

Empathising with Views of the Landscape

In this study, empathy is examined within the context of an embodied aesthetic experience in which observers transfer their emotional content onto the landscape. Photography is used as a medium of engagement with the landscape, in which both images and the practices of image-making are discussed in the context of landscape. Understanding our environment, the landscapes and places that inhabit it is often a deeply personal experience. The experiences are driven by an aesthetic engagement with our surroundings through sight, sound, smell, or touch (Berleant 2009, Salwa 2022). Landscape can hold contested meanings for different groups and empathy can be a useful tool in helping different groups come to an understanding of each other's views on landscape. Promoting empathy through pedagogy can also foster an environment where we are critically aware of our views and the views of others.

The focus of this study is based on a visual engagement with the landscape through photography and the social practices of image-making. Landscape's etymology originates from a visual engagement with our environment. Although the term has been expanded to encompass our growing understanding of how we perceive the phenomenon of landscape through all our senses (Ingold 2000, Malpas 2011, Massey 2000, Mitchell 2002), the visual remains a dominant way of sensing the landscape. Within the study, observers imaginatively project their ideas onto the landscape to help formulate an understanding of their emotional connection to it, and they repeat their engagement in this process as they listen to others do the same. The research investigates, through Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) exercises, how specific concepts of empathy are experienced when engaging with the landscape and listening to others' experiences of it. While engaging with the landscape through workshops the observers collect images of the landscape that evoke an empathetic response within them. Using images to respond to the landscape can raise issues. For instance, I do not wish to reduce the landscape to a representation but use the images as a practised response to being in the landscape. Therefore, a key thought behind the study is how we manifest our landscapes in images and what are the expressive elements of the images we make that connect us to the landscape.

The term landscape is commonly used in contemporary research, so it is essential to define it within the context of the research. Although the foundation of the word landscape lies in representation, it is, according to writers such as Tim Ingold, Jeff Malpas, and Edward Casey, thought of as a process that is constantly being reformulated. The terms space and place are often used to describe our environment, however, landscape is "inherently aesthetic, which means that it has an aspect that place or space do not necessarily possess." (Salwa 2022, 187) It is that aesthetic aspect of the landscape that allows us to respond to it through our senses. Landscapes are also something we are actively in, rather than in front of and they are in us too. (Casey 2009, Ingold 2000, Malpas 2011, Salwa 2022) The emotional significance we attach to our landscapes stems from our internalization of them. Therefore, by studying specific concepts of empathy, we can better understand our conceptions of landscape, allowing us to formulate a critical response to them.

Empathy displays itself in many nuanced ways, it has therefore been recommended that researchers work to recognise it in all its manifestations (Batson 2009, Sinefield-Kangas 2019). While being difficult to define, empathy has some defining characteristics. Its affective characteristic is set in experiencing the feelings of another while the cognitive characteristic is defined as being able to understand another's perspective (de Waal 2008, Sinefield-Kangas 2019). These definitions are helpful; however, it is important to remember that the "multiple expressive qualities of empathy make it difficult to identify and label at times" (Sinefield-Kangas 2019, 4). Examining it through VTS exercises can bring forth empathetic responses to landscapes that can be useful in terms of learning to critically respond to our understanding of landscape and to embrace the perspectives of another.

It can also assist in learning how the phenomenon of landscape connects to the attributes of empathetic behaviour. The study seeks to learn not just about landscape but also how contemporary photographic practices can be used with VTS methods as a pedagogical approach that can elicit empathetic phenomena between participants. That can also be a useful pedagogical tool in developing ways of understanding our shared experiences of the same landscapes.

One of the aims of the research is to use it in a socially engaged art practice with photography while working with communities of place. In September 2023, I used the method when working on a socially engaged project in Covilhã, Portugal. Covilhã once had a large wool industry that was based around the use of natural resources such as the mountains and streams, therefore the identity of Covilhã and its residents is strongly connected with the landscape. Together with members of the local community, we engaged in a workshop that used photography as a way of responding to the landscape. The workshop consisted of an introduction to the research, landscape as a concept, and the characteristics of empathy in relation to the aesthetic. After the introduction, we walked in the landscape and participants had time to wander in it, engaging with it through photography. After the walk, we reconvened, and participants shared some of their images. We discussed both the experience of making the images and wandering in the landscape and the images themselves. The discussion was recorded and at the end, participants answered a questionnaire in line with VTS methodologies so that the data could be examined as part of the overall research.

Keywords

Landscape, Empathy, Visual Thinking Strategies, Pedagogy, Technology