

**THIS ETHNOGRAPHY IS NOT ABOUT SURFING:  
THE FLUID LANDSCAPE OF MUNICH'S SURF WAVE**

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**A**midst the European landmass, in Southern Germany, people surf a river all year round. Growing up in Munich, I have always enjoyed the excitement of watching the surfers, but never considered the curiosity of this place. Only when I show it to visiting friends do I realise that river surfing in a landlocked place is both odd and fascinating. The wave generates a current of outgoing popularity among tourists and locals, attracting incoming spectators and surfers. This meeting point of surfers, passengers, and returners like myself posed an anthropological interest to me.

This ethnography is not about surfing. Rather, surfing and all associated behaviour, functioned as a lens to explore this place in terms of landscape. I will discuss the 'Surferwelle' (surf wave) as a landscape where nature and culture interact, and space is both localised and fluid. I argue that place is constituted and contested by people's various encounters with it. I will set the scene by considering the materiality of the place and then go deeper into my interpersonal encounters. Finally, visualising my fieldwork site as a place of popular surf pilgrimage subject to the tourist gaze, I will debate to what this place is unique or 'mainstream'.

**METHODOLOGY**

Not a surfer myself, I conducted my two weeks of fieldwork through participant observation. as part of the surf audience. I decided to direct my observation at the peripheral spectators, rather than the surfers at the centre of attention. This perspective allowed me to reflect upon photographic practice, overhear dialogues and enter conversations. I consciously decided not to conduct structured interviews with set and suggestive questions. In tune with the site, I preferred to 'go with the flow'.

## LITERATURE

To support my observations and interpretation, I draw on Hirsch's (1995) and Tilley and Cameron-Daum's (2017) concepts of landscapes, as well as Urry's (2002) concept of the tourist gaze. I argue that all three texts present departure as central to understanding landscape.

For Hirsch (1995), landscape is constituted of the interplay of an everyday foreground against the background of a potential life in an idealised environment. Hirsch (1995) suggests the concept of landscape originated from the practice of painting where: foreground and background, ordinary and extraordinary, insider and outsider were juxtaposed within the painting, or between the painting and viewer. Hirsch (1995) suggests that an ethnographic exploration of landscape necessarily originates from a familiar 'productive point of departure' (1995: 2) to explore alternative ideas about the site of fieldwork that reflect on the place of origin.

Similarly, Urry (2002) renders tourists as mass of modern people who set out to view something contrasting to 'the everyday and the mundane' (Urry 2002: 2) and to see 'everything as a sign in itself' (Culler 1981 cited in Urry 2002: 3). A kiss in Paris would epitomize Frenchness, a traditional pub Englishness. 'The tourist is a kind of contemporary pilgrim, seeking authenticity in other "times" and other "places" away from that person's everyday life' (Urry 2002: 9).

Lastly, Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017) pick up on the notion of Western and non-Western concepts of nature. They argue that a divide between nature and culture does exist, emphasising the physical experience of place and interaction with people as a performative ground of identity. The immediate bodily interaction with a place, and concomitant affective emotions, constitute a place prior to the reflective constitution of the same place in text and photography. Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017) outline that a rational and secular idea of nature is attributed to the West, opposed to the traditional and sacred image that indigenous people hold. An indigenous perspective ostensibly has an emotional connection with nature whereas a Western perspective of nature is framed scientifically and rationally. Tilley and

Cameron-Daum (2017) identify materiality, embodiment, contestation and emotion as four key characteristics of nature. The combination of these qualifies landscape as the opposite of a blank slate, shaped, consumed and lived in performative encounters of place and people that make for individuals' divergent and experiences of the same landscape.

In the following, I will use the concepts outlined above to complement my ethnography where suited. I especially rely on the idea that different meanings and values assigned to a place compete with each other, thus making for a contested landscape. I will also incorporate voices of my informants. I have translated German into English, indicating when the literal German is of importance. My observations and interpretations take precedence over the literature, aiming to represent my direct consumption of the landscape through text and photography.

## **THE PLACE**

The surfing takes place at the Southern end of Munich's 'Englischer Garten', a large park defining the city's landscape. The Southern half of the park lies within the city's inner circle, and therefore is the busier part. With the far end penetrating into the city centre, the wave is frequently visited by numerous passengers. The 'Englischer Garten' was designed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as part of a fashion trend of reorganising urban space, the name is telling of both topography and particularity. In contrast to the French garden, the English one is meant to look pleasingly natural, yet, it is culturally designed. An English garden has been established many time, qualifying the objective of creating supposedly natural space as less unique than untouched nature.

However, the particular design of this single place is unique and further shaped by people's interaction with it. The surfing is a late addition to the park. Established 'sometime around the 1990s', my parents recall the wave's installation that predates my memory. Less naturalised than in my perception, they still cannot identify an exact starting point. This indicates that the surfing subtly established itself as integral part of the 'Englischer Garten' and of Munich's image. A sensation today, its curiosity lies in the present rather than in history.

The wave is situated upon the 'Eisbach', a channel of the city's main river Isar. At the site of surfing it is 12 metres wide. The wave is generated by a wooden plank that disrupts the stream of water flowing out from underneath a stone bridge. It is attached to the bridge with ropes. Since covered by the water swirl, the plank and large parts of the ropes are not visible, obfuscating the constructed nature of the wave. The channel bed and sides are made of concrete.



*Surfers on the wave.*



*A sign regulating the surfing.*

Spectators watch from the bridge and banks. Surfers enter the river from either side of the stream. An official sign permits only one surfer in the water at a time. Looking onto the bridge, logs enclose a small bay on the right side of the wave, which harbours two wooden tables where surfers leave their gear and drinks. On the left side, surfers line up on a concrete step along the stream to wait for their turn.

There is another table on the left side of the channel. Since further away from the water, spectators, rather than surfers, use it as a seat. It is where I spend most my time observing. It is on 'my table' as I catch myself writing, half-jokingly and partly because I have become attached to this spot as point of observation, that I have the most elaborate conversations.



*A Sketch of my fieldwork site.*

## THE PEOPLE

I find myself sitting next to Theresa from Hamburg, we both are writing in our notebooks. When she tells the young man whom she arrived with to enjoy the surfing, I ask if they come here frequently. She explains that, to the contrary, she just met Fred and his wife Salome at 'Königsplatz', another of Munich's public and well-frequented places. She is very open and talkative, so much so, that by the end of our conversation I know her landlady's daughter's name. Nevertheless, her openness led to me to reflect upon my fieldwork.

Firstly, in response to my fieldwork, she tells me that as an ethnology student at the University of Freiburg she researched surfing, fishery and environmental change in the Bretagne. When I was taking my notes, she wondered if I was writing a diary, like herself. During her fieldwork, she used to leave the left page of notebooks free to express emotions, associations, and maybe even doodles for self-reflection. Secondly, belonging plays a major role in her conversation. She oscillates between places she travels and the need for a fixed shelter. She was particularly happy on this day, because it was that morning, after months of travelling, that she decided to move back to Freiburg, her 'harbour'. When I tell her that I enjoy meeting people and find it important not to get stressed, she suggests that I was a 'Freiburg-person'. However, in contrast to my opinion that meeting new people in Munich is difficult, she said she believes in smiling or approaching them openly, as I did with her. Her idea of ordinary encounters thus differs from mine, which is shaped by growing up in Munich where people are stereotyped to be cliquey, reclusive or arrogant. This difference is also evident in the word 'anschnacken', a North German term for starting a conversation with a stranger that is not used in Southern Germany.

Theresa's 'harbour' metaphor is relevant to the making of place. It combines her Northern vocabulary and Hamburg origin with Freiburg as a place of shelter. In contrast to Hamburg, Freiburg is not a port city; showing the efficacy of language producing an image of Freiburg as refuge. This metaphor also works with the English 'haven'. This example supports reflections on the fluent and productive nature of language. In both German and English, words such as 'dive in', 'flow', 'current' are ambiguous in being literal descriptions of aquatic behaviour but also metaphors, comparisons, images. Often, the latter are removed from their

literal meaning due to frequent use or re-contextualisation. This agrees with Tilley's (Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017: 8) observation that, in the discussion of landscape, the ubiquity of spatial or anthropomorphising metaphors empowers or naturalises an understanding of the same.

Theresa's identifying me as a 'Freiburg-person' enables me to reflect upon the categorisation of people according to place. While Munich stereotypes seem justified and natural to me, I find it odd to be rendered as exhibiting a (single) characteristic that fixates me geographically. However, the point is not to say that it would be more sensible for a place to make a person (being from Munich makes you arrogant) than for a trait to make a place (open and calm behaviour makes Freiburg). Rather, both inferences simplify the complexity and many-sidedness of people and places, which correlates with Tilley and Cameron-Daum's (2017) key characteristic of landscape as 'contested'.

Talking to Theresa brought background action to the foreground. Hirsch (1995) identifies foreground actuality with fixed place, and the insider perspective of an unfiltered image. In the background, there are the respective counterparts of background, potentiality, fluid space, outside and representation. In her conversation, Theresa has reflected on my fieldwork through her own, and instilled a suspicion towards language. Given this and our distinct stances towards first encounters, it can be said that our perspectives and representations of place differ. Yet, we have enough in common to begin a stimulant conversation that dismantles naturalised ideas.

I also spoke with an Irish student who is with an English and French speaking group of Erasmus students. I discussed university related topics such as degrees, tuition fees and accommodation, as well as travels between Scotland and Ireland, and employability of German and Irish in translation. I explained my fieldwork project and she wished me good luck in an Irish accent. I realised that our conversation was built on our common position as international students. With longer conversations diverging from the surfing (I notice two women having a lively conversation who do not look at the surfers at all), short encounters revolve around it.

In direct conversation or overhearing that of others, I hear things such as 'Look, the small boy is being coached by the baldy', 'amaaaazing', or a woman commenting on a man's stomach 'Gosh, is he pregnant? What a belly'. These snippets are expressions of visual impressions. An older lady, despite her love for water sports, regards surfing at these temperatures as 'crazy'. She has not touched the water at all, but shivers at the sight. A variety of brief encounters and longer conversations informed the way I constituted this specific place. It also gave me an insight into other peoples' experience of the surfer wave.

## **GAZING**

An interesting antagonism of the spectators' gaze on the surfing wave arises when, halfway through the duration of my fieldwork, the wave is suspended. This event reveals numerous observations. Firstly, it exposes the construction of the channel and wave, revealing the artificial nature of the place.

Secondly, I realise the wave itself attracts as much attention as the surfing in action. Never, even when no one was riding on it, did I see the wave. Passengers show themselves either surprised or disappointed but not disinterested. Reactions range from 'Nothing, nothing at all', over 'Now that's a thing' to 'That's all' and 'Not enough water'. Some people leave instantly when they discover that there is no wave, but others stay to look around or find out why.

My first reaction to the lack of wave is a worry that someone might have drowned. This enhanced by both the visibility of the channel's shallowness and people saying, jokingly in hindsight, 'Where has the surfer gone?'- 'He is probably lying in there'. There are officials in wellies and waders in the water. I find out that the wave has been discontinued for fourteen days for the purpose of relocating fish. This is because in the course of spawning migration they get caught in the wave. This displays the interplay of people with the natural and built environment.

Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017) would argue that the suspension of the wave due to the relocation of fish is one of non-Western emotional care for nature, opposed to rationally motivated preservation in the West. However, I argue that the emotional experience of the wave is not compromised by rational intervention. Rather, it ensures the long-term health of the location and animals passing through. Spectators do not avert their gaze in the face of the suspension of the wave. On the contrary, they find emotional excitement in the novel situation.

Their gaze either remains directed at the expected, but lacking wave, or in the case of families with children at ducks and pretty geese that swim on the water now that it is less torrential. Photos are taken. Thus, with and without the wave, there is a desire for witnessing something spectacular. This can be a surfer's exciting jump, the curiosity of urban river surfing, unexpected lack thereof, or some water birds. Urry writes that '[p]laces are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantas[ies]' (2002: 3) of extra-ordinary experiences.

He continues that '[s]uch anticipation is constructed and sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos, which construct and reinforce that gaze' (Urry 2002: 3). The final section of this ethnography considers the 'Surferwelle' as a touristic site of pilgrimage, juxtaposing the popular gaze, with the unique.



*The lacking wave and geese attract attention.*



## THE PILGRIM



*The "shrine" and Quicksilver-graffiti.*

As a consequence of the wave suspension, the low water level enables me to stand in the drained bay and adopt the surfers' perspective. The two wooden tables in the bay are central to evoking an air of both the sacred and the popular. One of the bridge's arches, with one table underneath, displays a gargoyle. Above the table there is a tea candle in a red glass, which can often be found in the religious context of churches or graveyards. Finally, on one of the tables there is a towel and a bottle of local lemonade, Paulaner Spezi. On the other table, a Quicksilver sign is sprayed.

The graffiti and the bottle echo branding I have observed on wetsuits, Billabong surfboards and bottles of local beer, 'Spezi' and the famous mixture of the two, 'Radler'. They speak of both local and global industries. Surfers rely on products from global surfing industry while spectators and surfers alike consume local beer. Economics continues on a microscale. For example, an individual flyer pinned to a tree offers a surf board for sale. A beverage crate is affixed to a bin for people to leave empty bottles. On return to collection places, the 'Pfand'-system exchanges money for bottles. Minimising waste and saving some people the effort of returning the bottles themselves, it becomes a source of income for others.



*"Pfand" crate.*



*A surfboard for 2<sup>nd</sup> hand sale and the Laureus advertisement.*

Viewing the first table as a shrine brings together tourists and returners on pilgrimage and the manifestation of their interest in this place. Footage taken by spectators captures them in this specific location. Distributed across social media or reviewed in the future, which diffuses the local.

Photographic practice may be viewed as capturing the strange uniqueness of the place on the one hand; on the other, it reproduces behaviour that can be observed at many places. Pictures and films of the attraction, people taking pictures, and selfies, are all taken at many tourist sites. Emblematic of this is yet another Snapchat geotag, which defines the location as 'Englischer Garten München'.

The air of sacredness, oddity and rarity around the 'Surferwelle', accompanied by popularising photography, are characteristics of Urry's (2002) touristic places. Yet, other features of the place do not fit Urry's outline. As such, there hardly is an aggressive tourist industry. The most facilitated action on site is a little poster that advertises donation to the 'Laureus Sport for Good Foundation'. While popularisation occurs on the individual level of photos, there are no official photographs, tickets, websites or surfing institution. Although mainstream practice competes with individual experience, space for multiple understandings of the site remains.

Also disagreeing with Urry's rendering of modern tourism as symptomatic of overstimulation and rush; I argue that immersion into this landscape is a balanced, sensorial experience that stalls feelings of the passage of time. What Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017) refer to as embodiment and materiality in the experience of landscape, is the feeling of cold, the warmth of sunshine, the smell of water and the sound of the wave lulling you in. Indeed, many people stop and stare for twenty or thirty minutes, enjoying nature, enjoying culture. This I present as diving into the wave immersion, into a stream of consciousness that enables a bodily experience of place and people that brings enjoyment and reflection in multiple and hence contested forms.

## **CONCLUSION**

This ethnography has presented Munich's 'Surferwelle' as contested landscape. The exploration of place and people emphasised the relevance of materiality, bodily experience, interpersonal encounters, language and emotion in the understanding of landscape (cf. Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017). It has shown that the quality of one place differs according to an individual's background and the interaction of place and people. Building on this, it has illustrated and argued for the existence of multiple landscapes in the same place. Using Hirsch's (1995) concept of fore- and backgrounded landscape, I demonstrated that at the 'Surferwelle', a rational and emotional care for a nature interacting with culture exists. The sacred atmosphere around the wave as place of pilgrimage further aids to dissolve the West-vs-rest idea of emotional nature. The experience of place has enabled me to believe in the reinforcement, albeit in new terms, of the nature-culture dichotomy. I have aimed to deliver this as truly as possible, given the textual and visual confinement of ethnography.

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