

«To be is to be perceived» Researching image regionalisation using the example of the Entlebuch UNESCO Biosphere Reserve

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It has become a cliché to say that visual images influence our ideas about “true” reality. Images make the abstract comprehensible and the unknown familiar, although, in doing so, they highlight certain aspects and inevitably occult others (Reiche 2003). If, as is the case in today’s media societies, a person’s access to “true” reality is almost exclusively through images, then it is inevitable that this “true” reality is either hidden by or fades into the medium of the image. If we focus on an image’s content, which ranges from the selective to the manipulative, it becomes clear that images say more about the understanding of reality of those who produce them than about reality *per se* (Graeser 2000). Nevertheless, those consuming the image often take the way certain facts are presented for reality and this influences how they subsequently act. Aspects of reality that receive no media exposure remain invisible and irrelevant.

This general rule of consumer products is also particularly true of regions: in the prevailing “aesthetical economy”, regions have to assert and differentiate themselves through the power of their images. In social geography, the production and diffusion of images and ideas about a region is called (mental or social) regionalisation (Hard 1994). In principle, “reality” provides unlimited possibilities for regionalisations, which can be constructed by drawing on a wide variety of characteristics such as language, way of life, type of agriculture, soil type, climate, commuter flows, etc. How this regionalisation then comes about in practice, is mainly determined by the interests and the scale of values of the actors. Analysing the images used to present a region is a potentially valuable means of revealing the partially uncriticised values (myths, clichés, etc.) of those producing images. My presentation will demonstrate how this can be done, using the example of different views of the Entlebuch, which we studied as part of the research project “The Power of Images” within the wider framework of the National Research Programme NRP 48 “Landscapes and Habitats of the Alps” (Müller 2006).

We studied the visual images (mainly photos) used to illustrate the Entlebuch biosphere reserve project in information brochures and newspaper articles. We developed a method of analysing the image content of a total of 530 photos and were thereby able to examine the majority of the images according to the spatial appropriation and/or usage of space they showed. This analysis of the images revealed the ways in which those producing each image thought the space ought to be used. Some particularly important images were the subject of more detailed structural-hermeneutic analysis. We used various techniques to situate the production of the images in their socio-historical context, this being fundamental to being able to interpret their impact; these included discourse analysis, interviews to gain insight into the intentions of those producing the images and the organisation of an interactive touring exhibition to capture to some degree how different populations reacted to the images (Backhaus *et al* 2006).

The method we developed for analysing the content of images makes it possible to translate richly illustrated presentations of “spaces” into a comprehensible overview similar to “area statistics” and thus to bring out ideas about spatial appropriation which may be in conflict with each other. It therefore represents one means of making the (often uncriticised) values that determine people’s actions available for open discussion.

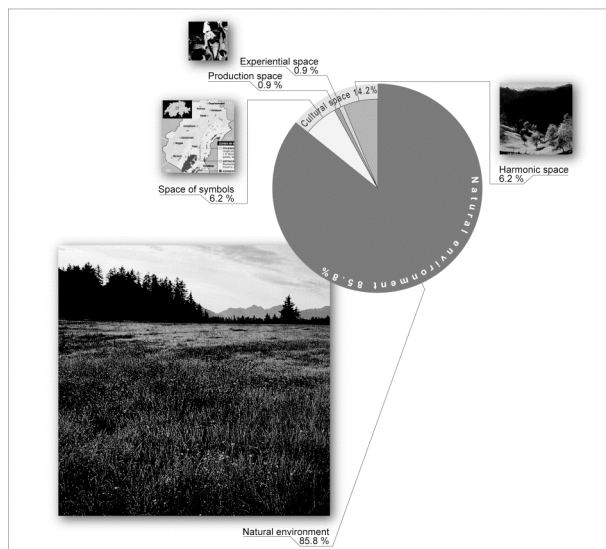


Figure 1. The view from outside the Entlebuch: Article „In der Natur liegt die Zukunft“ (Schweizer Familie, Nr. 37, 2001: 22-28). The images have been analysed in terms of the primary occurrences of spatial appropriations (Graph: U.M. Photos: Max Schmid).

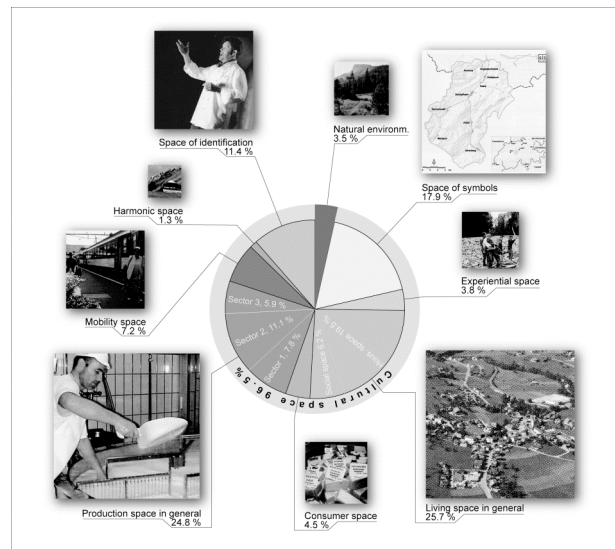


Figure 2. The “image of the Entlebuch” as presented in the voters’ information brochure “The Entlebuch, a biosphere reserve” from September 2000. The images have been analysed in terms of the primary occurrences of spatial appropriations (Graph: U.M. Pictures: UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch).

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