

VISUAL IMAGERY AND LEARNING ABOUT CULTURAL LANDSCAPES DURING GEOGRAPHY UNIVERSITY STUDIES

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(Received: January 2019; in revised form: February 2019)

ABSTRACT

One of the most complex topics in Geography is linked to cultural landscapes. Although this concept has aroused the interest of scholars from different nations and the bibliography is diverse, among students there are still uncertainties concerning the meaning of cultural landscapes. Thus, at the Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University, in Cluj-Napoca, Regional Planning and Development M.Sc. programme, the students had in their first semester a discipline named Cultural Landscapes, which provided the theoretical background using international references. For assessment, students were asked to transfer their knowledge into practice by realising a postcard with cultural landscapes of Cluj-Napoca city. This paper analyses the process of learning during solving the task, presenting firstly different views about cultural landscapes in geographical literature. The methodology used comprises the analysis of the process of learning, starting from discussions on the theory and going to the presentation of the task, the evaluation and the actual process of making the postcards undertaken by the students. There were eight postcards realised in pairs which were assessed using an especially designed grid. The whole activity carried out by the students was analysed from a didactic point of view. It is demonstrated that, being helped by theoretical discussions during the courses, the students managed to understand the cultural landscape and, moreover, to put into practice what they had learned. Thus, they managed to achieve a different perspective for some familiar landscapes from the city, in which they had lived for about three years. This learning activity actually put the theoretical frame into another light and so the students had become more aware of the meaning of cultural landscapes by experiencing them on their own.

Keywords: *Geography higher education, photography, picture postcard, collage, competence, assessment criteria and indicators*

INTRODUCTION. PROBLEM DESCRIPTION AND MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

This observational research was carried out during the 2018-2019 academic year, at the Faculty of Geography from Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The problem we wanted to solve started from our observation that, during the didactic activity with Geography M.Sc. students, they related to cultural landscapes based on their knowledge acquired very probably in pre-university education, placing the emphasis on unique elements and on the existence of tourist attractions. Thus, students observed the cultural landscape of Cluj-Napoca from the perspective of a tourist. This can be explained, to a certain extent, by the fact that most of the students who enrolled in this M.Sc. programme and, implicitly, took the course, came for university studies in this city. Still, all these students, being in their first year at the M.Sc. programme, have spent at least three years in the city of Cluj-Napoca.

At the discipline *Cultural Landscapes*, which they attended within the *Regional Planning and Development* M.Sc. programme in their first year, we tried to change the way they related to the cultural (anthropic) landscapes of Cluj-Napoca (and to cultural landscapes in general). To achieve this, students had to go through several training stages so that they entered into a deeper direct relationship with the landscape and did not position outside it, as tourists or as someone who assessed the "objective" landscape, considering mainly aesthetic criteria.

We placed the students inside the urban landscape from the beginning, because we asked them to take pictures of various cultural landscapes in Cluj-Napoca for about four months (October 2018-January 2019), choosing landscapes depending on the recommended bibliography and their own experience as temporary or permanent residents of Cluj-Napoca (that meant that the photographed landscapes should have had meanings that were specific of each student, depending on his or her interactions with the city).

The aim of the course was to help students acquire autonomy, to enable them in forming and assessing their competences to identify the elements of cultural landscapes and to analyse and discuss their typology. Therefore, one objective was for students to understand the economic, social, cultural and political factors that contributed to the formation of cultural landscapes, through the case study of Cluj-Napoca.

In this applicative ascertaining or observational research, we investigated (1) the activity carried out by the M.Sc. students, (2) the postcards they created, the oral presentation and the written text which they presented, and based on them, (3) we realised a self-evaluation grid of their picture postcards collages and of their oral and written presentations, in order to optimize (a) the learning process (and representation of cultural landscapes), as well as (b) students' self-assessment and our assessment of their learning outcomes.

Students also realised the subjectivity involved in working with picture postcards, with material landscapes and with visual imagery in general:

“[...] indeed the interpretations we make of them tell us as much about ourselves and our cultural assumptions as about their original significance” (Cosgrove, 2008, p. 184).

The study of landscape, by deconstructing its multiple meanings, develops students’ critical thinking: landscapes are not what they seem, but they should be read/analysed and understood. The meaning is not evident at a first “reading” of the landscape, because it is:

“[...] a highly-textured place, with multiple layers of meaning... a symbolic place where a number of cultures meet and perhaps clash” (Oakes & Price, 2008, Introduction to Cosgrove, p. 176).

Moreover, recent research showed the crucial importance of landscapes as resources for territorial planning, place-identity creation and cohesive development (Colavitti, 2016, 2018; Havadi-Nagy & Ilovan, 2018; Ilovan & Maroși, 2018; Markuszewska, 2019) and therefore students’ mastering of the concept is crucial for their training and future jobs in the field of territorial planning and development.

Short observations about the postcards made by the M.Sc. students and about the oral and written texts they presented

The students were asked to identify various types of landscapes. The aesthetics criterion was present, but not essential. They were encouraged to search for the “ugly” urban too, not just for what was perceived as beautiful. But this was more evident in the photographic essay, because in the postcards, in the selection process, information from the students’ cultural background was active: the postcards showed beautiful landscapes, they considered that postcards had to be a visiting card of the city. So any unpleasant landscape might have been automatically avoided and the harmony of representation in the collage was pursued (for instance, a student even used several software programmes to embellish photos).

Because students aimed to render the aesthetic qualities of landscape, therefore subjectively selecting what they considered or was considered to be “beautiful”, a high degree of conventionalism was involved in the picture postcards they created. Students succeeded in producing conventional representations of landscapes and included conventional landscapes into their picture postcards, rather than offering a completely new and more subjective or alternative manner of seeing the living environment in Cluj-Napoca.

Landscapes are *quasi-objects* (Mitchell, D., 2008, p. 163, quoting Bruno Latour’s concept): “they are not only material reality, but they are also an embodiment of the relations that went into building them”. Don Mitchell transfers this approach to considering landscape a *quasi-object* because of “embodying all the multifarious relations, struggles, arguments,

representations and conclusions that went into its making" (Mitchell, D., 2008, pp. 163-164), and thus it is only logical that it structures our social reality (Mitchell, D., 2008, p. 164), our relations to the material reality and among people.

So, most often, instead of critically analysing the landscape, of understanding its meanings and critically challenging them, of challenging the power relations that produced the respective landscape, and its function, we end up either reproducing the landscape in visual representations or in verbal/written ones. This was also the case with students' representations of Cluj-Napoca in their picture postcards: students reproduced the landscape or former landscape representations; as a rule, they did not challenge its meanings and conventional representations. It may be also because they perceived the picture postcard as a conventional and conservative product (reproducing established, traditional representations of the urban area, in this case).

Students selected many landscapes hosting monuments. They created picture postcards celebrating iconic images of the city: the symbolic buildings and other type of constructions (with a memorialization function) are located in the city centre. These have the function of pointing out what the community is/should be proud of: they are "symbols of memorialization" (Oakes & Price, 2008, Introduction to Cosgrove, p. 177).

However, in students' picture postcards, certain social attitudes can be identified as well as the visual experience of students' everyday world. Their representation of Cluj-Napoca in picture postcards was celebrating their experience with the city. Some of them also expressed these in written text, accompanying the selected images:

"Cluj becomes a painting of generations, attitudes, statues";

"The horizon line under which a small town full of vivacity and complexity is carved";

"Elizabeth Bridge, a cold iron bridge, warmed by incurable romantics";

"And when all the longings [doruri] travel, few arrive at their destination";

"The best drink is served during the classes, on Piezișă Street!";

"It may seem hilarious, but one of my favourite places in Cluj is an intersection, which I rush through almost every day and evening".

Observations about the self-assessment grid of collage postcards and their oral and written presentations realised by students

The grid (Table 1) is a dichotomic one (Yes / No option) and it can perform the role of a checklist. It can be used in self-assessment or assessment (to verify whether each criterion was accomplished). The achievement of criteria and indicators is established by observing the images; the compliance to some of the criteria is confirmed by checking the pictures and oral and written texts; however, the accomplishment of certain criteria can be checked only on the students' written texts.

CONCLUSIONS

From the bibliography that students read for the course of *Cultural Landscapes*, they collected many ideas that synthesized various landscape features: the landscape is firstly a whole, it cannot be expressed by its constituent parts taken separately because it is more than summing them up. It includes physical and cultural components, which are expressed in space and time and moreover, which coexist and are interrelated. The two major elements that compose a landscape are the nature as the scene of human activities and culture as an agent of change that transforms the natural basis and leaves a certain footprint on it.

However, the natural environment reserves a note of originality, a last word expressed by the way it assimilates the anthropic interventions, this being associated with the footprint that offers the uniqueness of the landscape. Thus every landscape has its own identity, a specific shape and knowable boundaries, which delimit various types of landscapes. It is important to mention that every landscape has its own aesthetics, dictated by its internal organization, more or less understood by those analysing it.

Each landscape has its own history; depending on the stage of evolution, the landscapes can be new (created recently, with modern architecture) or relicts (those that have been preserved in an archaic form, slightly altered by the touch of modernity). In both situations, people are the ones who act as modifiers of the landscape, modelling it for their own pleasure and utility. In this case, the landscape fits people's desires and serves people's needs, being in a continuous transformation. Some landscapes are texts from which one can read the past, because they encompass several historical periods, several overlapping places, and so the scenery is a palimpsest.

The landscape also depends strongly on the person who reads it because each reader adds his or her emotions, thoughts, feelings, he or she mentally represents his or her landscape and realises connections between landscape imagery and landscape reality. The whole process has as a result a new landscape, a subjective landscape, which bears the author's signature. Therefore, at the end of our activity, students realised that "[l]andscape is in fact a 'way of seeing'" (Cosgrove, 2008, p. 179).

Besides the connotations offered by each viewer, the landscapes can intentionally conceal other aspects, which are only discovered by the more attentive viewers. For example, the landscape can be a "social hieroglyph", a symbol for the social relationships it hides. And not just social relationships (power, politics), but also gender relations (the way that gender is represented in the landscape). Each landscape communicates a certain set of values, which is expressed in a less obvious way, leaving the viewer the freedom to understand and interpret it.

Considering all these theoretical and methodological contributions brought about by international and national research to the concept of *landscape*, our teaching and learning approach to the cultural landscapes of Cluj-Napoca enabled us to develop, with the students, an activity and an assessment grid that improve professor-student interaction during lectures and seminars, as well as students' learning process.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to our students for allowing us to present in this paper the picture postcards they created and some quotations from their written presentations.

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