

Module: BMOE6003

Title: Perceptions of Landscape: Intersections of History, Culture, and Emotion

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Introduction

Urban spaces are complex environments shaped by diverse perspectives and representations (Avanesov, 2024). A variety of forces influence human perceptions of landscapes and shape the ways individuals and societies interact with them. The understanding of landscapes is inherently subjective, influenced by personal histories, cultural norms, and environmental contexts (Cosgrove, 1998; Tuan, 2021; Ingold, 2002).

According to the Council of Europe (2000), landscape policy refers to how public authorities outline broad principles and strategies that guide actions to protect, manage, and shape landscapes. These policies also reflect the cultural and human values attached to the landscape, acknowledging people's role in its perception and development (Swanwick, 2002).

Landscape matters to me because it evokes a deep emotional and sensory response which leads to reflection, creativity, and a sense of connection. I perceive landscape not as a static backdrop or as forbidden territory but as an active influence on wellbeing and identity. My experience of environments such as numerous coastal and mountainous regions, winding rivers, mossy wooded mazes, and open ocean resonates on a soulful

level, offering both a sanctuary and an inspiration. This aligns with ideas of landscape as more than a physical space: it is a site of memory, perception, and personal meaning.

As Aitchison, Shaw, and MacLeod (2000) assert in *Leisure and Tourism Landscapes: Social and Cultural Geographies*, landscapes are often constructed through the lenses of tourism and recreation, transforming natural spaces into cultural symbols that reflect identity and memory. These symbolic landscapes are constantly evolving, shaped by human activity and broader cultural contexts. Over the last two decades, awareness of landscape as an integrated, holistic concept has increased, shifting from a tourism-centric focus to one that incorporates social values, ecological integrity, and sustainable practices (Meneghello, 2021).

The concept of 'nature': cultural, religious, and capitalist influences

Capitalist systems have had a profound effect on landscape formation and perception, often resulting in the commodification of natural environments. Landscapes are increasingly marketed for tourism, real estate, and recreation, leading to a reshaping of spaces to fit consumer demands rather than ecological or cultural integrity (Harvey, 1989).

Raised in a religious and spiritual community, I was also brought up with an open-minded approach to various belief systems, including those rooted in traditional and pagan traditions. This broader perspective nurtured my respect for the Earth, fostering a deep, personal connection to nature that continues to evolve. The bond I have with the ocean and the natural world is something I attribute to both my upbringing and my ongoing personal journey which is forever an everlasting discovery.

Definitions of landscape: place, power, culture, commodity, heritage, recreational resource

Gruner (2023) shows how landscapes are not just natural spaces, but places shaped by human activity, becoming cultural expressions of a society's values, traditions, and way of life; cultural landscapes. The perception of landscapes, therefore, becomes a dynamic interaction between the natural world and the cultural meanings assigned to it.

Over the last two decades, awareness of landscape as an integrated holistic concept has improved historic tourism-centric viewpoints by researching landscapes from a landscape-centric viewpoint, incorporating social values, ecological values, and sustainable practices (Meneghello, 2021).

For artists like J.M.W. Turner, the countryside was seen as fragile and precious, full of emotional and spiritual meaning. As Moorby (2025) points out, Turner's paintings often show rural and coastal landscapes as both powerful and beautiful, but also under threat from industrialisation. This reflects what Williams (1973) describes in *The Country and the City* about the romantic idea of the countryside as a pure escape from the corruption of city life. Turner's work wasn't just looking back nostalgically; it also criticised the social and economic changes of his time, turning nature into a powerful symbol of freedom against the rise of industry.

Romanticism and landscape aesthetics

The enduring influence of Romanticism has shaped not only how we visually appreciate landscapes but also how we emotionally connect with them. In the Romantic era, artists and writers celebrated nature as a source of spiritual insight, emotional intensity, and sublime beauty, often portraying dramatic scenery as a means of awakening deeper human truths (Hyde, 1915). This legacy persists in the way modern societies idealise 'untouched' or 'picturesque' settings.

For example, the Romantic tradition of viewing nature as awe-inspiring and spiritually restorative continues to influence leisure activities and conservation priorities today (McLean and Hurd, 2025).

Landscape perception theory and sense of place

The way people perceive landscapes emerges from a complex interplay of internal and external forces. Internally, personal memories, emotions, cultural identities, and psychological dispositions shape individual attachments to place, turning ordinary settings into environments laden with personal significance (Ilovan and Markuszewska, 2022). Externally, societal narratives, historical context, media portrayals, educational

frameworks, and public policy frame the collective value (or disregard) of particular landscapes (Andreina et al., 2023).

These interwoven influences demonstrate that our engagement with landscape is both emotionally intimate and socially constructed (Brown and Raymond, 2014). Recognising this dual nature is essential for appreciating the cultural ecosystem services and broader human values that landscapes provide, contributing directly to individual well-being and community identity (Daniel et al., 2012).

Over the past four decades, research into place attachment has expanded considerably. However, the focus has remained largely on individual psychological factors rather than on the attributes of places themselves or the dynamic processes involved. This imbalance has hindered the establishment of a unified theory, highlighting the need for future research to draw from fields such as social capital theory, environmental aesthetics, and phenomenological understandings of meaning-making (Lewicka, 2011).

I've always been drawn to the water, whether it was surfing waves or catching the wind while kitesurfing. Those moments of adrenaline, exhilaration, and peace are unlike anything else. Nicholas (2014) in *Blue Mind* talks about how being near or in water can create a deep sense of calm, happiness, and connection. The connection I have with the ocean runs deep and has been a meaningful part of my life since childhood. Living by the sea has become more than just a part of my life; it has shaped my identity. Inalhan, Yang, and Weber (2021) explore the idea of place attachment, and for me, the ocean isn't just a backdrop anymore; it's a fundamental part of who I am and how I connect with the world around me.

Lewicka (2023) explains that when people treat their communities as fixed and unchanging, they are more likely to see newcomers as threats. However, when places are seen as dynamic and evolving, attachment can actually make communities stronger and more welcoming. The way we imagine our home matters.

Through my relationship with the sea, I have come to develop a unique understanding of sense of place, a concept deeply rooted in the connection between individuals and their environments. I resonate with Thomas (1975), who argues that humans are inseparable

from nature, contrasting with perspectives like Larsen's (1992), which suggest that humanity is separate from it. This ongoing relationship with nature shapes how I perceive landscapes and our interaction with them. I believe that we *are* nature, but in modern society, we have created ways to separate ourselves from it, often to our own disadvantage. Gooley (2016) in *The Natural Navigator Pocket Guide*, points out how humans once read natural signs instinctively to move through and live with the landscape. Today, many of these skills have been forgotten, deepening our disconnection from the natural world and weakening the relationship we once had with it.

Landscapes are deeply influenced by social and cultural forces, shaping how people interpret and engage with them. The meanings we attach to a landscape are often informed by collective cultural narratives, historical contexts, and individual emotional connections. Yi-Fu Tuan's (1990) concept of topophilia illustrates how people form emotional bonds with places, influencing their perception and value of landscapes. Tuan argues that landscapes are not only perceived visually but also felt emotionally, with bonds formed to specific places deeply shaping how they are experienced.

Similarly, Aitchison et al. (2000) examine how landscapes are transformed into leisure and tourism spaces, where people's experiences are shaped by both personal desires and social expectations. In these spaces, cultural identity and social practices intersect with the physical environment, creating landscapes that hold symbolic significance.

John Wylie's (2007) work on the experiential nature of landscapes reinforces this point. Wylie suggests that landscapes are not merely observed but actively experienced. How people move through and interact with landscapes fundamentally alters their perception of them.

Victor Vakhshayn's (2014) theory on the relationship between language and space further serves as a foundational concept, emphasising the crucial role of language in shaping our understanding and perception of urban environments.

Sustainability and landscape

Sustainability has become an essential lens through which we engage with the landscape. This module encouraged me to see it not only as environmental protection but as a broader commitment to how we manage, share, and respect places. As someone who surfs and spends most of my time outdoors, nowadays particularly along the Pembrokeshire coast, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of unsustainable land and water practices.

Since 2017, I have seen signs of pollution in local waterways, mainly farm waste and chemical runoff entering streams that feed directly into the sea. These concerns were raised with local bodies, but little action followed. According to a recent report (Wildlife Trusts Wales, 2025) and local news reports (Williams, 2024a), which have highlighted similar issues, what I had observed was validated. Despite this, water quality appears to have worsened. Numerous swimmers and surfers in Pembrokeshire have reported illness after entering the water, reporting serious health implications of ongoing pollution. The crisis reached national news recently, in March 2025, when a spokesperson stressed the urgency of the situation and advised people to report any sickness via the Surfers Against Sewage app (Surfers Against Sewage, 2024).

Responses to this, particularly beach cleans and community actions, give me a sense of agency. However, they also showed me that grassroots efforts alone are not enough. True sustainability must address deeper systems such as farming practices, industrial regulation, biodiversity, and public accountability.

This module reinforced the idea that sustainability is both ecological and social. It is about more than scenic value; it is about living systems, public health, and our relationship with place. Creative practitioners, I believe, have an important role to play in making these issues visible, encouraging dialogue, and building a more connected, care-driven culture around landscape.

Case Studies and Fieldwork

Doing the fieldwork for this module helped me connect ideas with real places. I visited Llansteffan Beach on my own, outside of the organised sessions, because it is somewhere I already feel connected to through surfing and time spent by the sea. This

time, though, I walked it differently and more slowly, more consciously, thinking about access, erosion, and how people move through the space. It reminded me how familiar landscapes can take on new meanings when you stop to look and listen.

Dinefwr Castle stood out for its sense of layered history. The combination of ancient trees, the old castle ruins, and the curated parkland made me think about how we preserve and present landscapes. It is a place where ecology and heritage sit side by side, and it raised questions for me about who gets to decide what parts of a landscape are important.

At Llys y Fran Dam, I noticed how much the space had been shaped for public use, with cycling paths, signage, and cafes. It made me think about how landscapes are managed to attract visitors, but also how that can sometimes come at the expense of wildness or ecological care.

These visits gave me time to reflect not only on what landscapes look like but also how they feel, and how people shape and are shaped by them; not just of the physical space, but of the stories, decisions, and tensions that live within them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, landscape perception is shaped by a dynamic interplay of social, cultural, emotional, and ecological forces. From the emotional bonds we form with places, as Tuan (1990) describes through topophilia, to the cultural narratives embedded in landscapes, as Aitchison et al. (2000) argue, landscapes are far more than physical spaces. They are social constructs reflecting collective identities and histories. Wylie (2007) further reinforces this idea by emphasising the active role of the observer in shaping their perception of landscapes. Bruley, Locatelli, and Lavorel (2021) remind us that landscapes are cultural texts, read and reinterpreted through various human lenses. Manning et al. (2017) highlight the role of environmental management in shaping perceptions, particularly in national parks and recreational spaces. Sustainability is not a destination but a journey, one that requires reflection, action, and creative stewardship at every step. Landscape perception is constantly evolving in response to social, cultural, and ecological

forces.

My connection to the coastal environment I cherish, reflects these broader concepts. Landscapes, in their physical, emotional, and symbolic forms, offer spaces for reflection, meaning, and connection, shaping both our understanding of the natural world and our sense of self within it. Lewicka's (2023) work highlights a critical point: while strong place attachment fosters belonging, it can also lead to exclusion if places are viewed as static. Embracing a flexible, evolving view of place encourages openness to newcomers and supports more resilient, inclusive communities. The threads of belonging I feel to these landscapes, where every ripple in the water and rustle of the trees seems like a story shared, remind me that these are not just spaces to occupy, but living tapestries that call for care, attention, and respect. As society faces growing environmental challenges, how we perceive and engage with landscapes will be crucial in fostering sustainable relationships with our surroundings; the land that holds us, protects us, and provides us with a sense of home.

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