

Tartu, 07/06/2024, Alena Mathis

Sensing Extinction and Creating Awareness: Solastalgia as an Emotional 'Contact Zone' between the Human and Non-human World

Thank you very much for having me here and welcome to my presentation.

My name is Alena Mathis, I am a research assistant and a recent PhD candidate in European Ethnology at the University of Bamberg, Germany. My academic background has led me from arts-based social work to sociology and now to cultural anthropology, and somehow grief has become a recurrent theme in my research, which you will now get an insight into.

'Sensing Extinction and Creating Awareness. Solastalgia as an Emotional Contact Zone between the Human and Non-human World.'

Solastalgia is an emotional state, a psychoterratic one to be precise, which can arise in the face of degradative changes to one's 'home environment'. The scaling of 'home' can be very different though, due to technology sweeping news from all over the world into our living rooms, it ranges from the direct experience of solastalgia in the everyday environment to the mediated experience of solastalgia triggered by global processes that threaten a 'planetary home'. Also, it can be oriented towards both the present and the future. Symptomatically, solastalgia potentially manifests in 'disgust, fear of health issues, frustration, feelings of hopelessness, isolation, psychosomatic illness' (Moratis 2021: 412; cf. Albrecht 2005: 49) and 'anxiety' (Albrecht 2010: 218) and can vary seasonally. Under certain circumstances, solastalgia can lead to depression, substance abuse or suicide (cf. Albrecht 2010: 218-220.228; Prade-Weiss 2021: 198; Riemenschneider 2014: 20). Conceptually, these symptoms can be summarised as loss of 'senses of identity, place, belonging, control, and good health' (Albrecht 2005: 57). I argue that solastalgia is certainly pathogenic, but not pathological - it is not a disease or disorder that can be treated by individual medicine, but rather a psychoterratic distress syndrome that requires structural, political answers (Prade-Weiss 2021). This is why some of the known coping strategies for solastalgia can also be found in the public artistic or political-activist sphere.

Solastalgia is a complex emotional state that, like climate anxiety for example, consists of many emotional components at the same time - solastalgia not only has loss-oriented facets, but also future-oriented ones, it is not only about uncertainty, but also about connectivity, not only about sensing extinction, but also about creating awareness. We can understand this pendulum movement with the help of the psychological 'dual process model of coping with bereavement' by Stroebe and Schut (1999). They describe grief not as linear, but as oscillating between two different poles, sometimes the pendulum is longer on the loss orientation side, sometimes on the other. The message this model also contains is: Mourning takes time. And we should allow mourning to take time. Or as Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren (2013) put it: 'Mourning is about *dwelling* with a loss and so *coming to appreciate what it means*, how the world has changed, and how we must ourselves change and renew our relationships if we are to move forward from here [highl., A.M.]'

However, to me, this does not yet sufficiently explain the 'emotional contact zone' between the human and non-human world that is obviously part of solastalgia. I am particularly interested in the in-between of the pendulum swings, the 'dwelling', understanding 'what it means', 'how the world has changed'. For me, this raises the central question of what value-giving and identification processes connect people with their environment, which could then explain why changes to it are perceived as so painful. I also ask this question against the background that apparently not all kind of changes are perceived as painful – the emotional pain of solastalgia is primarily associated with industrial forms of nature appropriation, which are perceived as external and imposed. Individual forms of nature

appropriation - for example in the areas of housing, mobility, etc. - tend not to be questioned or to be perceived as unjust in a comparable way by those affected.

In my sociological research, I have set out to answer this question about the value-setting and identification processes that mediate between people and 'home environments'. In doing so, I realised that this question of the mediators of solastalgia is actually related to a gap in research.

'Place is a defining element of solastalgia, and people–place relationships are - central to the ongoing study of the links between environmental change and human health and wellness. However, the ways in [which, A.M.] place and people–place relationships are understood are often unclear in the solastalgia literature' (Galway/Beery/Jones-Casey et al. 2019: 10).

'This scoping review has revealed that our collective understanding of the factors mediating the relationship between the lived experience of environmental change and solastalgia—such as place attachment, connectedness to nature, and sense of powerlessness—is limited' (ibid.: 12).

In my presentation today, I would like to introduce you to a three-step approach that has emerged from my sociological and cultural anthropological research, which I find promising to conceptualize more clearly what connects people with their 'home environment'. I look forward to receiving comments and criticism afterwards, which I can incorporate into my further research. Based on the concept of 'landscape' instead of 'place', I will first discuss 'landscape identity', a relatively new concept that can be traced back to both an interdisciplinary Swedish research group (cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018, 2019) and one in Portugal (cf. Loupa Ramos/Bianchi/Bernardo et al. 2016, 2019) and which offers various complex links to the concept of solastalgia. As part of this concept, I will also talk about 'intangible everyday culture' or more specifically 'intangible cultural heritage (ICH in short)'. As everything is being brought together in my field of research for the dissertation, I will give you a rough outline of this at the end of the presentation.

At first sight, solastalgia might present itself as 'mourning nature'. Considering it like this captures one dicey aspect of the phenomenon, indeed. As you all know, 'nature', for the longest time – at least in sociology –, has been considered and treated as the negligible opposite of culture or society which proved to be highly compatible with the project of linear progress and incessant growth of so-called modernity if not to be its very foundation. Now, the invention of the neologism 'solastalgia' was due to a lack of adequate vocabulary in the anglo-american world. There are other cultures and especially vulnerable social groups that have already found terms to describe emotional processes of alienation to valued environments. If solastalgia is a term coined for the so-called Global North and we understand solastalgia as 'mourning nature', this would indicate an emotional state being diametrically opposed to the fundamentals of the very societies those affected live in. Solastalgia then appears to incorporate all the ambivalence of the project of modernity. To quote Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno: 'Every attempt to break the compulsion of nature, in which nature is broken, only ends up all the deeper in the compulsion of nature. This is the trajectory of European civilisation [transl., A.M.]' (1987: 35).

But taking a closer look, 'nature' appears to be too essentialist and general in the context of solastalgia anyway. The spatial dimension of loss we are dealing with here is one that is deeply connected to personal and cultural values, to cultural practices, habits, and economic constraints. It is one where nature and culture are no separate, but hybrid, interwoven realities. Galway/Beery/Jones-Casey et al. in their scoping review study on solastalgia from 2019 suggest capturing the spatiality of the phenomenon rather by the term 'cherished landscape' (ibid.: 11) that has been used in a few studies already (cf. ibid.: 10; Albrecht 2010; Pannell 2018; Wood/Gesley/Curtis et al. 2015). 'Landscape is tension' (Wylie 2007: 1). Working with 'landscape' allows to – firstly – acknowledge the constant co-

creation of nature and culture ('multispecies landscapes', Tsing 2012) and decline any conception of a purely ecological or 'environmental' construct – such is still negotiated with 'place' (cf. Galway/Beery/Jones-Casey et al. 2019: 8). Secondly, and this is the main argument for me to choose it over the concept of 'place', it allows to consider conflicts over the use of space (cf. Bender 2006: 303) by different aesthetic demands, identity-forming habits, ideologically charged concepts of nature, and private and economic interests in use. These conflicts over the use of space are rather vaguely elaborated within the concept of 'place' but very important for understanding solastalgia ('contested landscapes', Tilley 2006: 7; cf. Llewellyn/Rohse/Bere et al. 2019: 805).

Through processes of negotiating what is worth preserving, what is 'good' and 'bad' landscape change (cf. Honneth 2014), solastalgia verifiably profoundly affects social communities, and has the potential to both strengthen and divide them (cf. Devine-Wright 2009; Stobbelaar/Pedroli 2011; Butler/Sarlöv-Herlin 2019; Loupa Ramos/Bianchi/Bernardo et al. 2016; Richardson 2019; Albrecht 2005; Albrecht 2010; Adger/Butler/Walter-Springett 2017; Barnett/Tschakert/Head et al. 2016; Fresque-Baxter/Armitage 2012; Connor/Albrecht/Higginbotham et al. 2004; Phillips/Murphy 2021; Kennedy 2016). This is not lastly because these different claims of various actors on one and the same landscape often become only visible and explicit when perceived to be acutely threatened.

Once that we apply the concept of 'landscape' to the spatial dimension of solastalgia, it is possible to shed light on the value-setting and identification processes connecting humans to these landscapes again.

In the tradition of 'place identity' – which I believe to be conceptually pretty close to the concepts of 'sense of place' or 'place-making' – and yet benefitting from the specifications of 'landscape', there has been a new concept introduced in the past couple years: 'landscape identity'.

The role of landscape as a framework, medium and direct point of reference for identity-forming processes has not been recognised in academic literature for long but is now receiving increasing attention (cf. Dixon/Durrheim 2000; Stobbelaar/Pedroli 2011; Nitavska 2011; Loupa Ramos/Bianchi/Bernardo et al. 2016; Loupa Ramos/Bianchi/Bernardo et al. 2019; Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018; Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2019; Butler/Sarlöv-Herlin 2019). The concept of 'landscape identity' allows us to deepen our understanding of the quality of everyday connections between humans and landscapes and how these connections behave in the case of landscape transformation which seems particularly appealing regarding solastalgia (cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018; Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2019; Butler/Sarlöv-Herlin 2019). The current state of research on the concept is a three-phase understanding of 'landscape identity', subdivided into 'stability', 'change' and 'progression' (cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018: 882-885; Butler/Sarlöv-Herlin 2019: 273; Stobbelaar/Pedroli 2011: 321-332).

The first stage, 'stability', is the status quo not yet affected by any solastalgiic experiences. Analytically, it consists of three parts: these are 'identity of landscape', 'landscape-related identity' and 'practicing landscape identity' (cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018: 882-885).

The aspect 'identity of landscape' (ibid.: 882) emphasises those elements of landscape 'which can be commonly recognised as significant to [it]' (ibid.: 884). So this is mainly about physical qualities of landscapes (ibid.: 884), with regard to evenness, scale, enclosure, structure and texture, colours, variety, uniformity and forms. In this first aspect, landscape tends to create identity in the form of functionalities, 'people's preference [for the landscape] [...] and use of the landscape' (ibid.; cf. Lynch 2013) as well as in terms of orientation and mental localisation of memories (cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018: 884).

‘Landscape-related identity’ (ibid.: 883), on the other hand, refers to ‘the subjective perceptions, feelings and memories which people have in relation to their surroundings’ (ibid.) and thus also to the ‘historical, religious, social and psychological connotations’ (Knez 2005: 207-208; cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018: 883) of a landscape. How landscape is perceived and understood manifests itself in intangible cultural practices such as rituals, traditions or stories (cf. Canter 1996) that in turn generate senses of continuity of how landscapes ‘are’ and people being rooted in them (cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018: 883).

The third aspect is described by Butler et al. (2018) as ‘practicing landscape identity’ (ibid.: 883, 885). It stands for the fact that the meaning attributed to landscape is linked to the activities through which individuals and social groups have previously come into contact or through which they currently interact with landscapes (cf. ibid.: 885; Butler/Sarlöv-Herlin 2019: 273). By ‘practices [...] linking the physicality of the landscape to subjective perceptions of [it]’ (Butler/Sarlöv-Herlin 2019: 273; cf. Nicolini 2012: 7), such activities are involved in the production and stabilisation of landscape-based social, more-than-human orders (cf. Nicolini 2012: 2).

More recent contributions on ‘landscape identity’ emphasize that the dynamic interplay of active and perceptive elements in ‘landscape identity’ (cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018: 883; Loupa Ramos/Bianchi/Bernardo et al. 2016: 37-39; Loupa Ramos/Bianchi/Bernardo et al. 2019: 2.8-13; Stephenson 2008: 134).

I find these analytical approaches to fit the reports of persons affected of solastalgia about *what it is that is lost* quite well. To just give some examples from previous studies:

‘We used to read the landscape. But now it changes, you have to guess now. Everything changes, make it so hard [...] You never know, it just change like that, even the tide [...]’ (First Aunty in McNamara und Westoby 2011: 235). [note: sea level rise affecting bodies of landscape-specific local knowledge]

‘I’m setting [sic] there on my porch, which is my favourite place in the whole world, by the way – I’d rather be on my front porch than any other place in the world and I’ve been to a lot of places. As it stands right now, with the new permits I saw last week, they’re gonna blast off the mountain I look at when I look off my front porch’ (Gunnøe 2009 in Albrecht 2010: 219). [note: mountain top removal mining affecting familiar aesthetics (here: visual perceptions of landscape)]

‘Earlier, we used to have Amla trees near the river. Amla trees have particular importance during Bhuradaan. All the rituals used to be performed under them’ (LB, R8, cited in Kumar/Kumar/Sarathi 2021: 215). [note: extended heat and drought periods affecting rituals, traditions, spirituality]

‘My son uses more than 40 kg of chemical fertilizers for rice production, but we were using only animal dung in the farms. In our time, fertilizers were considered poisons, but now, no production without the fertilizers can be expected’ (DH, R9 in Kumar/Kumar/Sarathi 2021: 216). [note: extended heat and drought periods affecting agricultural practices and changing cultural values]

‘Identities become important when they are perceived to be under threat’ (Butler/Sarlöv-Herlin 2019: 273). Which brings us to the second stage of ‘landscape identity’: ‘change’. It is true that landscape is by definition in a state of permanent change (cf. Proshansky/Fabian/Kaminoff 1983: 65; Butler and Sarlöv-Herlin 2019: 271; Loupa Ramos et al. 2016: 39). However, the literature suggests ‘tipping points’ at which landscape change exceeds a usual level, which then also has consequences for the identity of

those affected (cf. Loupa Ramos/Bianchi/Bernardo et al. 2016: 42; Llewellyn/Rohse/Bere et al. 2019: 806): Stephenson (2008) speaks of 'inappropriate landscape development' (ibid.: 127, cf. Antrop 2005: 3, 5), Butler and Sarlöv-Herlin (2019) speak of 'negative or non-democratic [changes]' (ibid.: 273; cf. Egoz/Jørgensen/Ruggeri 2018). Activity and experience structures obviously change as soon as the underlying physicality of the landscape changes, necessitating new forms of more-than-human interaction (cf. Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2019: 315).

Disappearing socio-ecological systems always mean newly emerging socio-ecological systems too. This is what the third stage of 'landscape identity' is about. Although it is called 'progression', it is not about a linear or teleological development towards solaphilic feelings: 'Landscape change and the resulting disruption of landscape identity creates the space for new identities, albeit identities in which conflicts must be renegotiated and losses compensated, old identities are transformed and new identities emerge' (Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018: 887). To create a positive future perspective, an understanding of the implications of the experienced landscape loss and the potential value of the current, altered landscape is necessary (cf. ibid.: 886-887). This is no easy task, and this phase can take a very long time (cf. Brown/Perkins 1992: 284). In this context, there is often talk of strengthening participatory measures as well as the targeted gathering and negotiation of values and interests of different landscape-relevant actors (cf. Loupa Ramos/Bianchi/Bernardo et al. 2019: 2; Richardson 2019: 46-49; Egoz/Jørgensen/Ruggeri 2018: 67-68). If intersubjective understanding succeeds, 'then we can get a sense of how the future can be shaped to reflect the needs of those who have relationships with the landscape and give them space to shape their own futures; it helps to foster a post-disruption identity' (Butler/Knez/Åkerskog et al. 2018: 886-887).

So, now we have made it through 'landscape identity'. Interestingly, these three stages can also be further linked to the sociological theory of identity (Schimank 2016) ...

There is one scoping review study released in 2023 that particularly promotes the merging of the subject areas of solastalgia and intangible cultural heritage and this is the study of Pearson/Guy/McNamara et al. They identify solastalgia as 'emerging key theme' when approaching the entanglements of 'place' (or as I specify, 'cherished landscape'), 'cultural practices' and 'identity' and draw attention to the fact that it is often especially intangible cultural heritage that, when affected by climate change, means profound changes in everyday culture for those affected and can shake ontological certainties.

On this basis of conceptual work, I would like to pursue a threefold focus in my doctorate, namely solastalgia, intangible cultural heritage and a stronger multispecies perspective. And to make things more vivid at the end, I would now like to take you briefly into my field of research.

Since 2016, the high alpine Allgäu farming in Bad Hindelang has been on the national list of intangible cultural heritage. The municipality has the most alpine pastures in Germany (8,000 hectares, 46 alpine farms) and is one of the 23 regions in the Alps considered most worthy of protection due to its richness of biodiversity (which again is claimed to be due to the alpine farming tradition). The tradition has been documented since the High Middle Ages and is still in great demand in this municipality. Last summer, I was able to speak to the longest-serving alpine farmer in one of the valleys, who confirmed in person what has been documented for several years: Climate change is causing subtle but very noticeable processes of change and the traditional cultural practices in alpine farming already have to adapt to this. Consequences of climate change in the Alps so far include decreasing snow cover, changes in solar radiation, longer vegetation periods, increased risk of deforestation if the number of grazing animals is not adapted, more extreme weather conditions, temperature rise and glacier melt. In addition, there are social and economic influences that put even more pressure on alpine farming and make the question of whether and how this alternative agricultural structure could be transferred to the future

all the more difficult: To begin with, time and time again, alpine farming in the German Alps is struggling to maintain a financial backbone. Challenging the extensive tradition even more are commercially oriented developments in valley farming – you must know that the livestock ‘summered’ in the mountains often comes from a lot of different farms in the region – as well as a creeping intensification of use. Then, there is leisure and tourism, which, according to residents of the region, have taken on a new dimension, especially since the Covid 19 pandemic, and is associated with inappropriate behaviour in the mountains such as littering, leaving pasture gates or fences open, contact with grazing animals, noise, and straying from designated hiking and biking routes. There is also much and emotional discussion about the return of wolves and bears: although the presence of the animals in the area is not unprecedented, human and animal actors around local (alpine) farming must renegotiate and relearn the handling of the large predators. More fundamental lines of development concern urbanisation and transit traffic. The tradition of alpine farming in this region is very explicitly and closely tied to ideas of ‘home’, ‘Heimat’, seemingly age-old, continuous traditions, and a strong sense of identity. This is also reflected in a tendency towards conservative voting behaviour. – Surprisingly, as one might think, because on the one hand, extensive alpine farming is associated with and also propagated by resource conservation and environmental awareness – ideas that other political parties advocate much more resolutely – and on the other hand, it is the desire of alpine farmers to preserve this alternative form of agriculture, which will presumably only succeed with a certain willingness to allow more flexibility. The conservative parties in this federal state, on the other hand, are much more focused on maintaining the status quo in the sense of identity politics - that ‘everything can stay the way it has always been’.

Well, I hope that this will be an interesting time to get in touch with Alpine farmers and other protagonists who are shaping the not least controversial discourse on these topics. But the question is, of course, how I can get a methodological access to the landscape identity of the farmers and its emotional dimension. Stereotypically, the inhabitants of the region are not known to be particularly chatty. Of course, on the level of interactions between humans and landscape, it is the alpine economic activities that I will try to capture from both human and less human perspectives, for instance by means of multispecies ethnography. On the perceptual level, I plan to work with a mix of established and rather experimental methods within the framework of participant observation - including moving interviews in the field and sensory anthropology. It was very nice by the way to gather all the ideas presented at the conference in this direction, be it methods for capturing olfactory, acoustic, or tactile senses of changing landscapes.

So much, perhaps, in brief about my plan - thank you very much for listening!

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