmosphere» to characterise situations in which an atmosphere is consciously experienced. This distinction between atmospheres as a preconscious influence on the subjective state and the performance of activities and atmospheres as a consciously experienced phenomenon opens up two possibilities for how atmospheres can come into play in the subjective construction of landscapes. Before we go into these two possibilities, it is important to briefly explain a condition of the effectiveness of atmospheres that is particularly important for the examination of landscapes.

In many cases, research on atmospheres implicitly assumes a passive subject when experiencing atmospheres and emphasises the pathic dimension. Bille-Simonsen (2021) have pointed out that atmospheres in everyday situations predominantly come into play in the context of activities and that the activities must be taken into account as an influencing factor for the experience. For this reason, in this article we refer to encounters with landscapes. These encounters take place while hiking, cycling, jogging or foraging for mushrooms, for example, and it can be assumed that the experience of atmospheres can change with the activities engaged in.

Following on from these considerations, the next two sections turn to the question of how atmospheres can influence the social construction of landscapes. As previously indicated, a distinction is made between two possibilities: the conscious experience of

atmospheres and atmospheres as conditions of situated perception.

#### **4. The conscious experience of atmospheres as a moment of subjective construction of landscape**

As already mentioned in the second section, the question of the significance of the experience of atmospheres for the construction of landscapes has so far been given little importance. Only Crossey *et al.* (2022) have explicitly addressed this issue and, in addition to a conceptual discussion and methodological considerations, have also presented an empirical exploration using the example of an urban landscape. Their contribution, in which the author of this paper was also involved, represents an important starting point for the following considerations.

The extensive exclusion of this question from the range of topics in atmospheric research is understandable against the background of the importance of phenomenological thinking for its development. It emphasised personal sensation, whereas questions about the social construction of the world were largely ignored. In German-speaking human geography, research on atmospheres was even explicitly understood in some places as a counter-project to social constructivist approaches (Hasse 2017). Against the background of this line of development, it is understandable that the search for a connection between the experience of atmospheres and the social construction of spaces has not imposed itself as a research question.

In order to understand how the conscious experience of atmospheres can be understood as a moment in the social construction of landscape concepts, it is necessary to take a closer look at how the moment of sensory perception can be conceptualised. Even if atmospheric research has not posed the question of the development of social constructions of spaces in the course of experiencing atmospheres, conceptual considerations can be found in some places that social constructivist considerations can build on.

Ulber, for example (2017, 49ff.), with reference to Böhme (2001), has emphasised bodily reflexivity as an important characteristic of the experience of atmospheres. The term emphasises that a moment of conscious reference to one's own state of being arises at the moment of sensing an atmosphere. In principle, this moment of a conscious reference to one's own state

has the potential to be linked to subjective constructions of landscapes. However, the author does not delve any further into the theoretical considerations on this moment, although it is an important element in her discussion of artistic translations of landscape atmospheres. In an empirical study of the experience of Rüdeshheim's Drosselgasse, Hasse (2002) emphasised the importance of interpretations in the experience of atmospheres. With reference to Schmitz, he makes it clear that every statement about the sensing of atmospheres is based on «subjective feelings as in interpretive thinking» (Hasse 2002, 80). In this way, linguistic statements about the sensing of atmospheres must always be regarded as «a process of social construction» (Hasse 2002, 80). In these remarks, Hasse refers to linguistic statements that have arisen in the context of empirical research. However, the interplay of sensations with interpretations described by Hasse can also take place on a purely mental level without being expressed orally or in everyday exchanges about the experience of atmospheres.

Similarly to what Hasse only briefly alluded to, Vannini *et al.* (2012, 15ff.) have placed an understanding of human sensory experience as a combination of sensing and interpreting at the centre of their sociology of the senses with the concept of «somatic work». They use the term to emphasise that sensory experience should not be understood as a physiological process, but rather as an active interplay of sensing and sense-making (Vannini *et al.* 2012, 18ff.), which takes place in the form of «somatic rules». The term «somatic rules» is intended to emphasise the habitual dimension of «somatic work». Vannini *et al.* (2012, 20) emphasise that new connections between sensing and sense-making can also be created in the course of somatic work practices. The considerations of understanding sensing as part of a sense-making process were also explicitly linked to social constructivist research. In a discussion of Berger-Luckmann's (1966) seminal work for social constructivist thinking, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Friedmann (2016) emphasised that the two authors predominantly argue on a cognitive level. With reference to the concept of human sensory faculty as somatic work in the sociology of the senses, she proposes paying more attention to perception as a central, previously neglected mechanism in the social construction of reality and thus renewing social constructivist research. Even though Friedmann speaks of perceptions, her

considerations can in principle be applied to the conscious experience of atmospheres.

Based on these conceptual considerations, the conscious experience of atmospheres can also be understood as a moment in which a construction of landscape concepts can take place. The task for empirical research is thus to show in which places and in what way the conscious experience of atmospheres actually flows into the construction of landscape (or is related to other spatial constructions, or contains no connection with spatial constructions). Various questions are of interest for empirical research: firstly, it is important to ask in which places and at which moments landscape atmospheres are consciously experienced at all and enter into the construction of landscapes. Another question of interest is whether and how different activities (such as walking, cycling or jogging) when encountering landscapes, social and cultural differences or particular personal relationships to the landscape influence the emergence of the conscious experience of atmospheres and their integration into subjective landscape constructions.

Empirically, this question can be investigated using a multi-method design as described by Crossey *et al.* (2022). In essence, the methodology consists of recording situations or episodes in which the encounter with landscape is consciously experienced in a first step. In a second step, it is then necessary to reconstruct this conscious experience of atmospheres *in situ* with the help of qualitative interviews. By analysing these descriptions, connections between the experience of atmospheres and constructions of landscape can then be traced. Furthermore, the question arises as to the position of atmospheres in the overall structure of individual landscape constructions.

### **5. Atmospheres as a condition of situated perception**

Atmospheres can also influence the subjective construction of landscape as a condition of perception. In this case, however, they remain on a preconscious level and do not themselves enter into landscape construction as an element. They rather suggest a certain form of perception of landscape. For example, one can imagine a walk across a meadow in different weather conditions (a calm situation versus a situation with strong winds). In the calm situation, it is obvious that the meadow can be perceived in a relaxed manner with all the senses, whereas in strong winds, a



corresponding sensory opening towards the surroundings is less obvious.

In order to understand the interplay of atmospheres, perception and subjective constructions of landscapes on a theoretical level, perception must be understood as a practice that can be carried out in various forms. In other words, it is necessary to assume a multitude of possible forms of perception. Atmospheres can be seen as a factor that influences the form of perception that arises in a place. When discussing the connection between atmospheres and perception, Thibaud (2003) emphasised that we perceive according to an atmosphere. The influence of atmospheres on the form of perception becomes understandable when one considers that the influence of atmospheres on a person's state can be manifested in the way in which activities are carried out (Kazig 2007). If perception is understood as an activity or a practice, it becomes clear that the realisation of perception can change according to an atmosphere and the somatic work can take on a corresponding form. Accordingly, a specific form of perception can also influence the construction of landscape.

For landscape research, therefore, the question arises as to how atmospheres can modify the forms of perception when encountering landscapes and thus influences the subjective construction of landscape in a specific way. The study of the influence of atmospheres that change with the time of day, season or weather on perception and on the construction of landscape concepts is certainly an interesting question. In addition, the question also arises as to how different landscape-related activities such as hiking, cycling, jogging, picking mushrooms or watching birds go along with specific forms of perception and constructions of landscape. It ties in with Bille-Simonsen's (2021) consideration, already presented above, of assuming an active person in the question of the power of atmospheres and assuming that atmospheres unfold in different ways depending on the activity.

So far, there is no experience of the empirical implementation of these questions. Research designs with a comparative component appear promising, for example by contrasting the process of constructing of landscape in connection with different landscape-related activities or at different points in time (seasons, times of day, weather conditions). Similarly to the question of the influence of the conscious experience of atmospheres on the construction of landscapes, multi-method designs will also be useful here. On the

one hand, they must allow us to track down the moment of the sensory encounter in the construction process and, on the other hand, to understand the significance of this moment in the individual construction of landscape.

## 6. Conclusion

Thinking about the social construction of landscape in terms of the concept of atmosphere means focusing on sensory encounters with landscapes and understanding how these moments of vivid encounters with landscape flow into the subjective construction of landscape. With atmospheres as conditions of situated perception and the conscious experience of atmospheres, we have distinguished two ways in which atmospheres can be relevant to this process. Both are based on the understanding of sensory perception as a practice in which sensing and sense-making interact and which can therefore also be a moment in the subjective construction of landscape.

By focusing on the conscious experience of atmospheres, situations come into view in which atmospheres themselves can become an element of landscape constructions. Here it is important to understand which places and times are important for this when encountering a specific landscape space, to what extent they are shared individually or collectively, whether and how they are linked to certain activities in the landscape. The question also arises as to what position atmospheres occupy in the overall picture of both individual and collective landscape constructions.

The consideration of atmospheres as a condition of situated perception draws attention to the variety of forms of perception in encounters with landscapes that can arise under the influence of changing atmospheres. From this perspective, the question arises as to how the different forms of perception are manifested in the construction of landscapes. Of particular interest here is the question of how different landscape-related activities influence the perception and social construction of landscapes.

Especially when analysing the social construction of landscapes, which many people encounter in everyday life with a sensual interest, the consideration of these encounters as a moment of their social construction seems particularly relevant. The consideration of atmospheres therefore appears to be a promising innovation for social constructivist landscape research. Its empirical implementation requires skilful methodological combinations,

which could only be roughly outlined here. However, they appear to be realisable, so that this article can also be understood as an invitation to test this new perspective of social constructivist landscape research in empirical studies.

The examination of the question of the contribution of atmospheres to the construction of landscapes is also of interest for atmospheric research. Beyond the context of landscape, it can also be understood as an invitation to focus more on the experience of atmospheres as a moment of the social construction of spaces in atmospheric research.

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