

The Polish Journal
of Aesthetics

The Polish Journal
of Aesthetics

69-70 (2-3/2023)
Jagiellonian University in Kraków

The Polish Journal of Aesthetics

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Published by:

Institute of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University
52 Grodzka Street, 31-004 Kraków

Academic Journals

www.academic-journals.eu

Image on the cover by Freepik

Cover Design & Typesetting: Nowa Strona

First Edition

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e-ISSN 2544-8242

Aesthetics, Environment, and Sustainability

Edited by

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Noora-Helena Korpelainen, Mateusz Salwa

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Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed a growing awareness of climate change and its impacts on people and the natural environment. It has become increasingly clear that addressing this issue requires technical solutions and, perhaps primarily, a new ecological or green culture. This recognition has led to the understanding that ecology encompasses not just the natural sciences but also the social sciences and humanities, including philosophy. “Sustainability” is an umbrella term for the multidimensional shift needed to counteract the climate crisis.

For instance, despite efforts, we are still far from achieving the United Nations’ sustainability goals (UN SDGs). However, the rise of sustainability-related discussion and work has fostered increasing interest in concepts such as care, respect, accountability, and ethical development within the human community. Philosophical aesthetics have addressed these issues, especially in environmental and everyday aesthetics. The significance of environmental aesthetics extends beyond addressing the sustainability agenda to providing philosophical insights into human and natural environments, their aesthetic qualities, and the interplay between these and non-aesthetic qualities. Thus, environmental and everyday aesthetics represent an inspiring interface between philosophical or applied aesthetics and the pursuit of ecological and social sustainability.

In light of the sustainability agenda, it is imperative for philosophy to do more than interpret the world—it should aim to change it. However, this does not necessitate a shift towards direct activism. Contrarily, philosophical aesthetics often remains within the bounds of theoretical thinking. This approach does not imply a disinterested contemplation of the world as merely an aesthetic phenomenon. As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics aids in understanding the world’s intricacies, tensions, and contradictions and anticipating and evaluating opportunities, challenges, and threats. The theoretical dimension of aesthetics is practically valuable, as it provides a foundation for recommendations on fostering a more sustainable future, including what should or should not be done, how, and why.

Philosophical aesthetics can achieve this aim in various ways: by applying traditional aesthetic concepts to new or overlooked experiences of nature, by showing how philosophical concepts not typically associated with environmental issues can advance the sustainability agenda, by interpreting well-known aspects of modern culture in a new “green” light or by examining specific, singular manifestations of contemporary culture; and by providing arguments for decision-making in areas seemingly distant from philosophical discussions.

The articles in this volume illustrate how philosophical aesthetics can combine its theoretical dimension with practical significance. Stephanie Schuster discusses the aesthetic experience of natural phenomena on a sublime temporal scale, arguing that such experiences can engender a sense of being “at home in the natural world.” Elena Romagnoli draws on hermeneutics to interpret landscape sustainability regarding situatedness, advocating for an immersive and participatory approach to landscapes. Zoltán Somhegyi examines the evolving meanings of ruins and ruination in the context of changing sustainability perspectives. Adrienne Gálosi explores sustainable aesthetic appreciation in gardens, where humans cultivate nature. Finally, Matti Tainio and Minna Santaoja demonstrate how aesthetic considerations influence technical practices. Tainio focuses on night-time illumination, highlighting its multispecies sustainability implications, while Santaoja advocates for reevaluating aesthetic values in peatland restoration, underscoring the importance of tolerating, or even embracing, awkwardness during sustainability transitions.

Sustainability has become increasingly prominent in contemporary aesthetics. The XV International Summer Conference, organized by the International Institute of Applied Aesthetics in June 2023, is a testament to this. Supported by the City of Lahti and in collaboration with the University of Helsinki, the Lahti University Campus Coordination Unit, the Finnish Society for Aesthetics, Päijät-Hämeen Kesäyliopisto, and Visit Lahti, the conference brought together scholars from various academic centers and philosophical traditions. This gathering demonstrated that “sustainable aesthetics” is an evolving field capable of uniting diverse voices in its discourse.

We believe this volume offers a glimpse into sustainable aesthetics that will interest those new to the field while contributing significantly to its ongoing development.

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Stephanie Schuster*

Aesthetic Deep Time Experiences of Temporal Sublime Nature

Abstract

Deep time, encompassing the expansive temporal scale of Earth's and the universe's history, bears the potential of alienation due to its immensity. However, this estrangement can be mitigated through aesthetic appreciation of the temporal sublime in nature, as found in geological landscapes, ancient forests, and the starry sky. This paper aims to elucidate aesthetic deep time experiences and their significance. It posits that aesthetic resonance with the awe-inspiring atmosphere of ancient and enduring natural environments fosters an elevating yet humble feeling of belonging and being at home in the vast temporal continuum of the natural world. Central to such aesthetic experiences is a felt integration of world time and life time.

Keywords

Environmental Aesthetics, Deep Time, Temporal Sublimity, Aesthetic Resonance, Atmosphere

Introduction

Imagine standing on the verge of a steep canyon, walking through a thick ancient forest, or gazing at the vast and sparkling starry sky; imagine perceiving, in the impressive appearance and the light of your general knowledge, the ultimately unfathomable antiquity and continuance of the world—its deep time. Imagine being overwhelmed by the perception of the sublime scene and, at the same time, developing a profoundly fulfilling yet humble

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sense of belonging. I call such and similar experiences in sublime natural environments, in which the world's vast temporal scale is encountered, aesthetic deep time experiences.

The central claim of this paper is that aesthetic deep time experiences (*deep time experiences*, hereafter) contribute to a feeling of being at home in the natural world and its temporal depth. I argue that it is through aesthetic resonance with the awe-inspiring atmosphere of ancient and enduring natural environments that the observer attains an elevating yet humble feeling of belonging and being at home. Central to deep time experiences is a felt integration of world time and life time.

I will defend my claim by clarifying concepts such as deep time, aesthetic resonance, and temporal sublimity and drawing on two case studies examining a particular example of deep time experiences (Szécsényi 2021; Rolston 1998). To develop my argument, I build essentially on Angelika Krebs' landscape aesthetics (Krebs 2018, 2014), which gives a solid account of the experience of natural environments as the bearer of expressive qualities, i.e., atmospheres.

My paper attempts to explain deep time experiences and by this means contribute to aesthetic arguments about nature conservation.¹ For reasons of acquaintance, I approach deep time experiences from a contemporary Western perspective, relating them to the Western history of science and aesthetic concepts. Yet, this perspective neither implies any claims to superiority nor, in principle, precludes cross-cultural relevance.

1. Deep Time

Our lifeworld experience of time involves at least three core elements: the awareness of the present, the perception of change, i.e., time flow, and an asymmetry between the past and the future. While we have immediate sensual access to the present and, thus, immediate experiences of it, the past is encountered through personal and collective memory and, beyond that, through inferences and imagination based on evidence and traces. Through vivid memory or imagination, at best stimulated through sensual objects such as relics or ruins, the past can be encountered and revived in a subject's mind so vividly that it is appropriate to speak of experiences of the past or

¹ Other reasons for nature conservation concern human basic needs and the well-being of animals. See Krebs (1999) for a critical taxonomy of major nature conservation arguments and Krebs (2018) for the location of the aesthetic argument within this wider realm.

being in touch with it (Korsmeyer 2019). While we cannot encounter traces from the future, we can approach it through our imagination, based on expectations and predictions, and stimulated through enduring sensual objects. In this extended sense, the future can be experienced too.

Some cultural and natural traces of the past point to relatively recent preceding moments or periods. Others show evidence of events and eras of ancient times. Among them, some natural entities bear witness to the immense timescale of the world. Deep time refers to this scientifically established immense timescale. Its discovery goes back to research findings of natural scientists in the 18th and 19th centuries when Earth's vast geologic history was realized.² The metaphorical term "deep time" thus relates to geologic time or cosmic time. It was coined by John McPhee (1981) to express this enormous amount of time that challenges the human imagination. It is used nowadays to include the world's deep past and future.

A deep time awareness bears the potential of alienation by vastly exceeding human history and challenging the human imagination. Yet, it does not necessarily involve an estranged human existence. At least three mutually inspiring ways can be distinguished of tempering the potential of alienation: firstly, the acquisition of scientific knowledge that supports our intellectual orientation in the vast dimension of deep time and gives reason to acknowledge that we are part of an ancient and enduring process (Bjornerud 2018); secondly, artistic involvement that explores our possible relationships with deep time (Talasek 2014); and thirdly, aesthetic experiences of the temporal sublime in nature that invites us to encounter deep time and to be in touch with it based on sensual perception of ancient and enduring natural environments, such as canyons and mountains as well as volcanic, glacial and karst landscapes, cliffs and gorges, ancient forests and the starry sky.

2. Aesthetic Experience and Resonance

To explain deep time experiences and how they contribute to feeling at home in the vast temporal continuum of the natural world, an understanding of aesthetic experience is necessary. This understanding begins with pointing out its distinctive characteristics. I do not aim to lay out a complete theory but merely explicate my starting point. Three characteristics of aesthetic experience are central: the appreciation of the sensual qualities of an

² See Albritton (1980) for changing conceptions of Earth's antiquity in the Western world after the 16th century.

object for its own sake, a free play of our cognitive and affective powers, and aesthetic resonance.³

Aesthetic experiences are anchored in sensual perception. That is, they start from the perception of the sensual qualities of an object and stay related to these sensual qualities. Think of the steepness of a canyon, an ancient forest's thickness, or the starry sky's vastness and sparkle. Or of an energetic melody, a smooth piece of furniture, a bright flower, a melodious poem. In aesthetic experiences, we take pleasure in the perception of these objects because of their sensual qualities. As distinct from other experiences of perception, in aesthetic experiences, we do not instrumentalize an object for a distinct purpose, nor do we perceive it as a means to an end, but we find value in the pleasure of engaging with its sensual qualities and dwell on them, considering the "aesthetic object" for its own sake.

Though aesthetic experiences are rooted in and related to sensual perception, the content of aesthetic experiences amounts to more than mere sensual pleasure. We dwell on an aesthetic object because based on its sensual qualities and, additionally, further knowledge about it (such as age or origin), it excites various imaginations, thoughts, and feelings (emotions and moods) related to our life experiences and values. We usually experience aesthetic objects as inspiring, meaningful, and symbolically rich, which is why they, in the act of engaging with them for their own sake, bring our powers of imagination and understanding as well as our affective powers into free play.⁴ One could say that aesthetic objects challenge us to find meaning in them, "to make critical comparisons, and to examine our own lives and emotions in the light of what we find" (Scruton 2009, 197). In aesthetic experiences, we thus "open up and grow both rationally and emotionally" (Krebs 2018, 255).

Departing from more intellectual conceptions of aesthetic experience, I stress its affective quality. Yet, what does it mean that aesthetic experiences not only involve the flow-like pleasure that is typical for all intrinsic activities, but that aesthetic objects furthermore excite various feelings?

³ Three important sources for my understanding of aesthetic experience are Scruton's (2011, 2009) aesthetics, Brady's (2003) 'integrated aesthetic' and Krebs' (2018) 'aesthetic resonance'. They all substantially draw on and reinterpret ideas from Kant's (2000) aesthetic judgment.

⁴ The idea of a free play of our powers of cognition goes back to Kant's (2000) aesthetic judgment. Yet, the inclusion of a free play of our affective powers clearly departs from Kant. For further aesthetic theories that stress the affective dimension, see Levinson (2006) and Dewey (1934).

For one thing, it means that aesthetic objects, as was just mentioned, excite various affective states in our attempt to find meaning in them. As will be pointed out later, in the case of deep time experiences they might include feelings such as insignificance, elevation, wonder, and enchantment. In addition, it also means that closely attending to aesthetic objects typically includes the perception of their expressive qualities and sympathetic attention to them. In aesthetic experiences of a steep canyon, a thick ancient forest, or a vast and sparkling starry sky, we are not only invited to various affective states, but to share a sense of the sublime (that is, as will be elucidated in the following section, to experience awe). Being touched by an energetic melody, we feel energized ourselves. This relational act of sympathetic attention can be called emotional “resonance” and to highlight the aesthetic context in which these feelings are experienced, “aesthetic resonance.” In moments of particularly intense aesthetic resonance, we can potentially experience a vital unity with the aesthetic object and become aware of ourselves as part of a larger whole, yet not understood as an actual dissolution of subject and object, but rather as an experience of perfect coordination.⁵

Anyone can have aesthetic experiences and any kind of thing can be an aesthetic object, be they art, everyday objects, or natural entities. However, due to their particular sensual qualities, some objects invite and reward this kind of intrinsic engagement more than others. We usually attribute aesthetic value to them or judge them as beautiful, sublime, or the like. Our reasoning praxis indicates that aesthetic judgments are neither subjective nor arbitrary but claim intersubjective validity. After all, they are rooted, as was mentioned, in our life experiences and values.

3. The Temporal Sublime

The sublime pertains to aesthetic objects that are primarily characterized by their manifestation or expression of immense magnitude or tremendous power and evoke a profound aesthetic response: a sense of the sublime or

⁵ Krebs (2018) introduces the concept of aesthetic resonance, but remarks that the physical metaphor of resonance can be misleading in three ways: 1. physical resonance is a causal phenomenon, while aesthetic resonance is intentional sympathy; 2. physical resonance is instantaneous, while aesthetic resonance requires active attention; 3. physical resonance is bilateral, while aesthetic resonance is not a mutual concept; the aesthetic object does not respond to us in a literal sense. Here lies also a crucial difference to social acts of emotional resonance, when persons do respond to each other in a literal sense.

awe (Clewis 2021).⁶ Nevertheless, the subject only experiences the sublime in a position of safety. Typical sublime objects are natural entities such as mountain ranges, canyons, waterfalls, storms, the starry sky, plains, and deserts, but also artifacts such as cathedrals or bridges. Though commonly applied to monumental objects, the sublime extends to immaterial items such as moral character traits and scientific ideas. Emily Brady explains the sublimity of abstract ideas and objects “by their possession of qualities already linked to the material sublime—qualities, such as greatness, immensity and loftiness, which expand the imagination—or through their associations with objects or actions that are typically considered sublime” (Brady 2013, 35). A particular sublime quality that falls into this category is high age. Aesthetically engaging with a very old object, we encounter the temporal sublime.

Theoretically, our knowledge about the high age of an object, be it an artifact or of natural origin, is sufficient to evoke a sense of the temporal sublime. Yet, two material qualities strongly support the aesthetic response: a prominent individual form and spatial magnitude. These qualities catch our attention and support our imaginative powers (Wordsworth 1810). Paradigmatic examples are the remarkable ruins of antiquity, such as the majestic Egyptian pyramids, and natural entities, such as steep canyons and distinctly shaped mountains. The temporal sublime is, thus, typically evoked through a combination of the tangible properties of an object and its more abstract temporal property with which we are usually familiar through general scientific or historical knowledge.⁷

Like aesthetic objects generally, sublime objects bring our cognitive and affective powers into play. However, due to their characteristic qualities, this play is not entirely free, and the aesthetic experience is particularly demanding because sublime objects overwhelm our senses and capacities of imagination and understanding, thereby eliciting a comparative reflection that potentially inhibits the aesthetic experience.

⁶ Though my understanding of aesthetic experience is inspired by Kant’s (2000) aesthetic judgment, I do not follow his aesthetic dualism which regards the experience of the sublime as essentially different from the experience of beauty. I rather discern gradual differences, such as Schopenhauer (1969).

⁷ As can be inferred from my understanding of aesthetic experience in section 2, detailed scientific knowledge is neither necessary for, nor the content of aesthetic experience. For a summary of the knowledge-debate in environmental aesthetics, see Brady and Prior (2020). My position mostly resembles Brady’s (2003) ‘integrated aesthetic’.

There are, more precisely, two potential tensions in the encounter of sublime objects that threaten the unity and the directedness of the aesthetic experience. For one thing, realizing the observer's smallness in relation to the magnificent vastness of the aesthetic object—in our case, its high age—cannot only evoke admiration and the like, but also a feeling of insignificance. Alternatively, the overwhelming sensual impressions can inspire the observer to direct their attention to sublime qualities deemed essential to humans, such as consciousness, moral vocation, or reason. While the latter response overcomes the mixed feelings of admiration and insignificance that threaten the experience's unity, it shifts away from the integrated both other- and self-directedness of the aesthetic experience to mere self-directedness.

How can the unity of the sublime experience be established and the other-directedness be kept? I suggest it happens through a successful synthesis of the sensual impressions, imaginations, thoughts, and feelings. As Brady, who furthermore stresses the transformative power of the sublime experience, remarks regarding the natural sublime: encountering it, we see ourselves differently, “as deeply struck by it all, but also handling it, synthesizing it, and gaining some new sense of how we fit into a picture much larger than us” (Brady 2013, 199). Such a synthesis is demanding and requires engagement, yet it is an integral part of the experience of the sublime. It means incorporating divergent reactions to the aesthetic object: on the one hand, the reflection on one's smallness or ephemerality and the humble realization of a higher complex of forces and meaning, and on the other hand, the elevating feeling of participating in the magnitude and strength of the aesthetic object through sympathetic attention and the realization that it is possible to carry the object in our consciousness and to reflect on it rationally despite being overwhelmed by the sensual impressions and the challenges of the imagination. By permitting a ‘both...and’, integration of other- and self-directedness is retained, and eventually, a successful synthesis evokes a coherent affective response, that is, a shared sense of the sublime. In other words, it is an experience of awe.⁸ In experiencing awe, we aesthetically resonate with the sublime object as a whole. Metaphorically speaking, we answer it.

⁸ As Clewis (2021) has convincingly argued, the affective state of sublimity is a species of awe, aesthetic awe. Yet, departing from him, I do not define awe as an affective mix with inner tension. While the philosophical literature on awe is rather sparse, my understanding is inspired by Bollnow's (1942) detailed consideration. It stresses the coherence of awe, even though the German term ‘Ehrfurcht’ suggests a mix of positive and negative feelings.

Based on this framework, let us narrow the focus more closely on deep time experiences. As became apparent, the terms “temporal sublimity” and “deep time” are strongly related. Deep time refers to the vastness of geologic and cosmic time. So does the temporal sublime, though the term, as it is used, includes any high age that challenges the observer. Additionally, the temporal sublime includes the notion of a temporal quality that can be the object of an aesthetic experience. Thus, I classify deep time experiences as a case of temporal sublime experiences of natural environments.

In the light of what has been outlined so far, imagine, again, standing on the verge of a steep canyon, walking through a thick ancient forest, or gazing at the vast and sparkling starry sky; imagine, again, perceiving, in the impressive appearance and the light of your general knowledge, the ultimately unfathomable antiquity and continuance of the world. Imagine being overwhelmed by the encounter of the world’s sublime temporal scale as it is manifest in the steep and shapely canyon, the thick and mighty ancient forest, or the vast and sparkling starry sky, yet, in attending to the environment around you for its own sake, you engage in a play of imaginations, thoughts, and feelings. The imaginations might include vivid images of the encountered place as it was in the deep past, as it has developed, and as it might be in the future. The thoughts might include reflections on the relationship of world time with your life time, the mystery of existence, eternity, and the interconnectedness of all beings across space and time. The feelings might include insignificance, elevation, wonder, and enchantment. All in all, you develop a humble sense of the vast temporal dimension of nature’s complex forces, yet realize—through the sensual experience of an enviroing ancient presence, as will be further elaborated in the following sections—that it is a complex in which you partake; and, based on your deepest values and life experiences that include respect for something larger than yourself, respect for the deep origins of life and gratitude for the mystery of existence, you experience awe.

This description and invitation to the imagination is not meant as a fixed script for deep time experiences but tries to capture typical aspects based on examples (Szécsényi 2021, Rolston 1998). It also does not want to suggest that the aesthetic resonance—the feeling of awe, which takes more or less time to engage in, dependent on the current state of mind and former experiences—is the final point of the experience. The play of the powers of imagination and understanding and the affective powers typically continue, sometimes even long after being in the particular environment. However, the feeling of awe, which encapsulates a sense of the sublime, represents

the apex of this aesthetic experience. But what does sharing a sense of the sublime mean exactly? The ensuing section will elucidate that the experience of sublime awe is not merely a subjective response evoked within the observer. Instead, through a successful synthesis, one encounters an awe-inspiring atmosphere inherent to the sublime. This atmosphere, distinctly expressed in the surrounding environment, invites aesthetic resonance, which, ultimately, leads to a feeling of participation.

4. Aesthetic Resonance with the Awe-Inspiring Atmosphere of Temporal Sublime Natural Environments

Since the enviroing ancient presence of temporal sublime nature and the encounter of an atmosphere are crucial for understanding the feeling of participation in deep time experiences, I will approach these aspects by pointing out particular characteristics of aesthetic experiences in natural environments.

Initially, it is crucial to define “nature” within the context of this discussion. Here, nature refers to those elements of the world not crafted by human hands. Unlike human-made artifacts, this encompasses entities that arise, evolve, and cease independently. Notably, the distinction between nature and artifacts should be seen as a spectrum, akin to the gradation between light and dark, rather than as a binary, which is more akin to the absolute states of life and death (Deplazes-Zemp 2022; Krebs 2018). Most of what we call the natural environment lies between the extremes of pure nature and pure artifact. Nonetheless, in the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments such as canyons, ancient forests, or the starry sky—even if the latter is experienced downtown—we encounter, at least to a great extent, something non-human made.

Besides aesthetically encountering something non-human made, aesthetic experiences of natural environments share at least three further characteristics (Brady and Prior 2020). Firstly, they are particularly immersive. They differ from the object-centered experience of a sculpture or a single tree, which implies a clear boundary of the aesthetic object. If we aesthetically experience a natural environment, we do not only look at or listen to something, but we perceive a setting from within; we experience ourselves as observers and participants. Secondly, aesthetic experiences of natural environments include manifold and diverse sensual impressions, not only visual and acoustic ones, but also olfactory and tactile qualities, and may even extend to include the impressions of temperature. While it remains disputed

whether the senses of smell and touch are aesthetic or belong to the sphere of the pleasant, temperature perception usually does not count as aesthetic experience, which is based on intentional acts and not a matter of causal reaction or mere sensual pleasure.⁹ However, in aesthetic experiences of natural environments, the diversity of aesthetic and non-aesthetic perceptions is part of an experienced whole, which adds to its immersive character. The third characteristic concerns the perception of ongoing dynamic changes due to daytimes, seasons, weather phenomena, and processes of growth and decay.¹⁰ These changes evoke the impression of natural environments as enduring and living, while the encounter of other living species further intensifies the impression of liveliness.

As was pointed out, it is in particular through the sensual experience of an enviroing ancient presence that we realize to partake in the vast temporal dimension of nature's complex forces in deep time experiences. As it becomes evident now, this is due to the immersive character of aesthetic experiences of natural environments and the impression of natural environments as living and enduring.

Before further analyzing the aspect of ancient presence, which is linked with the experience of the liveliness of natural environments, in the final section, another question must be addressed. How do we encounter the manifold immersive elements of a natural environment surrounding us as a whole? In other words, how can we aesthetically resonate with an environment as a whole? As Krebs argues regarding Georg Simmel's landscape philosophy, the unifying principle is atmosphere (*Stimmung*), an affective quality that integrates a larger whole (Krebs 2018, 2014; Simmel 2007). That atmosphere is the unifying principle of natural environments, is reflected in descriptions of such environments as peaceful or melancholic. These statements also indicate that atmosphere is an affective quality tantamount to mood, thus, a state that affectively integrates an experiencing subject.¹¹

⁹ See Kant (2000) for differences of the pleasant and the aesthetic and Brady (2003) on a discussion of the aesthetics of smell.

¹⁰ The third characteristic of aesthetic experiences of natural environments reveals their particular temporal properties. For examples of aesthetic experiences of natural environments that focus on other temporal properties than deep age (such as cyclicity or time flow), see Schuster (2021).

¹¹ See Krebs (2017) for an approach to moods (also 'Stimmung' in German) as affective states with an integrating and, furthermore, holistic character.

In the case of built environments, such as marketplaces, cathedrals, or cityscapes, which share the immersive aesthetic characteristic of natural environments, we can say that the architect intended to create a particular atmosphere (Zumthor 2006). But how are atmospheres infused into natural environments? How can they have an affective quality? Following Krebs, I contend that the experiencing subject infuses atmospheres into natural environments. Yet, the atmospheres are not just an arbitrary ascription. Instead, we find expression in natural environments based on their characteristics that we perceive through the lens of human life, thus, our life experiences and values. In other words, we find expression in natural environments in our continual attempt to make sense of the world around us.¹² In the case of aesthetic experiences of ancient natural environments—through a successful synthesis of the manifold and immersive sensual impressions, imaginations, thoughts, and feelings—we typically encounter a sublime, that is, an awe-inspiring atmosphere, inviting aesthetic resonance.

To aesthetically resonate with an atmosphere is an intentional act, though it might sometimes feel like experiencing emotional contagion. However, we can perceive an atmosphere without resonating with it. As was said above, in moments of dynamic aesthetic relation with intensive sympathetic attention, we experience a vital unity with an aesthetic object. In aesthetic resonance with the atmosphere of environments, this sense of unity typically includes a feeling of participation, a feeling of belonging and being at home. While the feeling relates to the human world in the case of built environments such as beautiful architecture, it relates to the natural world in the case of natural environments. Though the feeling of being at home in nature must not be confused with absolute security, it deeply connects us with the natural world. Thus, natural environments that have enough integrity to invite aesthetic resonance contribute, in general, to healing a feeling of alienation and rift with the natural world (Krebs 2018, 2014).

Aesthetic resonance with an idyllic landscape is less demanding than deep sympathetic movement with the awe-inspiring atmosphere of a sublime natural environment. Yet, it is possible to fully devote oneself to a humble realization of a higher complex of forces and meaning, as, for example, in encounters of deep time when we succeed in aesthetically resonating with the awe-inspiring atmosphere of the ancient natural environment.¹³ In invit-

¹² This section can only provide a condensed version of Krebs' landscape aesthetics. See Krebs (2018; 2014) for her elaborated approach.

¹³ I depart slightly from Krebs' landscape aesthetics by suggesting that aesthetic resonance is fully achieved not only in beautiful, but also in sublime nature. Krebs (2018)

ing a feeling of belonging and being at home in the world's temporal depth, temporal sublime nature contributes to the mentioned healing of a feeling of alienation and rift with the natural world. The concluding next section will further address this particular experience of temporal participation.

Conclusion: A Felt Integration of World Time and Life Time

In order to grasp the most particular temporal quality of deep time experiences, I will finally draw on two case studies of deep time experiences: Endre Szécsényi's (2021) reflections on the aesthetics of the night sky and Holmes Rolston's (1998) exploration of aesthetic experiences of ancient forests. Although they each focus on a specific environment, they share striking similarities concerning the phenomenology of deep time experiences. In particular, they highlight a central aspect of deep time experiences that still needs more focus: the experience of ancient presence, which is linked with the experience of the liveliness of natural environments.

In experiences of deep time, one is said to encounter the Earth's and the cosmos' ancient past. However, this past is not experienced as distant or detached; rather, it is perceived as a present reality, apprehended through a multisensory engagement with the world. As Rolston articulates, natural environments are historical museums, but unlike cultural museums or ruins, which preserve the past in a static form, these natural museums continuously embody what they have always been. They are enduring living environments that bridge the deep past with the present and potentially extend into the deep future. This duality of being both ancient and perpetually renewed in each moment underscores their unique temporal character. Their dynamism thus "couples with antiquity to demand an order of aesthetic interpretation that one is unlikely to find in the criticism of art and its artifacts" (Rolston 1998, 158).

Depending on the characteristics of a natural environment, special features shape deep time experiences. Encountering, for example, the night sky, we experience a particular ancient object and an extreme temporal scale: cosmic time. However, as Szécsényi points out, the ancient night sky is nonetheless experienced as connected to the present moment because of the peculiar sensual impressions around us, such as the enlightening of the terrestrial landscape, voices, and smells. Furthermore, though the night sky is, thus, part of the lively natural environment, it is remarkably slow to change and therefore connects us in spirit with humans from all places and times, as

argues that in the latter, due to mixed affective responses, sympathetic movement is only partly achieved.

Szécsényi's remark leads to infer: "Since time immemorial every generation has had the opportunity to wonder at almost the same breath-taking sight of the starry sky, while everything else in our environments has changed and is incessantly changing" (Szécsényi 2021, 58). In ancient forests, as Rolston observes, a "miracle of the Earth" is encountered, namely that nature "decorates" its geomorphology with life. According to him, the trees of ancient forests evoke this ongoing "genesis and biological power" (Rolston 1998, 160). Whereas in volcanic landscapes, as the former Icelandic president Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson (2009) vividly puts it, deep time experiences typically include the feeling of witnessing the beginnings that holy scriptures attribute to higher powers.

Of peculiarity and partly different from deep time experiences, as I have approached and outlined them, are experiences of caves because the presence as manifested in the time of day, year, or weather is less perceptible underground. Thus, the observer sometimes feels like entering a somewhat detached temporal dimension, which, nonetheless, has its own value.¹⁴

Both Rolston and Szécsényi stress the aesthetic challenge presented by the magnitude of the overwhelming sense of deep time and the simultaneous awareness of humanity's and one's individual finitude. Yet, in encountering deep time not as an abstract number or theory but as manifested in the at once ancient, present, and enduring environment whose awe-inspiring atmosphere invites aesthetic resonance, alienation can give way to a feeling of integration. Or, as I put the claim: At the heart of deep time experiences lies a felt integration of world time and life time. While the former encompasses the vast dimensions of the world's past and future, the latter relates to the observer's comparably limited life time.

The felt integration of world time and life time is an experience that overrides the natural world's indifference towards us, even though we know that the world cannot sympathize with us. Our humble yet profound feeling of integration and belonging is real and, ultimately, consoling. To prevent an impoverished and alienated relationship to the depth of world time, we should, thus, treat our canyons, ancient forests, the starry sky, and all the other impressive manifestations of deep time with careful consideration, both regarding us and successive generations.¹⁵

¹⁴ Another particular case of deep time experiences (that is beyond the scope of this paper) concerns the aesthetic encounter of living fossils. See, e.g., Leopold's (1987) vivid description of encountering sandhill cranes.

¹⁵ See Brady (2021) and Capdevila-Werning and Lehtinen (2021) for approaches to intergenerational aesthetics.

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Situatedness in Landscape Sustainability. A Hermeneutical Approach

Abstract

In this paper, I claim that some hermeneutical concepts developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer might help us elaborate a philosophical understanding of landscape's sustainability. In particular, the notion of "situatedness" as the intrinsic finitude of human beings located in a spatial-temporal context is conceived as a productive element by Gadamer. After having recalled the meaning of this notion in Gadamer's thought, I will show how it can provide a valuable contribution, firstly, to the critique of an idea of sustainability as a mere "musealization" of exceptional places, whose counterpart is the exploitation of places considered aesthetically insignificant. Secondly, I will highlight the potentialities of situatedness for the formulation of an approach that takes into account, on the one hand, the relationality that characterizes the relationship between humans and landscape in a way that contrasts a dualistic conception, and, on the other hand, the radical historicity of every specific landscape as well as our approach to landscape that evolves throughout history. Against mere appropriation and, on the opposite, contemplation, the concept of situatedness may enable us to highlight an immersive and participatory approach to landscapes, recalling the responsibility towards the places that we inhabit and visit.

Keywords

Situatedness, Hermeneutics, Sustainability, Landscape Aesthetics

Introduction

Sustainability is a crucial issue to be investigated to address the growing concerns related to ecology and increasingly violent climatic changes; however, it has only recently been examined from the point of view of aesthetics

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as a philosophical discipline. I will refer to “aesthetic sustainability” as an intrinsically relational concept concerning the interaction between human beings and their environment, as underlined recently by Parker Krieg and Reetta Toivanen (2021) and by Sanna Lehtinen (2020, 2021).¹ According to their approaches, the philosophical conceivability of sustainability is predicated on our understanding of the intrinsic *interaction* between humans and nature, requiring us to go beyond the subject-object dualism and embrace an immersive and participatory point of view.

I aim to show how, despite having enjoyed little consideration in the field thus far, philosophical hermeneutics, as developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, can provide a valuable contribution *first* to the critique of an idea of aesthetic sustainability as the mere “musealization” of exceptional places (separating them from ordinary experiences) whose counterpart is the exploitation of places considered aesthetically insignificant or “banal,” and *second* to the formulation of an approach, which by departing from the concept of “situatedness,” takes into account the relationality and historicity not only of places but also of human praxis.

I will elucidate this point following the strand of studies represented by authors such as Arnold Berleant (1993, 1997) and Paolo D’Angelo (2014),² who focus on the concept of landscape conceived in an immersive and relational way.³ This tradition sets itself apart from the cognitivist reading in environmental aesthetics, emblematically represented by Allen Carlson (1981), who focuses on the notion of environment,⁴ the appreciation of which is based on scientific knowledge.⁵ Carlson criticizes landscape as “it were a static essentially ‘two-dimensional’ representation, reducing it to

¹ From a cultural point of view see Nassauer (1997), and, with a specific focus on architecture see, among others, Benson, Roe (2008).

² For a broader perspective on these studies see also Doherty, Waldheim (2016) as well as Howard, Thompson, Waterton, Atha (2019).

³ For a recognition of studies on landscape aesthetics, see Siani (2022, also 2023), who particularly stressed the “pluralistic-holistic-participatory” strand and for whom landscape is not reducible to a single concept and perspective, thus emphasizing the need to deal rather with a plurality of landscapes.

⁴ For objections to this strand, see Brady (2003, 86-119) and D’Angelo (2014, 131-149).

⁵ The position labelled as “scientific cognitivism” argues that “just as the serious, appropriate aesthetic appreciation of art requires knowledge of art history and art criticism, the aesthetic appreciation of nature requires knowledge of natural history—that provided by the natural sciences, especially geology, biology and ecology” (Carlson 2009, 11).

a scene or view" (Carlson 2009, 28).⁶ Differently, the basis of "landscape aesthetics"⁷ is the conviction that the notion of landscape is better suited to explaining an immersive and participatory relationship between humans and nature, overcoming a two-dimensional conception.⁸

This reading fits well with the characteristics of Gadamer's aesthetics, whose conception of aesthetic experience is continuistic and integrative (see Romagnoli 2023). The issues developed by landscape aesthetics also open up critical political and social perspectives concerning the sustainability of the landscape. It becomes easier to implement respectful attitudes towards the landscape if we conceive of it as something in which we are all situated and which influences our way of being (as Berleant's aesthetics of engagement has underlined), as opposed to an abstract object of contemplation that we perceive as distant and separate, and perhaps as the preserve of a few holders of specialized scientific knowledge.⁹

In this paper, I will first specify what I mean when referring to the Gadamerian notion of situatedness. Secondly, I will show how the Gadamerian concept of situatedness can contribute to landscape aesthetics and its sustainable declination. In particular, there are three fundamental aspects that I will focus on: how the Gadamerian conception can highlight an unfruitful way of thinking about sustainability that results in the musealization of specific places, which become *de facto* inaccessible; how the concept of situat-

⁶ According to this reading, the "landscape model" is a projection of landscape painting on nature, inheriting the notion of picturesque as "picture-like": "In this way, the idea of the picturesque relates to earlier conceptions of the natural world as composed of what were called the works of nature, which, although considered proper and important objects of aesthetic experience, were thought to be more appealing when they resemble works of art" (Carlson 2009, 4).

⁷ "While environment may be 'just' nature, i.e. an independent object, landscape is always nature mediated through culture, i.e. a structurally relational term of our experience. Thus, landscape aesthetics is both broader and more restricted in scope than environmental aesthetics: it does not thematize everything that is thought of as natural, but it also thematizes things that are not nature" (Siani 2022).

⁸ As D'Angelo has well pointed out, landscape aesthetics aims to recall that "landscape [...] always has to do with a subject's perception, it can only be constituted in the relationship between a perceiving, feeling and imagining subject and an object; the environment is a physical-biological concept" (D'Angelo 2014, 28, my trans.).

⁹ According to Berleant, "one contribution that the aesthetic makes to the cognition of landscape lies in recognizing the human contribution to the experience as well as to the knowledge of it. [...] Furthermore, apprehending the aesthetic value of landscape in this way not only offers cognitive gratification; it also provides a means of recognizing that value in experience and may arouse and incentive to promote it" (Berleant 1997, 18).

edness can highlight the relational nature of every aesthetic experience of landscape against merely predatory attitudes; how hermeneutics teaches us the historical roots of such aesthetic experiences, thus contrasting the naïve idea of reconstructing unattainable past conditions. This is particularly true of the landscape which would not exist without its interaction with humans giving sense to it.

1. A Methodological Premise

In this regard, a preliminary and fundamental clarification is needed. My intention here is *not* to claim that Gadamer can be considered a “philosopher of landscape” on par with authors such as Georg Simmel (1913) or Joachim Ritter (1963). Instead, I aim to apply some fundamental concepts of his reflection, sometimes also going *beyond* Gadamer himself, to urgent aesthetic issues of the contemporary world. Indeed, especially in his masterpiece *Truth and Method* (1960), Gadamer appears to be bound to a “classical” and narrow view of aesthetics as a philosophy of fine arts, falling into that strand that considers the landscape merely a mirror of the works of art (see D’Angelo 2014, 21ff.). It is common knowledge that Gadamer attributes a primacy to artistic beauty at the expense of natural beauty, a perspective which came about with the transition from Kant’s philosophy to the aesthetics of idealism (see Gadamer 2013, 43-45).¹⁰ The landscape would only derive its reality from pictorial representation, acquiring meaning as a manifestation of the human state of mind. Although Gadamer recalls the historicity of the landscape (especially when it comes to the evolution of appreciation of the landscape of the Alps),¹¹ he loses sight of the other pole of the relations, namely the landscape itself as nature, as otherness and not as a mere reflection of the human (see Gadamer 2013, 45).

Well aware of this, it must be repeated: I intend to employ certain tools developed by Gadamer’s philosophy and show their fruitful application to landscape aesthetics. My approach takes place in a recent process of reas-

¹⁰ This subordination of natural beauty to artistic beauty in twenty century philosophical tradition was denounced in Anglo-American circles by Ronald W. Hepburn (1966, 9-35).

¹¹ Gadamer emphasized the historicity of the judgement of taste on landscape: “For judgments on the beauty of a landscape undoubtedly depend on the artistic taste of the time. One has only to think of the Alpine landscape being described as ugly, which we still find in the eighteenth century—the effect, as we know, of the spirit of artificial symmetry that dominates the century of absolutism” (Gadamer 2013, 54).

sessing Gadamer's philosophy in the direction of a "performative" and anti-exceptionalist reading (see George, Van der Heiden 2021; Nielsen 2022; Romagnoli 2023). This approach makes it possible to bring out how hermeneutics distances itself from an aesthetic conception centered on the "Great Art" of the past, focused on the figure of the creative genius and the relationship between a work of art and the public (conceived dualistically as a subject-object relationship), highlighting a participatory dynamic. It is, therefore, possible to extend hermeneutics in the direction of landscape and everyday phenomena that show a relevant value of aesthetic experience (see Friberg 2021; Romagnoli 2022). Not only does this imply an extension of the potentialities of aesthetics as a discipline, but it also and primarily implies a rethinking of the social role of such aesthetic phenomena, which touch the lives of individuals in a "horizontal" sense and can therefore lead to ethical and political elaboration, for example, by calling for responsibility for the places around us and for our communities (see Berleant 1991; Saito 2007, 2022).

2. Gadamer's Contribution to Situatedness

The concept of situatedness is at the center of multiple contemporary studies: the hermeneutical category of situatedness has been explored in environmental and landscape aesthetics.¹² However, both these lines of inquiry mainly refer to Martin Heidegger's works, as remarked by Jeff Malpas (2015, 354-366), who emphasized the topographical basis of the concept of the *Faktizität* related to the experience of *Dasein* already in Heidegger's early reflections.¹³ Differently from this strand of studies, I will refer to the Gadamerian declination of situatedness, which emphasizes the *historical* rather than *ontological-existential* dimension, as in Heidegger. The historicity of situatedness helps us more adequately account for the concept of landscape, understood as a relational notion reconciling human action and nature. Despite it being true that Gadamer's "hermeneutic situation (*hermeneutische Situation*)" has a primarily historical significance, it nonetheless also indicates being *spatially* situated, as "*here and now*," *hic et nunc*.

¹² For an enquiry on the role of situatedness in art see Wilder (2020). More generally, the relation between space and situatedness has been recently investigated by Hünefeldt & Schlitte (2018) and by Janz (2018).

¹³ For a reflection on the role of Ricoeur's hermeneutics and its potentialities for landscape aesthetics, see Furia (2019).

The concept of situatedness relates to that of finitude, a foundational point the hermeneutic tradition inherits from Heidegger, and particularly from the elaboration of three main concepts presented in *Being and Time*: the finitude of *Dasein*, namely of human beings, the *Geworfenheit*, and that of *Befindlichkeit*, which indicates that every human experience is inserted and developed in a specific context, or in a “world” in Heideggerian terms (see Heidegger 2010, §28-29). Finitude entails necessarily being situated in a specific spatial-temporal dimension; this determinacy is not a limitation but a productive element. The relationship with the other is only possible based on our finitude.

Gadamer further elaborates on the concept inherited from Heidegger, developing it in contrast with nineteenth-century historicism, accused of being a failed attempt at reconstructing the past, trying to go beyond the present perspective (see Gadamer 2013, 278ff.). The impossibility of abstracting oneself from one’s specific situation is at the basis of Gadamerian philosophy, already in the first part of *Truth and Method* devoted to art, and then developed primarily in the second part against the historicist claim that it would be possible to place oneself in the same point of view of an author of past work: “According to Schleiermacher, historical knowledge opens the possibility of replacing what is lost and reconstructing tradition, inasmuch as it restores the original occasion and circumstances” (Gadamer 2013, 166). Gadamer continues:

[U]ltimately, this view of hermeneutics is as nonsensical as all restitution and restoration of past life. Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original. In its continuance in an estranged state, it acquires only a derivative, cultural existence (Gadamer 2013, 166).

This process is what Gadamer conceived as the famous “consciousness of being affected by history,” namely the awareness of one’s limitation as well as of the relation between the present and the past tradition, a concept strictly connected with that of situatedness: “Consciousness of being affected by history [*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*] is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*” (Gadamer 2013, 312). Gadamer also explains that situatedness does not imply pure relativism and the impossibility of communicating with those situated elsewhere. Instead, it is a matter of considering one’s situatedness (and pre-understandings) to think of a possible exchange with otherness. Situatedness is indeed a *dynamic condition* of movement that leads to openness to and encounter with the other. Herme-

neutics, as developed by Gadamer, is an intrinsic relational theory: situatedness implies interaction with the world in a way that can overcome a dualistic conception.

Anyone can reach an ever-greater comprehension of the world, or rather, of their situation or context: “The multiplicity of these worldviews does not involve any relativization of the ‘world.’ Rather, the world is not different from the views in which it presents itself” (Gadamer 2013, 464). According to Gadamer, temporal distance and historical situatedness do not set a limit for comprehension. On the contrary, they make it possible. They entail an awareness of one’s limitation, positively conceived as the possibility of opening to the dialogue with the other (be it a text, a civilization, a place, etc.).

To sum up, the previously said in a few words, the heart of Gadamer’s conception of situatedness is based on the idea that every human experience can only happen in a specific historical context. Situatedness is the obvious consequence of our finitude, and only from our specific perspective we can approach the world. More importantly, this limitation is conceived as a *productive* element, not a restriction.

3. Sustainability as Musealization of Exceptional Landscapes

In relation to what I mentioned, the concept of situatedness can make an essential contribution to approaching sustainability in multiple ways: by emphasizing the limitation of conceiving of sustainability as a musealization of exceptional places, by recalling the relational and immersive nature of the experience of human beings in the world instead; by highlighting the historical roots of every experience, its spatial-temporal embeddedness, namely the focus on the particularity of every single experience.

Starting with the first remarked contribution, Gadamer’s critique of the process of musealization, developed against 19th-century aesthetics, provides us with an essential cue for highlighting a way forward in landscape protection. Gadamer defined this process as “aesthetic differentiation”:

[W]hereas a definite taste differentiates—i.e., selects and rejects—on the basis of some content, aesthetic differentiation is an *abstraction* that selects only on the basis of aesthetic quality as such. It is performed in the self-consciousness of ‘aesthetic experiences.’ Aesthetic experience [*Erlebnis*] is directed towards what is supposed to be the work proper—what it ignores are the *extra-aesthetic* elements that cling to it, such as purpose, function, the significance of its content (Gadamer 2013, 78, my emphasis).

For Gadamer, the attempt to go beyond the specific situation resulted in the isolation of artistic experience from ordinary life, abstracting every social element and creating an ahistorical enclosure. In this direction, following Gadamer's critique, the preservation of exceptionally beautiful and endangered landscapes is often understood as a musealization of those places, which then become inaccessible to an actual exchange with human beings. We can call this approach as merely "contemplative."

The other side of the coin is the mass exploitation of places considered "ordinary." These are conceived as less beautiful and therefore not worthy of preservation, thus left to the exploitation of large crowds of people and the organization of events based on an "appropriative" attitude—a fact that results in the often irreversible deterioration of those places. The contemplative and the appropriative attitudes manifest a common way of proceeding when approaching landscapes. Also, from a social and political perspective, some decisions made to protect the "special" landscape have a counterpart in the mass exploitation of more "banal" places. This attitude reflects a dualistic approach based on the methodological criterion of exceptionality. As Yuriko Saito stressed, "the general public tends to be more attracted to the unfamiliar and the spectacular, typified by the crown jewels of our national parks, such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, with their dramatic elevation, waterfalls, unusual geological formation, and thermal phenomena" (Saito 2007, 61).¹⁴ This creates a polarization between interest in exceptional places and disinterest in everyday, common or ordinary environments. Rightly, Saito claims that the dominance of the aesthetics of exceptional places (which look like paintings) "has consequences not only regarding the fate of unscenic lands but also regarding our protection and management of scenic lands" (Saito 2007, 62).

A concrete example of this way of conceiving sustainability as musealization can be found in mass tourism (see Giombini, Benenti 2021) and the attempts at making it sustainable, for example, the case of the *Spiaggia Rosa* situated in the south-east of Budelli island, in the Maddalena Archipelago in Sardinia. This area, characterized by its pink-colored beach, has undergone progressive erosion to the point of disappearing, mainly due to the behavior of tourists who used to take sand away as a souvenir. This "appropriative" attitude has to do with the attempt to take a part of the experience of that

¹⁴ These places risk also of being assimilated to the "theme parks" (paradigmatically exemplified by Disney Park) as analyzed and deconstructed by Berleant (1997, 42-57)—let us think about the destine of Venice where the administration is planning to introduce a paid ticket to enter the city.

place with oneself: precisely a *souvenir* of that landscape. Starting from 1992, and especially since the establishment of the Maddalena Archipelago National Park (1996), the introduction of protective measures to safeguard the beach (prohibition of anchoring and landing) enabled it to regain its coloration in full. It is no longer possible to walk along the beach, which is now only visible from afar during organized and authorized excursions—the visit to the beach has been replaced by virtual tours provided by the park authorities.¹⁵ The appropriative attitude towards the beach has thus been replaced with a contemplative attitude, which presupposes a mere two-dimensional perspective (tourists observing the beach at a distance from organized boats).

Both models, the appropriative and the contemplative, the unsustainable and the apparently more sustainable, are consequences of the same dualistic conception of the landscape. Moreover, the apparently sustainable attitude entails an additional dualism because some places become only accessible for contemplation. In contrast, others, considered unworthy of aesthetic attention, remain subject to exploitation (as, for example, in the case of the Italian beaches of Rimini and Riccione offering the venue of choice for large concerts). This behavior exemplifies a form of methodical exceptionalism. Such exceptional places are thus treated similarly to works of art in museums, separated from ordinary life. Their appreciation is, in fact, possible only from a distance or through images—something similar to what happens to animals in reserves, for which a custom-made habitat is reconstructed, or to the “musealization of ruins” that leads to the paradox of denying the very nature of ruins by locking them in museums (see Somhegyi 2023, 49-51).

Therefore, as I said, another dualism is produced, based on a vision of sustainable landscape as abstract “wilderness” or “pristine nature” (see Carlson 2009, 6) untouched by human actions. This way of conceiving sustainability could be defined as the “abstract reconstruction of a past life,” using Gadamer’s words. If the critique of what is “mere nature” is central to Berleant’s and Emily Brady’s works, Gadamer’s contribution could help focus on the historical elements that are intrinsically connected to every landscape. Thinking of “pristine nature” as achievable is an abstraction connected to musealization. It is to believe in the possibility of abstracting a landscape from human interactions and actions—something we have instead experienced as impossible given recent developments related to climate change, whereby even an uninhabited area of Antarctica receives the effects of hu-

¹⁵ See https://lamaddalenapark.iswebcloud.it/pagina13158_norme-attuative.html.

man action. From this perspective, it is a matter of keeping in mind the historical development that a landscape has undergone, as opposed to reconstructing past conditions that are now unachievable.

4. Applications of Situatedness

In addition to the critique of sustainability as a musealization of exceptional places, the Gadamerian conception of situatedness also provides some insights in the direction of a possible rethinking of sustainability in a relational and immersive sense. Every experience departs from the situation we find ourselves in, that is, from the “center [*Mitte*],” as Gadamer stated in *Truth and Method*. Situatedness indeed implies an intrinsic relation between human beings and their world. In this sense, landscape is a relational reality, where humans and nature interact. In the case of landscape, this means that when we are experiencing a determinate landscape, we are inserted in it.¹⁶ We are not like a spectator sitting in front of a screen. On the contrary, our being is influenced by being born and raised in a specific landscape. For example, a sense of collectiveness may be produced by a landscape of small spaces, with narrow streets and houses near each other, like in a little medieval hamlet in Italy.

This is particularly evident in the case of tourism: when taking the role of a tourist, we can flirt with unfamiliarity by perceiving ourselves as spectators who will leave the place. Against this attitude, situatedness reminds us that we create a relation to a certain place even by visiting it as tourists (see Haapala 2005), for example, by hiking on a mountain or trekking a natural park. In contrast to an appropriative view, where tourists only look for exotic places to observe from afar by taking photos or carrying away souvenirs, situatedness helps to highlight how each place visited, even for a short time, is a part of the tourists themselves (fostering, for example, more intimate bonding between tourists and local people). Overcoming the isolation of the tourist, as disconnected from the life of those places, may help produce a sense of responsibility towards the place—an aspect developed by Berleant’s (1991) aesthetics of engagement. Therefore, the concept of situatedness can help draw attention to the mutual dynamics of influence between individuals and the landscape, emphasizing that we are bound to the places we find ourselves.

¹⁶ “We are beginning to realize that the natural world is no independent sphere but is itself a cultural artifact. Not only is nature affected pervasively by human action; our very conception of nature has emerged historically, differing widely from one cultural tradition to another” (Berleant 1993, 234).

Moreover, situatedness involves a *hic et nunc*, a dimension of historical grounding that resonates with a conception of landscape as the interaction of nature and culture. In this sense, the concept of situatedness reminds us not only that a specific landscape has its own history, but also that our own approach to landscape evolves throughout history.¹⁷ For example, our view of the famous *Sassi di Matera* in Italy differs from that of those who inhabited those places a hundred years ago: today, we attribute aesthetic characteristics to a landscape that was harsh and hostile to life for the inhabitants of the previous century. This aspect can help draw attention to the positivity of being a foreigner or visitor to a particular place, taking into account not only the habits of those who live there but also the differences in perspectives of visitors who may be distant, geographically or temporally. Gadamer teaches that situatedness is the very condition at the basis of our experience of any determinate place. For example, Japanese and Italian visitors experience the same landscape differently. This consideration could help promote sustainability by highlighting that we need to consider the different backgrounds of the possible visitors, rendering a more multifaceted and integral experience in line with the reflections of Brady's "critical pluralism" (see Brady 2003). For example, a German tourist may notice with amazement how, in other European countries, stores and supermarkets are open on holidays. In Germany, closing shopping malls on holidays encourages the enjoyment of experiences in nature or city parks, resulting in greater attention to those places at the expense of potentially polluting shopping malls. Fostering an exchange with the local population and considering themselves immersed in that place, the tourists can put forward a different point of view.

Against the monolithic vision of the landscape as a generic totality, we need to master situatedness to help us consider and respect the specificities of small-scale realities without, however, implying a form of relativism or a reactionary safeguard of the local traditions, with the result of excluding those who do not belong to certain places. Indeed, each landscape has uniqueness and irreducibility derived from being located in a certain context. For example, the categories elaborated to describe the landscapes of the United States are marked by the ideal of wilderness, as emblematically represented by the expanses of Texas, characterized by enormous plains that

¹⁷ As D'Angelo remarked, "landscape is not only linked to history because landscapes show the mark of the presence of [hu]man and his activity," but "landscape is also historical because it is always seen through the eyes of the observer, which are never innocent but always conditioned by a taste, a poetics, an idea of what the landscape should be" (D'Angelo 2014, 35, my trans.).

appear “infinite” to the human eye and uninhabited. The categories elaborated from such landscapes are undoubtedly inadequate to account for landscape realities such as those of Europe, characterized by more restricted spaces and often marked by the work of humans and history. In this sense, Gadamer’s aesthetics is particularly sensitive in responding to the historicity of the landscape, understood, however, not as a mere “historicist” reading but as the possibility of grasping an aesthetic experience while considering the peculiar situation in which one finds oneself.

Conclusions

Focusing on the situatedness and the historical roots of every experience, including the landscape experience, prevents naïve attempts at reconstructing past or “original” landscapes. Reconstruction is in fact another variant of some ways of enacting an unfruitful understanding of sustainability, such as rebuilding habitats for endangered animals or repopulating certain areas in view of the principle of biodiversity. In some cases, reconstructing landscapes can be likened to naïve reconstruction of some buildings in a changed context with a manner identic to their past form. This operation does not consider the passage of time and the historicity of landscapes nor that of the human gaze.

In contraposition, the notion of situatedness puts into question the idealized vision of an unspoiled landscape preceding the coming of humans and spoiled by subsequent historical changes. Indeed, the uniqueness of each place should be preserved while making it accessible at the same time. The preservation of landscape should not imply a contemplative vision, like that of a painting in a museum, which, in this understanding, would seem to give reason to Carlson’s criticism of the two-dimensional conception of the landscape as a scenery. In the specific case of the *Spiaggia Rosa*, the aim would certainly not be to reopen the beach, leaving it at the mercy of “predatory” attitudes, but rather to rethink our approach towards places—even perhaps by introducing a restricted number of accesses,¹⁸ but above all by encouraging collective paths of exchange with landscapes and raising awareness through aesthetic education of care toward nature. This path would call for a sense of responsibility and care on the part of visitors precisely because of the close relationship that unites them with the places.

¹⁸ Moreover, an additional help would be requiring mindfulness practices such as carrying a mat and washing sand off to avoid carrying it away; something that has been introduced in another particular beautiful beach the *Pelosa* in Stintino, in the North-Western part of Sardinia (see, <https://spiaggialapelosa.it/stintino/>).

Between mere exploitation and contemplation, situatedness draws attention to the relational and immersive aspect of aesthetic experience, which is not specific to certain extraordinary places, being rather common to every place that characterizes our lives. We ought to respect the unicity of every place while making it accessible. Even the tourist would not be a mere “consumer” vis-à-vis any landscape but rather one of those who *participate in constructing* the aesthetic experience of that determinate landscape.

I claim that we can acquire such a relational and immersive vision thanks to the category of situatedness understood in a productive sense, just like hermeneutics does. Places are not mere objects. Not only does any determinate place contain a specific history, but the visitor brings their history while experiencing such a place. A stranger may find new meanings in the places they visit, meanings so far undiscovered by the natives, or may bring home some new perspective. So, every relation to the landscape implies a form of situatedness that should be directed towards mutual enrichment. I would propose further developing the potentialities intrinsic to the concept of situatedness, as introduced by Gadamer, and applying them to improving a sustainable attitude towards the landscape.

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Zoltán Somhegyi*

The Changing Modes and Manifestations of Ruination. Nostalgia for Classical Decay¹

Abstract

In this paper, I focus on the changing modes, forms, and manifestations of ruination. In classical cases, it was Nature ruining the artificial, i.e., human artifacts, like constructions. In our contemporary reality, however, we can see more and more warning signs that this “natural” and “classical” ruination is itself challenged and changing: what we have now could instead be described as the ruination of Nature by the artificial. While earlier we paid attention to a relic caused by the agency of Nature, now we will have to pay attention to the relic of Nature’s agency itself.

Keywords

Ruins, Ruination, Heritage, Sustainability, Nostalgia

Introduction

A beautiful old church in Normandy, France, is in danger. Of course, and unfortunately, this fact about the church is not too surprising, as we are accustomed to old buildings being exposed to perils, especially those from the ravages of time. However, the case is slightly more complex, so finding adequate and satisfactory solutions is also more complicated. In other words, despite the dramatic situation, it can be regarded as a tricky state of affairs that may serve as a precedent for other similar cases, mainly because —

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¹ This paper was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (OTKA), Project Nr. OTKA K-143294, “Perspectives in Environmental Aesthetics” (2022–2025).

as we will soon see—it is an example that incorporates various aspects in the investigated issue. Such loss can be significant for a wide range of readers, including art historians, philosophers of art, archaeologists, heritage specialists, climate change researchers, environmental policymakers, cultural consultants of local municipalities, or even non-specialized or non-professional lovers of Impressionist painting.

Let us thus first see some of the basic details of the building in question that will serve as a case study from which to depart in our investigation. The Saint-Valery church in Varengeville-sur-Mer is in danger of disappearing, more precisely of falling into the sea, due to increased coastal erosion jeopardizing the cliffs on which the church is built. While erosion may seem to be a natural phenomenon affecting many coastal regions, its power has increased because of rising sea levels due to climate change and as a warning sign. Moreover, in order to have some actual numbers, an article by Georges Waser in *The Art Newspaper*, which reported on Varengeville-sur-Mer, also quoted a recent collapse in the neighboring town of Dieppe, where, in 2012, no less than 20,000 cubic meters of the cliff have fallen victim to erosion (Waser 2022).

The building originated in the 11th century and was later enlarged and modified. Georges Braque contributed significant aesthetic “added value” by designing a stained glass window that depicts the Tree of Jesse (Varengeville-sur-Mer 2023). Braque is buried in the churchyard, which is also in danger of ruin, together with the building. Several Impressionist artists could not resist the temptation of the charming location, as it is testified by, for example, Claude Monet’s work painted in 1882. Such paintings also have importance beyond their art historical value, as they report the levels and grades of erosion in the late 19th century.

From this summary of the art and environmental issues concerning the church, it becomes evident that we are observing diverse forms of ruination and decay, affecting both Nature and human constructions. This situation presents a special yet unfortunate case, which is theoretically complex, especially in terms of assessing and appreciating these different forms of degradation. Nevertheless, we can also see that all this is strongly connected to the broader concept of sustainability, offering a framework and critical concept within which I will investigate these questions further. Therefore, in the following discussion, sustainability will not only refer to finding responsible ways of further growth and avoiding the exhaustion of our natural resources but also to sustaining or maintaining, when possible, aspects of both the natural environment and material culture and their fascinating interaction.

Considering that interaction, what interests us the most here are the natural processes and classical manifestations of ruination. This intersection is often considered aesthetically valuable in the Western tradition, but we are aware of the different and equally legitimate and different approaches to these questions in other cultures (Somhegyi 2020, chapter 4).

1. Natural Ruination of the Building

First, we have the “normal” and natural ruination of the building itself. In this case, it does not matter that the church is on the cliff since this type of “classical” architectural dereliction can affect each building, which we can define as the interaction of Nature with human efforts. By the latter, the “interaction of Nature with human efforts,” I am also referring to such classical interpretations of ruins as, for example, Georg Simmel’s, from the beginning of the 20th century, who famously described architecture as a temporary balance between the “upward striving soul” and nature in its gravity. In his words:

This unique balance—between mechanical, inert matter which passively resists pressure, and informing spirituality which pushes upward—breaks, however, the instant a building crumbles. For this means nothing else than that merely natural forces begin to become master over the work of man: the balance between nature and spirit, which the building manifested, shifts in favor of nature” (Simmel 1959, 259).

Cases of classical architectural ruination show the result of the power of Nature, more precisely, how it overpowers human agency (Ginsberg 2004; Trigg 2006). Such ruins can evoke nostalgic emotions, worrying thoughts, and aesthetic appreciation. When encountering a sublime amount of time, they can trigger feelings of “smallness” in front of the power of Nature. Alternatively, they can stimulate thoughts on the transience of all human efforts and the ephemerality of the results of our actions (Dillon 2014; Makarius 2004; Zucker 1961). We can also claim that without continuous maintenance efforts, nature destroys buildings, and for a while, we encounter the result of this natural destruction. I have to emphasize, however, that this is only temporal since, without conservation, even ruins get ruined. Since Nature’s change will not stop on its own, at a certain point, there are not even ruins anymore. Of course, the time frame of the existence of ruins depends on several factors, like weather conditions and the original building materials (Somhegyi 2020, see esp. chapter 1).

Triggering perceptions of and ruminations about some decaying ruins thus manifest the power and agency of Nature over human efforts. In some ways, assessing the classical forms and results of architectural decay may seem to perpetuate ideas about a rigid division between humans and nature. Contrarily, ruins have long been, and still are, among the most striking examples that challenge this anthropocentric approach. They illustrate how we witness and, in a sense, appreciate nature gradually reclaiming human-made artifacts. For the loss of the edifice, and as a paradox manifestation of the acceptance of defeat, we console ourselves with the aesthetic pleasure gained from the ruination.

2. “Normal” Erosion of the Cliff

Returning to the threatened church in France, we can briefly look at the second type of ruination, which we could label as “normal” erosion. Compared to the natural ruination of the building and some of its aesthetic implications mentioned above, here we have significantly less to say. In a way, what is described above is just a “normal” or “natural” activity by Nature. The main difference is that it does not affect the building itself, but its surroundings and “base”—the cliff under it. But as for ruination, this “original” or “natural” erosion results from natural processes against which we cannot do much. Unlike in the case of the building that we can repair, rebuild, conserve, etc., entropy is beyond human control. Therefore, it is still the same direction, the agency of Nature, with the difference that it is not directed towards a human artifact but against Nature itself—even if, naturally, with effect and implications on the artifact, too.

The only human effort we can make in such a case—and, in a way, regarding the church, the only “fault” we (as humans) made this time—is how to choose the place of buildings suitably. As Georges Waser described in the aforementioned brief report on the threatened church, another historical monument from the broader region that is comparable to Varengeville-sur-Mer when regarding, for example, its age, appearance, and touristic importance—the Mont Saint-Michel—is deteriorating notably less due to erosion (Waser 2022). All this is because of the difference in its material foundation: the leucogranite rock under Mont Saint-Michel is more resistant than Varengeville-sur-Mer’s chalk, sand, and clay base.

In any case, what we can see concerning this second aspect I labeled as “normal” erosion is that here, we still have the traditional agency of Nature, with its long-known effects and results.

3. Increased Erosion of the Complex

However, let us wait a minute and look at the latter trait of erosion in more detail. As you can guess, we cannot speak of “only” natural erosion here, but it has definitely increased in scale and power due to rising sea levels. Here, a natural dereliction is combined with the dereliction of Nature itself. In other words, earlier, we could contemplate the ruination of the artificial, that is, of manufactured constructions through the agency of Nature, but now we have to add to it the ruination of Nature itself by human agency, definitely going beyond the limits of sustainability. This perspective becomes curious because it is not simply a shift of focus and change of direction but has an exponentially increasing effect on the “classical” ruination process. Nature, being destroyed, can also be more efficient in destroying human artifacts.

However, it is worth observing the implications regarding both aesthetic questions and heritage management issues. Hence, what becomes essential is to see how the changing modes of ruination processes affect the possible management of ruins, architectural dereliction, and the assessment of natural decay.

When examining these issues, we can start with prevention and preservation. Here, we must again admit that we do not have many options. Unlike the reparation or maintenance of a singular construction that in many or most cases is still possible, and hence ruination is preventable if there is a will and the financial resources to do so, we cannot efficiently counteract, in the studied case and similar ones, the perils coming from the large-scale destruction caused by Nature’s increased powers, the strength of an increase in entropy.

Why not? For example, because there is the question of authenticity. Questions and debates around authenticity are not “limited” to the levels of the building itself. Now, as the threat increases in scale, its operation circle also enlarges and affects more than the construction *per se*. It will affect the actual site and also the “sitedness” (Shapshay 2022) of the building, or, we can say, the authenticity of its environmental context and surroundings.

To simplify the issue, we can say that, in a similar way as how we can replace some or practically all of the parts of a building—which will, naturally, have its aesthetic implications (Somhegyi 2022)—we can, at least theoretically, change the *location* of the building. It can, for example, be transported away. It is not as uncommon as it may sound since relocation can happen to constructions if they are in peril or brought away for their artistic, historical, and aesthetic value. For the historical aspect, we could quote the classic ex-

ample of the relocation of the Temple of Abu Simbel in 1968 and the Cloisters Museum in New York for the aesthetic. Nevertheless, how would and how does such a change affect the object of our care? What are the implications of such a drastic intervention in the sitedness of a construction?

Here, we can learn a bit from neighboring research, which has partly comparable results, regarding post-seismic reconstruction models of towns. As Matteo Clemente and Luca Salvati differentiated in their insightful article, we can have off-site and on-site interventions, where the former means building a new town in the vicinity of the destroyed one, and the latter refers to the approach of reconstructing the city “where it was, as it was” (Clemente, Salvati 2017). While Clemente and Salvati show more successful and less efficient examples for both, they conclude that ideally, it is better to avoid “the ‘new town model’ as much as possible” (Clemente, Salvati 2017, 11). Their main claim is that maintaining some connection to the original place is essential in overcoming the trauma of the “interrupted landscape,” that is, a “drastic break in the individual stories attaching the people to their territory, as well as an abrupt alteration of the continuous process by which people attribute a sense to their own territory” (Clemente, Salvati 2017, 1). In arguing for this keeping of attachment, they urge to limit the top-down government strategies of an overly imposed, command-and-control approach and to focus on providing maximum opportunity for the affected local community to shape their old-new environment, for example, by granting the responsibility of reconstruction to grassroots groups. Only this way, they claim, can we hope to maintain or re-create identity, a relationship to the place, and history: “Rebuilding an identity ‘ex abrupto’ without considering the gradual historical sedimentation in the social context, would lead to gentrification, fake identities as those typical of new towns, theme parks or outlet malls” (Clemente, Salvati 2017, 9-10).

The memory of a place plays a key role here, the series of lived experiences contributing to the “sedimentation process.” As Forrest Clingerman, a researcher of environmental hermeneutics and environmental theology, reminds us:

[...] memory connects the past of the place with its presence or presentness. [...] The temporal dimensions of memory include both subject and object, self and place. In the pastness of memory, the self and place are like dance partners: moving together in step, responding to one another’s movements, creating meaning in a unique pairing of particular individuals and places (Clingerman 2011, 146, 148, italics in the original).

Naturally, we can observe this not merely on an individual level. This importance of the interconnection of personal attachment and growing out of it—the social relevance of the place in its becoming valuable even as heritage—is what was also highlighted by Lisa Giombini:

While a *place* is seen as the background of human action, the setting where social and personal dynamics take place, *heritage* reflects the societal perception of such dynamics, acting as both the producer and the product of collective and individual identity. Within this perspective, everyday significance and attachment are considered key elements on which to base effective reconstruction programs (Giombini 2020, italics in the original).

In a later article, she further emphasizes the role of the community in the creation of this meaning and significance:

[...] a historical site is never meaningful *in* or *by* itself. Its meaning derives, instead, from the role the object plays in ‘constituting’ something that is of value, that is, people’s attachment to a particular place and culture. Meaning, thus, is not wholly inherent to the object but rather depends on the surrounding social context [...] (Giombini 2021, 105, italics in the original).

As mentioned, all the above considerations may help determine the optimal approach to dealing with the object in question and other buildings threatened by the increased destructive powers of Nature or the ones already ruined. Constructions, building complexes, or even entire villages or towns are embedded in and thus strongly connected to their original context. This strong connection and placement help us assess them qua ruins, or, as Peter Lamarque put it: “A key point is that the aesthetic appreciation of a ruin focuses on the ruin *as a ruin*. In effect, a ruin has become a new kind of object inviting a new kind of response, different from the response that the original building might have elicited” (Lamarque 2016, 297, italics in the original). As a consequence, because of their strong link to the original place, that is, their “sitedness,” we can also raise Robert Ginsberg’s claim: “The ruin is at home under the rain and wind” (Ginsberg 1988, 169). All this also explains that in the case of their reconstruction, saving, conservation, or when approaching them with care, they should be treated *in situ* to try to save the historical, cultural, and social sedimentation in the surroundings.

Just as a bitter curiosity, to all the above details of the survey of the theoretical implications of sitedness and relocation, we must add that it is often not even a real option. Sometimes, there is a lack of serious will. At the same time, in other cases, there are also physical obstacles or “mere” financial

burdens—to get an idea of this latter, according to Georges Waser’s (2022) article, in the case of Varengeville-sur-Mer, just the feasibility study for a potential relocation of the Saint-Valery church would cost somewhere between € 400,000 and € 600,000.

4. Accepting Decay?

So what exactly remains for us if, in the end, we cannot save something like—presumably—the Saint-Valery church, which is currently in limbo? We can find some considerations in the direction towards which, among other researchers, Erich Hatala Matthes points: accepting such cases as part of the story. Matthes quotes and agrees with the affirmation by Caitlin DeSilvey that “[i]t goes against the grain of human nature to step back and allow things to collapse, the urge to step in at the last minute to avert material disintegration is a powerful one” (DeSilvey 2017, 15; in Matthes 2020, 176). Hence, it is difficult to “resist the impulse to preserve.” Nevertheless, he proposes “alternative ways of thinking” (Matthes 2020, 176). What do these ideas entail? In some sense, they are a certain acceptance of the possibility of letting things go. As Matthes claims: “The tensions inherent in ruins, the ‘interplay’ of forces, thus also invite frank reflection on the false dichotomy of nature and culture” (Matthes 2020, 180). As my introduction argues, ruins are not about the division of nature and culture. Contrarily, they represent the often aesthetically pleasing manifestations of their interconnection. This idea aligns with and reinforces my initial claim. Furthermore, this discussion is intrinsically linked to questions of sustainability, emphasizing the need to find ways to sustain nature and the natural world and its harmonious interaction with our constructions. In Matthes’ text, we can find further clarifications regarding the approach:

We are now in a position to see that while climate change is presented (accurately) as the major environmental problem of our time, it is *also* part of our heritage. [...] Rising sea levels are not simply threatening our heritage, but they are also part of our environmental heritage—the inheritance of generations of industrial activity fueling anthropogenic climate change. We are endeavoring to save the coast from ourselves. [...] The ruins of coastal places operate as a devastating criticism of the capitalist-industrial forces that have driven anthropogenic climate change. But they also offer the promise of finding new meanings in these altered spaces—sites that might bring us together in opposition to the forces that engendered them, and inspire novel visions of a different future (Matthes 2020, 179, 181).

So, here we are again at the fundamental questions of meaning, interpretation, memory, and identity connected to the place. Again, in agreement with Caitlin DeSilvey:

[...] when protection can no longer be sustained at the levels we have become accustomed to, we will need new ways of making sense of the world and our relationship to it. [...] Objects generate meaning not just in their preservation and persistence but also in their destruction and disposal. [...] If we are to explore alternatives to the preservation paradigm, perhaps we need to develop modes of care that help us negotiate the transition between presence and absence (DeSilvey 2017, 16-17, 29, 179).

It might initially seem like a scarce consolation after the significant loss that we have already had and are inevitably going to have, but if all this incentivizes further reflection—and, connected to that and, more importantly, further action too—then it can bring some hope. This speculation will thus again be a mode that could meaningfully contribute to the discourse of sustainability, this time, however, in the sense of sustaining some memory of and maintaining the connection to places and spaces, even if they are or will be physically altered or will disappear.

One of the areas where such forms of loss will stimulate further reflection and discussion is ruination's novel modes and approaches to the concept of the sustainability of ruins. Since the classical forms of ruination could be interpreted as the contemplation of the aesthetically attractive manifestations of the agency of Nature over human constructions, aesthetic sustainability, in this case, would mean sustaining, or at least trying to sustain, these natural forms and processes of ruination, thus trying to keep ruins what they were and are, aesthetically pleasing relics caused by the agency of Nature. In this sense, then, we are aiming and attempting to maintain the natural (forms of) ruination of human constructions, that is, the process traditionally promising the "producing" of aesthetically valuable remnants—at least from a Western perspective—even if, naturally, their "afterlives" is not without further challenges (Somhegyi 2023).

It will also be the point when nostalgia turns into solastalgia. In classical cases, ruins are strongly connected to nostalgia, inviting the observer to sentimental thoughts of the past, longing for earlier periods and places from which we have either moved on or have not been. Solastalgia operates on other levels, as described by Glenn Albrecht, who coined the term:

It is the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place. [...] In direct contrast to the dislocated spatial dimensions of traditionally defined nostalgia, solastalgia is the homesickness you have when you are still located within your home environment (Albrecht 2019, 38-39).

We can thus claim that our perception of ruins is evolving. Traditionally, ruins stimulated a sense of nostalgia. However, as we increasingly sense and perceive environmental degradation, this nostalgia becomes more profound. It is no longer just about an attachment to a place but also about a yearning for the traditional forms of decay primarily driven by natural forces. This evolving sense of nostalgia suggests a shift towards what might be termed “higher level” nostalgia. It is a nostalgia not just for places but for a time when ruination was a natural process, untouched by human-induced environmental change. As discussed earlier, this natural decay process led to the creation of classical ruins. In light of this, a developed understanding of aesthetic sustainability could guide our efforts to preserve these classical processes of ruination. Such an approach acknowledges the intrinsic value of decay as it occurred in the past, driven solely by natural forces. These forms of ruins are traditionally considered more “peaceful” and tranquil, emanating a sort of Winckelmannian “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,” something that even fake ruins imitate, with more or less convincing results (Somhegyi 2021). However, recent ruination—that is, the decay of edifices of the recent past or older buildings but of which ruination has started and increased only in the near past—is rather worrying, or, as Oliver Broggini claimed, it can also be described as “incongruous,” “sinister,” and “disquieting” (Broggini 2009, 9). Here, we can also remember Jonathan Hill’s insightful considerations on the reasons for such worries. Hill claims that the uneasiness of recent ruination may come from the fact that such decaying constructions are too efficient in illustrating our inevitable death:

[...] modern ruins are disturbing for other reasons too, intensifying the analogy of a body to a building. In an ancient ruin, decay occurred in the distant past, stimulating general thoughts of degradation and renewal that allow us to contemplate our own life and believe that death is inevitable but reassuringly in the future. In a modern ruin, active decay occurs before our eyes, stimulating particularly disturbing thoughts of our imminent degeneration and demise (Hill 2019, 194).

In conclusion, we can claim that, while our nostalgia was stimulated by the ruin before, we will soon have nostalgia for the classically ruining though not-yet-ruined Nature. In other words, while earlier we paid attention to a relic made by the agency of Nature, now we will have to pay attention to the relic of Nature’s agency itself.

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Adrienne Gálosi*

“Post-nature” Sylvania. Dimensions of Aesthetic Judgment and Interpretation of Contemporary Parks¹

Abstract

This paper establishes interpretative criteria for the aesthetic evaluation of contemporary gardens and parks, specifically focusing on a dendrological park. Initially, it examines the potential of a “contract with nature” as a foundational basis for such evaluation but subsequently challenges this notion. The paper posits that political and material-ecological aspects significantly influence aesthetic judgments in these spaces. It argues that these elements are integral to eliciting a direct aesthetic experience and necessitates explicit explication in their interpretation. This study further interprets gardens and parks as akin to works of art in that they represent, albeit without conventional subject matter, the nuanced relationships to the lives of individuals. The paper elucidates the more profound, often unspoken dialogues between nature, culture, and individual experience by viewing these spaces as representational mediums.

Keywords

Modified Environment, Natural Contract, Earth Jurisprudence, Post-Nature, Representation

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¹ This paper was supported by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (OTKA), Project No. 143294, “Perspectives in Environmental Aesthetics” (2022–2025).

When ages grow to civility and elegance, men come to
Build Stately rather than to *Garden Finely*:
 As if *Gardening* were the *Greater perfection*.

Bacon 1625

They had conceived the idea of making in the espalier wall
 an archway, through which the prospect could be seen.[...]
 They had sacrificed the asparagus in order to build
 on the spot an Etruscan tomb...

Flaubert 2008 [1881]

Introduction

However familiar and common the experience of walking in gardens and parks may be, these hybrid environments present considerable difficulties when evaluating and interpreting them. This paper outlines concepts and interpretive aspects essential in evaluating gardens, landscape gardens, and parks. I will use a recently opened park as an illustrative example to define these. It is not intended to be a case study, as I am not providing a detailed description and analysis of the park. However, the issues of interpretation raised by the site are possible examples of general questions that need to be answered for any other garden or park, although the evaluation is specific to each particular park or garden. Standard criteria for aesthetic judgment are not included in the paper, as it is impossible to establish a set of universal criteria for parks and gardens, as is the case for works of art. However, criteria relevant to the interpretation of parks and gardens are included to underpin the individual judgment.

This park was chosen because the owner/designer justified the park mainly on the grounds of sustainability and environmentalism, but at the same time, it provoked a backlash and negative judgments based on contemporary environmentalism. In other words, opposing interpretative frameworks lead to conflicting park assessments. This paper provides a conceptual framework for an expanded aesthetic judgment for interpreting parks valued primarily as aesthetic experiences. In the paper's conclusion, I will suggest that the different aesthetic perceptions and evaluations are based on different understandings of the relationship with the sustainability of life.

1. The Shekvetili Dendrological Park

The Shekvetili Dendrological Park in Georgia is a much-discussed park that opened its gates to visitors in 2020. It had to open its gates, as it is a closed private park on the private estate of former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. As its name suggests, the 60-hectare park is mainly distinguished by its unique trees.² The park was brought to the public's attention by Georgian filmmaker Salomé Jashi's documentary *Taming the Garden*, released in 2021.³ The film has won fourteen prestigious awards and numerous nominations, and its critical acclaim has brought the park into the broader cultural discourse. What is so special about this park that it has become the subject of an outstanding nature film? It is the trees that make the park unique. There are hundreds of giant, majestic old trees. Only these trees have all grown old elsewhere.⁴ So far, in Georgia alone, more than two hundred ancient trees have been uprooted from their original habitat and replanted in this private park. The film follows the uprooting, transporting, and replanting of a few giant trees, using poetic, elegiac images rather than narration or interviews to pass judgment on the practice.

2. Aesthetic Reflection as Expanded Context for the Judgment of Taste

How we evaluate this park is inseparable from how we interpret it. Aesthetic judgment, although specific, is a reflective judgment, which means, to use Kant's idea, that a concept must be found for the object. It is the process of

² The park does not have a website, only a Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Dendrologicalpark/>. In addition to natural curiosities, the park includes an artificial pond, a playground, a model city, and modern recreational areas. For more information on these and on how to visit the park, including pictures, see for example: <https://transfersgeorgia.com/tours/dendrological-park-tour-in-shekvetili/> [accessed: 25 July 2023].

³ Salomé Jashi (2021), *Taming the Garden*, Mira Film, CORSO Film, Sakdoc Film, 01:30. For the reception of the film, awards and nominations, see <https://tamingthegarden-film.com/en/> [accessed: 25 July 2023].

⁴ The 18 hectares of Shekvetili Park are predominantly occupied by native tree species. Additionally, the park hosts a remarkable collection of ancient trees, translocated from various regions across the country. This includes a notable contingent of over 200 trees that are over a century old, with some even reaching an age of 400 years. Expanding beyond this, an additional 42 hectares of the park are dedicated to a diverse array of plants and mature trees imported from international locales, contributing to a rich botanical diversity. This area also serves as a sanctuary for 58 endangered bird species, along with a variety of other exotic fauna, thereby enhancing the park's ecological significance and conservation value.

judgment itself, which is not simply the feeling of pleasure of a perceiving subject but takes place in the space of meaning opened up by the subject's response to the object. Without going into a detailed analysis of aesthetic judgment here, I assume that the reflective aesthetic judgment considers several aspects that are not aesthetic but are (also) aesthetically manifested and thus play a role in the aesthetic judgment as the meaning of form. Thus, the complex experience of gardens and parks is formed in what can be called, for want of a better word, a networked experience, in which different modes of aesthetic experience are interwoven—since the garden functions as both a natural and an artificial object—but at the same time this experience is not divorced from all the social, cultural and intellectual contexts that have played a role in the creation of the garden and which also manifest themselves in some aesthetic aspects.⁵

3. Parks at the Crossroads of Nature and Culture

The first conceptual difficulty, which applies to every aspect of thinking about gardens and parks, is that they are a hybrid of the natural and the artificial, both an experience of the natural environment and an experience constructed by a given creative intention.⁶ Emily Brady describes gardens as

⁵ This paper does not endeavor to analyze reflective aesthetic judgment, nor does it seek to interpret Kant's view that taste evaluates an object independently of concepts and interests. Additionally, it does not aim to resolve the aporia inherent in taste judgments, which are at once subjective and universally necessary. Instead, the paper takes as its starting point the consistency within Kantian theory itself with the notion that aesthetic judgment is not formed in a meaning vacuum. While Kant asserts that aesthetic pleasure is conceptually independent, this paper argues that the involvement of concepts in judgment does not equate to their determinative role in defining beauty as a specific, given object. Concepts are involved, but they do not constrict the judgment to a finite understanding of beauty.

⁶ The experiences offered by gardens and parks are very much linked to the geographical and historical location of the place, to its type, to the history of its genre, to its tradition of use and interpretation. Throughout history, different types of gardens have developed in different parts of the world, and they are so diverse that it is very difficult to offer a comprehensive typology. For this reason, the theoretical literature has had considerable difficulty in finding a definitive common denominator for gardens (gardens being the broad, all-encompassing term that includes landscape gardens and parks in their various forms) that would uniformly define, for example, the classical Japanese "dry garden", and at the same time the landscape garden of Lancelot "Capability" Brown at Blenheim, which was criticised (by Reynolds, for example, very strongly) because, as they said, the visitor could

modified environments in the space between nature and culture (Brady *et al.* 2018). Brady and her co-authors try to cover their field of study—the different forms of gardens and artworks in the landscape—with one term, the modified environment, and they try to define it not in the tension of counter-concepts or the dualism of the nature-culture dichotomy, but as a point on a continuum, with varying degrees of naturalness and artificiality.⁷

When we think in terms of dichotomies, we are dealing with relational concepts, because these concepts only acquire meaning in relation to each other. Not only culture, but also society and history, and even the city or the ideal can be counter-concepts to nature. In its most general approach, human or man-made vs. non-human, external nature are distinguished in these relational counter-concepts. The dissolution of dichotomies into a kind of hybrid continuum, where one does not speak of oppositions or counter-worlds but of degrees, can only be raised if one of the fundamental concepts of the relation, namely nature, is called into question. The views that hold this position do not speak of the disappearance of nature as the basis of human existence, but they raise the question of whether nature, whose elements are all permeated by humans, can still be understood as a counter-concept to humans. This understanding will be discussed later, but it is important to note that the traditional description of landscaped gardens and parks—namely that they combine the effort to cultivate and process nature and at the same time to preserve it as a landscape, that is, as a piece of nature that is only contemplated by humans and is alien to them—can be applied to most of today's gardens and parks, insofar as we replace the landscape with natural objects on a smaller scale. We see in the garden objects that, despite all domestication, something of the non-human is preserved in them. In other words, Shekvetili Park is also a managed environment,⁸ somewhere be-

not tell whether he was walking in the fields. In other words, the very general double experience formulated in the above sentence applies to certain types of garden only in its extreme values.

⁷ Brady's term "modified environment" encompasses John Andrew Fisher's concepts of influenced and mixed environments, the former being influenced by human activity, e.g., pollution, but largely natural, and the latter including man-made objects, e.g., roads (Fisher 2003).

⁸ This word comes to my mind, perhaps not by chance, because man often no longer cultivates the environment in the original sense of culture, where the cultivation of the land and the cultivation of the soul with philosophy were one and the same word (see Cicero: "Cultura animi philosophia est"), which is still preserved in language, in the word agriculture. Man no longer simply arranges the environment to make the chaos of nature transparent, but manages it, administers it, solves the "challenges" of the environment to suit their own purposes.

tween natural and artificial, but perhaps with its giant trees, it wants to express the dignity of nature, which far exceeds the limits of human existence. We are, therefore, starting from a position that does not draw a strict ontological line between nature and culture but sees in their intertwining the presence of nature as an inescapable condition that determines human existence from the outside.

It is easy to imagine that the park can provide the experience described above, but the fact that the enormous old trees have been transplanted here may cause discomfort and anxiety for many—and it does, as the film documents. The desire to create a private park with rare plants would not be sufficient justification, so there were also environmentalist arguments: the life of the trees can only be sustained in this protected area through expert care. I cannot judge the acceptability of this justification from the professional point of view of nature conservation, but I would ask if this practice could fall within the scope of a natural contract as Michel Serres (1995) understood the term.

4. Natural Contract as a Possible Basis for Evaluation

Suppose we imagine that this metaphorical contract is implemented. In that case, we can imagine that one of the signatories, the park's creator, undertakes to ensure the care, future flourishing, and sustainable life of the trees in a privileged location, even at the cost of removing them from their original, allegedly endangered habitat. The other signatory would be the trees or nature in general. Serres would vehemently object to his contract being taken literally—as he did in his letter explaining the incomprehension of his critics (Serres 2000). However, he emphasizes throughout that what was hitherto a global object—nature—now becomes an agent, and thus a subject, and then a subject of law, a legal entity. In Serres's analysis, the former subject-object relationship seems to be reversed, as both members acquire a new dimension by becoming global. So, the questions now concern how the collective subject becomes more and more an object: previously active, the subject now becomes a passive global object of forces and constraints responding to its actions; and how the status of the world object changes: previously passive, the object now becomes active, and as previously given, it now becomes our real partner (Serres 2000, 20-21). He believes that the legal conventions on the climate crisis mean that the subjectivization of the former object is already underway at the legal level.

This tendency of treating nature as an active legal subject has been reinforced since the publication of Serres's writings, and although he believed that just as no one signed the social contract, it became a framework for thought and action and even a condition of possibility for the formation of society, so too the natural contract has no concrete signatories.⁹ However, actual 'contracts,' signed legal documents, have been made in the name of nature since then. The emergence and implementation of Earth Jurisprudence is the recognition that all members of the planetary community are legal subjects and endows non-human life forms with complex forms of legal agency. New Zealand, for example, granted legal identity to the Te Urewera forest in 2014, which now has its property. India and Colombia have granted rights to rivers, and Ecuador granted constitutional rights to nature in 2008 (Demos 2015).¹⁰ Such a contract is not only based on our self-interest in keeping the earth alive for survival. However, it is also a consequence of, among other things, the movement that began in the 1980s to advocate first for animal rights. As a result, the human and social sciences began to systematically investigate animal existence, consciousness, and forms of subjectivity, which now extends to plants, leading to a discourse of the 'plant turn' (Marder 2013).

Science increasingly supports the conviction that plants are not mere objects but must be seen as subjects with intentions. We can see them as living beings that shape their lives (Castro 2019). Listening to the dendrologists' research, we modify our simplistic image of old trees as solitary individuals, stoic organisms barely tolerating each other as they compete for space and resources. If we accept that a tree's habitat and environment are complex ecosystems,¹¹ answering whether the centuries-old oak would sign an otherwise apparently fair contract offer is challenging. The plant's intention, the 'language of nature,' still has to be 'translated' into our human language, and we know that these translations are always interpretations based on a set of social, historical, cultural—not natural—assumptions.

⁹ Bruno Latour also takes his metaphorical example from the field of law, saying that between the warring parties of nature and culture (he, like Serres, speaks of war) a "diplomat" must mediate, a "non-believer" but a mediator responsible for every word spoken, in order to work out a common ground that can produce a peace proposal deeper than a compromise (Latour 2004, 209-217).

¹⁰ Also see: Burdon 2011.

¹¹ On forests as complex communities of life, characterized not only by interdependence but also by altruism, see, for example, *The Social Life of Forests* (2020).

We are witnessing a growing acceptance of the reference to the wild law of nature (Cullinan 2002). However, neither the concrete nor the philosophically posited natural contract is a 'natural' basis for our value judgments. In appealing to nature, we argue that we, as human agents, provide to the other party and draw from our understanding of nature.

However, before we begin to list the arguments that would lead to a negative judgment of the park created in this way, it should be remembered that replanting old trees to restore parks and gardens is a common, almost everyday practice. When a castle park is listed along with the building, which is often the case, the restoration work must include the park or garden. In such cases, the garden restorer must create an appearance that is (almost) identical to the original,¹² usually after a long research process. From our point of view, it is interesting that if the original appearance cannot be achieved with the original plant, mainly for safety reasons, that is, if the old tree in the original image of the garden could become dangerous for visitors, the garden restorer replaces it with a tree of the same age and species.¹³ When we ascribe historical value to a modified environment and declare it protected, we are protecting the formal complexity, the intended effect of its materials, strictly speaking, the human creation, rather than the individual components of the creation, and we consider the individual plants to be replaceable. In other words, we do not object to the practice of displacing old trees when it is done in the name of a traditionally accepted value, historic preservation. In the case of Shekvetili Park, we would instead welcome a natural contract, whereas in the other case, we would refrain from doing so, and in both cases, we do so in the name of conservation, but we direct our protective gaze differently.

¹² We need not go into the question of what is meant by original appearance in the case of a garden, since a garden, even the most meticulously designed French garden, which does not follow the forms of nature, never has a closed and definitive objectification, the materiality of the garden varies, and in many cases the garden designer themselves sees the moment when the garden reaches its intended formal completeness in the future.

¹³ Old trees are available on the international nursery market and can, of course, be used not only for conservation purposes but also to enhance the historic atmosphere of private estates. The prerequisite for this, of course, is that there are nurseries around the world that have been in operation for hundreds of years, where the seedlings have had time to become veterans. The technology to transplant them has long been available, albeit expensive.

5. The Risk of Earth Jurisprudence

Moving further in the direction of skepticism about the natural contract, we arrive at the argument put in its most extreme form by Alain Badiou: "[t]he rise of the 'rights of nature' is a contemporary form of the opium of the people. It is only slightly camouflaged religion [...] a gigantic operation in the depoliticization of subjects" (Badiou 2008, 139, quoted by Swyngedouw 2011, 69). With this statement, Badiou, as a political philosopher, concludes that the political dimension of what is summed up as the "end of nature" discourse. Although T.J. Demos and Emily Brady, for example, refuse to abandon the concept of nature, as does the post-nature discourse of recent ecological theory, and would instead call for a conceptual reinvention, they both acknowledge that the historically constructed concept of nature is capable of historically reinforcing patterns of ideological naturalization, of being used and exploited to ascribe to it a 'law' and normative force against which deviations can be identified (Demos 2015, 5; Brady 2018, 4).

Badiou's statement should, therefore, not be understood as a denial of the importance of politics from an environmental point of view but rather as a demonstration that we cannot rely on the law of nature to provide a normative basis for justifying our social practices. Since there is no normative force written into nature, since we cannot read nature itself, the ethical maxims that can guide our human actions, it is dangerous to base our environmental policies on something that is assumed to be beyond man since this ultimately means depoliticizing humans.

In thinking about the unconventional afforestation practice in Shekvetil Park, we wondered whether a natural contract could be the basis and framework for our judgment. Then, we found that the possibility of basing it on the rights of nature is not only uncertain but could be considered socially dangerous.

6. Possible Aspects of the Judgment

Moving beyond the 'contract with nature' theoretical framework, which proves inadequate for our purposes, this paper turns to practical considerations in gardens' aesthetic evaluation, as Shekvetili Park exemplified. This paper examines how everyday interactions and management influence our aesthetic perceptions of these spaces. Such practical engagement invariably raises normative questions, necessitating community involvement in forming aesthetic judgments. Far from irrelevant, these judgments have signifi-

cant implications in the social and moral spheres, underscoring the interconnectedness of aesthetics, ethics, and community values. Although aesthetic judgment is a subjective way of relating to the world, it presupposes a communal perspective; our judgments are calibrated collectively with those of others, even when facing a work of art as a solitary spectator or walking alone in a park. In the formation of aesthetic judgment, although there is no empirical basis in the form of a *sensus communis*, at least in terms of the reference conditions involved, we strive for consensus, and we also collectively shape the process of how we give and account for the reasons for our judgments.

When evaluating a garden, I propose considering political, material-ecological, and aesthetic aspects. Because the same aspects can be observed in all social practices, the question is which takes precedence in the experience and to what extent this is reflected in the evaluation. Moreover, as I pointed out at the beginning, the political and the material dimensions have aesthetic manifestations. So, when we make an aesthetic judgment, we infer from the aesthetic qualities of the work its politics or its relationship to materiality and ecology. Nevertheless, I would emphasize the interconnectedness of the aesthetic and the other aspects. If, for example, our knowledge of the political aspects of a particular work is crucial, it will affect how we evaluate its aesthetic qualities and how we perceive them.

6.1. Political Dimensions

In the case of Shekvetili Park, it is undoubtedly known that people on both sides signed contracts. Through his lawyers, the Georgian billionaire essentially bribed local people all over the country, 'compensating' them for the trees by promising people in remote villages roads in addition to those that had to be built to transport the trees in the first place. Such a direct account of the exercise of power, while an essential element if we are to draw a complete picture of the work or park in question, must be confined to the margins of analysis; in the case of aesthetic evaluation, as I have stressed, the political must be detected in the aesthetic.

It is now a truism to say that when it comes to landscape, garden, or nature, the aesthetic and the political are inseparable, for the overt or covert orders of power lurk in all their aspects. Since Denis E. Cosgrove's famous book *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984), many have explored the thesis that landscape and garden are discourses through which particular social groups have historically framed themselves and their relationships to territory, land, and other groups and that this discourse is epistemically

and technically intimately linked to particular ways of seeing and framing the world as an image. This view has meant that the focus of garden history research has shifted from the purely visible to the symbolic and social. In speaking of eighteenth-century English landscape gardens, Stephen Daniels (1988, 43-82) describes 'the duplicity of landscape,' that is, its simultaneous appeal as subjective experience and pleasure and its role as a social expression of authority and property. The author gives many examples of how the landowner might use the different species of trees to express, for example, patriotism or the social values to which he was committed.¹⁴ However, the texts on the garden as a symbolic representation of power always seem to speak of a planter, that is, the owner or designer of the land, who selects the species of trees to be planted and needs the 'prophetic eye of taste' to see the subsequent 'magnificent grandeur' of the garden (Daniels 1988, 52). Most contemporary gardens and parks do not have such iconography for visitors to interpret.¹⁵

Seeing old trees evokes a fundamental aesthetic-existential experience, namely the interconnectedness of time and place. The transplantation of trees breaks this link and is very much in keeping with the image of today's mobile society, a global nomadic society where everyone can be relocated to perform their tasks in a new place. Where the principle of selection is size (and feasibility), the 'task' of each plant is likely to be nothing less than to induce a sense of the sublime. The sublime experience of landscape is always linked to the experience of the existential limits of man, contemplating the universe as a totality, which, as a spiritual experience, can elevate the spectator to the creator of the universe. Irresistible is the interpretation that the landowner who transplants trees of sublime size wants to see himself as the creator of the objects that give rise to the sublime experience.

¹⁴ The elm, for example, was planted and highly appreciated as a park tree, but culturally it was most closely associated with agriculture and was used to indicate the owner's agricultural interests (Daniels 1988, 50).

¹⁵ There are, of course, many contemporary exceptions. To take just three very different examples from different countries, Isama Noguchi's (1982) *The California Scenario* (Costa Mesa), follows the Eastern tradition of the garden as imitative art, a miniature collage of the surrounding landscape. Charles Jenks' (1989) *Garden of Cosmic Speculation* (Dumfries, Scotland) invites an explicitly intellectual reception, with the natural elements mostly modelled on contemporary art forms. A stepped waterfall, e.g., tells the story of the universe, while a terrace depicts the distortion of space and time caused by a black hole. Michel Pena and François Brun's (1997) *Le jardin Atlantique* (Montparnasse, Paris), a modern version of the Babylonian hanging garden, brings our mythical images of gardens into play, while at the same time, like its Babylonian predecessor, depicting a landscape of distant places.

If we were to give a detailed account of the park using the method of “descriptive aesthetics”, to use Arnold Berleant’s (1992, 25-26) phrase,¹⁶ we could list at length the variety of technologies of power and possession, exclusion and control, which regulate not only the behavior but also the aesthetic experience of visitors: strictly marked footpaths, with an alarm to warn walkers if they stray onto the lawn. Cameras keep an eye on walkers, and barriers block off prohibited areas. The garden employs a unique form of plant mediatization, integrating technology with the natural environment. As visitors approach certain trees, motion-sensing technology activates hidden loudspeakers, enabling these trees to ‘speak’ by delivering short fictional narratives. This innovative use of technology personifies nature, creating an interactive experience for visitors. This technique exemplifies “hypermediation,” a concept described by Bolter and Grusin (1999), which refers to a media-rich environment that creates an illusion of non-mediation, or immediacy, enhancing the visitor’s engagement with the narrative and the natural setting.

6.2. Material-Ecological Dimension

Among the material and ecological aspects, some directly influence aesthetic experience, but I can only give one example here: The only way to dig a deep enough planting hole for the trees with their enormous roots would have been to plant them quite far apart, which would not have made it possible to create the image of a single grove. So, the trees cling to the ground on small mounds. On the one hand, this surface corresponds to the fiction associated with organicity, our image of the harmonious surface of the hilly ground, but at the cost of anchoring most trees with metal straps. Aesthetic interpretation must consider that the dilemma in designing the park must have been whether to create the image of a vast meadow with old trees scattered throughout or to form a grove, even if this is only possible with visible technological assistance. The latter’s choice is a sign that the broad cultural and symbolic meanings of the wooded grove are not diminished by technological mediation for the contemporary viewer, who can no longer see these devices as alien elements.¹⁷

¹⁶ Arnold Berleant makes distinctions between substantive aesthetics, metaaesthetics, and descriptive aesthetics; the third concept refers to “accounts of art and aesthetic experience that may be partly narrative, partly phenomenological, partly evocative, and sometimes even revelatory” (Berleant 1992, 26).

¹⁷ Explicit knowledge of these symbolic, cultural meanings is not necessarily available to either the landscape architect or the visitor; they are, I believe, embedded in our cultural visual un/preconscious.

6.3. Aesthetic Dimensions

The most comprehensive aspect of the analysis should address all the more narrowly defined aesthetic issues that would examine the park in the context of the landscape garden tradition. It is necessary to ask how contemporary gardens and parks relate to their historical predecessors in type and genre and their ideas of beauty and functionality. What formal and compositional principles do they apply? Are these principles derived from a historical tradition of gardens, or do they draw on the vocabulary and syntax of other contemporary visual arts or practices?

Shekviteli Park's space is thoughtfully divided into geometrically shaped plots, centering around a rectangular pond, with footpaths winding serpentine, intricately traversing and connecting each plot. This meticulous layout is connected to landscaping traditions, wherein different park sections symbolize distinct environments or serve as conduits for various narratives. Such design choices may reflect an intention to create a space that is not just visually engaging but also rich in symbolic meaning, evoking different themes or stories in each uniquely crafted area. However, this dual formal organization—abstract geometric and organic—may also mean that practical considerations, especially maintenance, favor regular plots, while a walk in nature is associated with the image of irregular paths. Therefore, the park satisfies both requirements simultaneously and with equal weight. It does not try to hide the sphere of practice. It does not conceive of the park as where it should, if not disappear, at least be discreetly relegated to the background because this is how it can satisfy the desire that makes people want to go out into the park.

These points bring us back to whether we should regard the garden as a work of art. At the one end of the scale, perhaps, is Horace Walpole's conviction that "Poetry, Painting, and Gardening, or the Science of Landscape, will forever be regarded by men of taste as three sisters, or the three graces that dress and adorn Nature."¹⁸ On the other end—on the side that denies gardens' status as works of art—are generally those who consider the garden's functionality incompatible with the notion of autonomous art.

Even if we do not want to decide on this point, either in general or in the case of Shekviteli Park, it is possible to approach the question from the point of view of the concept of representation. A garden or a park is never simply

¹⁸ Horace Walpole, MS annotation to a collection of William Mason's (1926, 46) *Satirical Poems* (Oxford), quoted in Hunt (1971, 294).

a modified, shaped environment but always a mediation of the environment; that is, in addition to its material, natural elements, and forms, it also mediates and represents how the designer or his client sees the environment. In other words, the question is not about what a garden or a park represents as an external reality since we can say that it represents nature with nature,¹⁹ but how it does so. In this sense, the garden is always self-referential. What it presents as a landscape, as a picture, is nothing more than what it is: trees, paths, groves, lakes, etc.—but these “contents” are only visible because they have become objects of representation as a part of a garden. In this sense, the garden must always show its art, and the visitor must walk the narrow path between objectification and representation of nature in the garden.²⁰

7. The Representation of Gardens, the “Meaning” of Shekvetili Park

Finally, the question can be asked: in this mode of representation, what is it that the Shekvetili Park represents? Gardens, like other forms of art, have materials and means. The materials of painting, for example, are tempera, oil, or canvas, and its means, for example, are shapes and lines. Can the two be separated in the case of horticulture? The gardener’s materials are living plants apart from inanimate elements such as stone and rock. When the gardener composes the form and color of the plants, he sees them as the material of his work and treats them as such. Think of the gardener as the guardian of even the most humble flower and an expert in pruning, cutting, and uprooting. However, the means of his art are not only the colors or the shape of the leaves but also the life of these plants (Ferrari 2010). In other words, garden design materials are living plants, and its means are the lives of plants. When the gardener works on the composition of the place as a whole, the individual plant, in its materiality, is there to create the specific

¹⁹ The ways in which this was done also lie between extremes in the cultural history of the garden; e.g., while Chinese gardens can be described as mimetic, recreating the great landscapes of the empire in miniature within enclosed walls, some forms of English landscape gardening sought to conceal the artificial until it was unrecognisable. See footnote 4. But the characteristic of Brown’s gardens was to give each plant, especially the trees, such attentive care that they could give the best of their capabilities (hence Brown’s nickname: Capability). By perfecting nature in this way, he was interested, like the antiquarian virtuoso, in the individuality of the plant’s particular form, drawing attention to its individual beauty.

²⁰ I am indebted to Hunt (2000, 78-85), who, drawing on Foucault, writes about the possible use of the concept of representation for gardens.

atmosphere of the place. Of course, these two elements are also interrelated since the plant form used as a compositional element is the quality of a living organism, but what the gardener uses to create the place is life, concrete, real life. Hence, the unpredictability of the garden means that the gardener can never know exactly how life will unfold. If they are unhappy with the stunted growth of a plant, they will, of course, replace it with a new one. No (other) art uses life as a means in this way,²¹ for although theatre and dance are built on the gestures, voices, and movements of living people, the choreographer can only force the dance's body to perform strange forms, not manipulate his whole life.

Ultimately, then, it is the politics of the relationship to individual life that the park represents. The "post-nature" park, I believe, is an accurate representation of the intersection at which we stand, not only in the park but also outside the park fence: at the beginning of the entanglement of biotechnological power—that we are able not only to move stationary organisms, but also to radically transform life forms beyond what we have done so far, for example, by breeding, by selection—and economic-political power, that there is a concentration of economic and financial power capable of using its means to bring about this transformation according to its own will. The question is, who, which actors of our world will sign and which contracts when the next step of biopolitics will be to "manage" their natural life?

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²¹ Though we could consider bioart an exception, interpreting it as a possible new revision of the boundaries between science and art. I call it new, which means that the changing identities of both science and art have always been defined by where the boundaries of the other lie. Without citing here the long and complex history of the art-science relationship, let me just state that I consider bioart a new multidisciplinary area. Art has become so flexible that it can take the form of any object, and even any practice or discipline. The question is whether art behaves like a parasite on the host body of science, or bioart can create a lasting genuine new artistic medium and practice.

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Darkness and Sustainability: Other Species' Night and Human Aesthetic Preferences

Abstract

This article explores the connections between darkness and sustainability, particularly in contemporary night environments, and the needs of various species. Artificial light plays a vital role in shaping the aesthetics of today's nightscapes. For humans, illumination during night-time serves both practical purposes after sunset and enhances the aesthetic appeal of the night. However, this same artificial lighting poses disturbances to other species. Consequently, using artificial light at night is a significant issue in discussing a sustainable future.

Keywords

Darkness, Artificial Illumination, Other Species, Aesthetic Choice, Aesthetic Preferences

Introduction

The aesthetics of environmental issues have changed over the past few decades. Former practices, for instance, using leaded fuels or regarding land-fill disposal as adequate for waste disposal, are now inappropriate. Waste, pollution, and noise have become established environmental problems. The levels of dangerous substances, including noise pollution, have strict limits, and exceeding them has legal consequences. The common aspect of these restrictions is that they are based on quantified information.

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The case of artificial illumination is different. There are limits to adequate lighting, but no consensus on defining harmful light exists. Moreover, when the energy consumption for outdoor illumination decreases, along with technological innovations like LED lights, the link between artificial light and its environmental impact changes. Energy consumption and emissions are no longer the focal issue in the context of artificial light. Instead, the magnitude and impact of light in the night-time environment are.

If artificial illumination is seen as beneficial for human lives and the restrictions for the magnitude of lighting are negligible, there is no real motivation for reducing night-time illumination.

Nonetheless, the harms of continuous illumination are acknowledged. Night-time illumination affects diurnal rhythms and can cause health problems for humans, such as those working during the night. Still, the harmful effect of light is seen as limited, and the benefits of artificial illumination overcome the problems. The impact of night-time lights is not well understood.

1. Night-Time Aesthetics

The aesthetics of night have been discussed rather extensively, considering both natural night and darkness in cities. The classic texts, mainly Edmund Burke (2014 [1759]) and Immanuel Kant (1987 [1790]), associated darkness with the sublime. However, Burke's analysis of darkness included the bodily effects, thus expanding the idea of sublime experience (Burke 2014, 108, 145, 279). In my understanding, Burke appears to be the only philosopher so far to consider the aesthetic qualities of darkness as such and not strictly in the context of the sublime. His initial intention was to analyze the relationship between darkness and the sublime, but the inquiry about the experience of darkness extends beyond that single scope. For instance, while Burke's deliberations about darkness as privation, the relations of darkness and blackness, as well as the physical reactions related to experiencing darkness, are presented in the context of the sublime, they explicate the qualities of darkness and our reactions to it also in a broader context (ibidem, 125, 278-280, 281, 283, 286).

Contemporary research on dark environments has two core subjects: the natural night sky and the urban nights. The texts about the natural night focus mainly on the visibility of stars, the Milky Way, northern lights, and other celestial wonders, and the effect of light pollution on these phenomena (Bogard 2013; Stone 2018, 2017). Studies about urban darkness have

adopted a contrasting perspective to the night and concentrate more on the historical and cultural aspects of the dark hours, such as the development and outcome of artificial illumination and the effects of extended active hours on urban culture, such as the feeling of security, the sub-cultures and their spaces in the urban shadows (Edensor 2015b, 2015a, 2012; Nye 2010, 1994; Dunn 2016; Tainio, Lyytimäki 2022).

Despite the various views on night, these examinations share the same perspective: in the center are the human experience and the human aesthetic preferences. The effects and consequences of night-time lighting on natural life are often mentioned, but second to human liking, even though continuous illumination threatens many other species and thus forms a part of ongoing environmental change and contributes to the loss of biodiversity (Tainio, Lyytimäki 2022, 29; Sanders *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, the focus of the studies is often on the exceptional—the sublime experiences under the starry sky—or the unique atmospheres created by artificial illumination in the urban night (Edensor 2012; Nye 2022, 23). The average darkness is not aesthetically interesting for today's observer (Nye 2010, 10).

In addition, most previous inquiries about darkness and the night regard darkness as more of a background than the subject itself. Darkness brings out faint lights as a backdrop and makes it possible to experience celestial views or captivating illumination in a city, but it is only partially significant for contemporary human life.

2. Normative Aspects of Night-Time Illumination

While the aesthetically positive outcome justifies night-time illumination—it turns the gloomy night-time environment into a modern and pleasing sight, it also has a vital security aspect, as night-time lights make people feel safe (Nye 2010, 12; Morgan-Taylor 2015, 164). These two perspectives on light are linked, but the security aspect is more substantial when the normative aspects of artificial light are rationalized. When night-time illumination makes moving around easier and enhances the felt security, it also assists people in enjoying free time in the late hours. Light affords various activities, enhances the night-time views, and thus is aesthetically enjoyable, but for justifying the omnipresence of light and the continuous increase of illumination, the security aspect is considered predominant.

Contemporary night-time illumination has a robust normative foundation as various local, national, and international decrees oblige a particular type and magnitude of night-time illumination. Modern societies have estab-

lished standards for adequate lighting that guide lighting on streets, highways, and other public spaces. Likewise, standards are set to make seafaring and air traffic safer (e.g., Finnish regulations for motor vehicles: Liikenneviraston ohjeita 16/2015). The common aspect of these standards is their indifference to the aesthetic experience of the illumination. The amount, color, orientation, and other details of light are specified, but their overall effect on the aesthetics of the environment is not considered. Sometimes, these standards are supplemented by local guidelines to achieve excellent and consistent night-time illumination (e.g., Helsingin kaupunki 2020). However, these guidelines are subject to technical norms that have different objectives.

The justification of the standards is often monetized, for example, by comparing the cost of lost lives in traffic and the effect of adequate illumination on traffic deaths (Liikenneviraston ohjeita 16/2015, 121; Tervonen 2015, 6). These numbers rationalize standards requiring more light without any fundamental questioning or discussion about the aesthetic qualities of night-time illumination. The rationale does not leave room for contesting the amount of light, and frequently, construction or renovation traffic routes produce more light in the night-time environment. Because the new technologies decrease the energy consumption of each light fixture, renewing lighting structures seems to align with sustainable development. The prevalent standards override possible contradictory ends, consequently hindering even a discussion about changes in night-time lighting—concerning especially the possibility that lower levels of illumination could be sufficient (Lyytimäki 2013, e46-e47).

3. Aesthetic Effects of Artificial Light

The aesthetic *footprint* (Naukkarinen 2011) is a concept that suggests considering the broader effect of our aesthetic choices and preferences. The idea of the aesthetic footprint is to support evaluating the relationship between one's aesthetic enjoyment of a product, event, or artificial changes in the environment and the aesthetic consequences of their production and consumption, thus bringing forth the broader impact of one's aesthetic preferences (Naukkarinen 2011). For instance, the aesthetic footprint of a garment bought in Finland often occurs in a distant part of the world, where the fabric is produced and the garment is manufactured, and the aesthetic impact might be more significant than the purchaser's enjoyment.

Artificial light is similar to other human products and activities—its ecological and aesthetic footprint is far-reaching. The aesthetic effect of artificial light is partially invisible, similar to the aesthetic footprint of the production

of garments. The aesthetic quality of a new shirt does not disclose its aesthetic longevity or the various aesthetic consequences of its production. In the case of artificial illumination, most of the light's impact can be detected easily; a light source illuminates its vicinity. This part of the impact is planned, but the light often glares where it should not, much further than one usually thinks. In more troublesome cases, the effect is much more comprehensive. Poorly installed or too-powerful light can produce a diffuse glow visible from a long distance, which is not noticeable near the lighting structure. In addition to these local effects, the aesthetic footprint of artificial light includes the production of the light source, its technical durability, and the production of energy needed for illumination. In the context of night's aesthetics, artificial light's local aesthetic footprint results mostly from carelessness, ignorance, and deficient planning. While decorating one's garden or protecting a property with lights, the far-reaching effects are regularly overlooked, resulting in unnecessary illumination.

Light pollution, which is nearly omnipresent today, is visible evidence of the aesthetic footprint of light. The way artificial light can leak into unexpected places is seldom noticed. Thus, the effect of light is identical to other changes in the current climate crisis. The shift in local ecosystems caused by light is so gradual that it is almost impossible to observe without a unique research setup (e.g., Boyes *et al.* 2021; Elgert 2023, 13-15). Popular light pollution maps exemplify the difficulty of detecting changes in night-time artificial illumination. They provide a generic view of the changes in night-time illumination but are inaccurate at showing the conditions in a specific environment. Thus, even notable changes in local ecosystems induced by night-time illumination become evident only through targeted studies (Lyytimäki, Rinne 2013, 127; Davies, Smyth 2018). The primary reason for the invisibility of the increasing night-time illumination can be understood through the *shifting baseline syndrome* that moves our idea of "normal" lighting levels and makes the brighter illumination the new normal (Stone 2017, 290). Furthermore, the spectrum of light also has a significant effect. The recent change from previous technologies, e.g., incandescent and sodium lights to LED technology has brought the spectrum of artificial light toward shorter wavelengths, which are more disturbing to both humans and nocturnal species (Svechkina *et al.* 2020; Van Tichelen *et al.* 2019, 67).

Humans suffer from various forms of light pollution. In addition to the generally increased illumination that hides celestial views, light can glare and trespass in dark spaces. Light sources can form clutter—"bright, confusing, and excessive groupings of light sources"—if not adequately planned

(Dark Sky International). Continuous light harms humans, causing different health problems, especially those working at night (Cho *et al.* 2015; Svehkina *et al.* 2020). Besides, other inhabitants of the night require darkness to survive and prosper.

Unlike in environmental aesthetics generally (e.g., Saito 1998), the non-human lifeforms and their needs are primarily neglected in the aesthetic investigations of night. The discussion about the aesthetic qualities of night and darkness has focused on the human experiences and how human activities and aesthetic preferences affect their ecological niches. However, the life sciences provide data about the harmful effects of continuous illumination on various species.

4. Artificial Illumination at Night and Other Species

Because of the comfort artificial illumination provides for contemporary lifestyles, the ecological impact of streetlights illuminating nearby fields or forests is not a concern for the general public. Moreover, nature along the streets or roads is seldom considered valuable. Various shrubs, generic trees, and half-wild, unkempt vegetation will likely raise no interest. For most people, they appear as a mess. Likewise, the animals in these areas are usually not aesthetically appealing but small and remain mostly hidden from human observation. It is easy to understand that this in-between environment is customarily considered insignificant in both the biological and aesthetic senses. However, these sentiments are incorrect. Seemingly negligible locations matter despite their unimpressive aesthetics and typical vegetation and animal life, and the environmental effects of night-time artificial light prevail there, too.

In general, direct street lighting has detrimental impacts on local insect populations and LED lights significantly adversely affect insect populations compared to older technologies, such as sodium lights. Especially harmful is diffuse skyglow, which occurs when artificial light shines upward and scatters off atmospheric molecules or suspended aerosols. Most skyglow comes from urban areas but affects rural areas that are still seemingly dark. Even a dim skyglow disrupts the diurnal cycles of many forms of life. This disruption becomes most visible in various moths whose diapause induction and, consequently, winter survival are negatively affected by small amounts of artificial light (Merckx *et al.* 2022, 1023, 1026). Even though night-time illumination is just one explanation for the decline of moth populations, its impact is clear (Boyes *et al.* 2021).

Light pollution forces animals to change their activities in ways that endanger the future of the population. For instance, night-time light disturbs the mate attraction of the common glowworm (*Lampyrus noctiluca*) by changing the behavior of female glowworms. Elgert (2023, 25, 26) has found that when subjected to night-time light, the female glowworms do not relocate to a darker environment but hide and refrain from glowing, which prevents the discovery of partners. Moreover, the male glowworms seem to favor the females in a dark environment and select brighter and larger partners than in natural circumstances. This changing behavior produces a bias in mating and suggests adverse effects on reproductive output.

While light pollution most notably influences insect populations, it also affects other animals. The effect on migratory birds as well as sea turtles is well-known (Lyytimäki 2013, e46), but animals like bats that are otherwise adapted for living close to human habitats are disturbed by light that exposes them to predators and impedes their foraging (Rydell *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, attempts to reduce the human impact on Earth can result in unpredictable consequences that sometimes have adverse effects on (night-time) ecosystems. For instance, wind turbines producing green electricity have night warning lights that disturb bats in boreal forests (Gaultier *et al.*, 2023, 6).

In addition, the sensory systems of most other species differ from human senses. Our eyes can detect only a narrow spectrum of “visible” light between wavelengths from about 380 to about 750 nanometers, while many species’ vision abilities reach outside this—to ultraviolet like birds or infrared like snakes. Many other animals can see in almost complete darkness where human eyesight is almost useless, and species like bats have other means of observing their surroundings in the dark (Telkänranta 2015, 13-21). Consequently, it is impossible to comprehend the effect of artificial light on other species.

The previous examples show the substantial effect of light on many species. Some species benefit from light, but more become disturbed when night-time illumination increases (e.g., Sanders *et al.* 2021). Current studies analyze the populations and behavior of insects and minor vertebrates that are reliant on particular ecological niches and, therefore, cannot escape increasing light and are easily attainable for research arrangements (e.g., Merckx *et al.* 2022, 1024; Boyes *et al.* 2021). These species seem to have minor significance, but their population and reproductive behavior changes can be the markers of notable changes in a local ecosystem or even in a broader context as their populations affect pollination and food chains (Boyes *et al.* 2021).

The direct effect of artificial light on animal populations has been shown (e.g., Sanders *et al.* 2021), and night-time artificial light has ancillary consequences on human population. If the impact of artificial light is viewed through ecosystem services, its extent becomes apparent. Jari Lyytimäki (2013) shows how artificial illumination adversely affects the services humans receive from night-time ecosystems. According to Lyytimäki (2013, e45), these services include, for instance, “nocturnal processes related to nutrient cycling, soil formation, primary production, disease regulation, pollination, and water purification” as well as “goods harvested at night-time,” night-time fishing. In addition, “nocturnal nature watching and recreation, including observing celestial objects from nature” can be included in the nocturnal ecosystem services. The effect in humans is primarily indirect, but it can be significant when artificial illumination impacts species essential to crop pollination.

There are implications that night-time lights affect the biodiversity of nocturnal landscapes in various forms of life, from vegetation to mammals (Kyba, Hölker 2013; Grubisic *et al.* 2018, 5-7). When thinking about the range of species disturbed by light and the differences in the sensory systems between life forms, we can suspect that artificially illuminated environments and skies form environmental harm today. As the lifeforms studied in the examples above are insects and other small animals, the changes seem like minor events, but they can be markers of irreversible changes in an ecosystem.

The views presented above mainly consider light to be a practical technology that impacts human culture and animal populations, but from the perspective of this article, much of the artificial light results from aesthetic choices and preferences. Technological development has allowed us to decorate the night with artificial light. However, new knowledge about the consequences of constant illumination raises an ethical question: should we make conscious aesthetic choices because of other species’ lives, even if it requires adjusting our aesthetic preferences about illumination?

5. The Night: Human Aesthetic Preferences and Choices

Darkness comes naturally every day, and our habit is to try to abolish it. It is both easy and difficult to restore. Technically, it requires cutting the power, but a cultural acceptance of a darker environment involves making a significant conceptual turn and fighting against our current habits. Instead of enjoying the abundance of artificial light, we ought to explore ways of thinking

that would assist in appreciating dimmer conditions and shadows. The Japanese classic *In Praise of Shadows* by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1977 [1933]) presents unlit environments in the context of traditional Japanese culture. Tanizaki's book underlines his nostalgic view of the shadows and dim lights while giving an example of the possibility of seeing darkness in a different light. Night-time lights are much more pervasive today than in the early 20th century, so contemporary culture will have more difficulties finding appropriate ways of enjoying or tolerating shadows. However, some paths can help adopt new approaches to darkness.

The aesthetic value of a particular environment can be separated from its spectacularity despite our inclination to be fascinated by beauty, cuteness, and exceptionality (Saito 1998, 103-104; Diaconu 2015, Section 4; Lehtinen 2021, 260). Unscenic nature may demand some effort to understand its structure and function. This cognitive undertaking allows the widening and deepening of one's perspective, which may bring forth the subtle aesthetic values of the unscenic environment (Saito 1998, 103-104). Knowing the ecological dependencies between the seemingly uninteresting vegetation, various animal species, and a specific place can turn dull streetside shrubs into an aesthetically significant environment. Furthermore, assimilating a place's characteristics requires an intimate relationship, meaning active engagement with the particular environment and its features (Saito 2022, 52, 54). Achieving this requires slowing down and looking at the mundane environment afresh. This approach relates to ideas in everyday aesthetics, where familiarity—time and repetition—results in a significant caring relationship with objects, environments, and events (Saito 2022, 144-146).

Respectively, a normal state of intangible, commonly unnoticed phenomena can become aesthetically pleasing when their extremities become too widespread and make life unpleasant. Mădălina Diaconu (2015) discusses the benefits of average weather in a climate crisis, which can shift aesthetic preferences away from extremes. When heat, storms, and other radical weather events become stronger or too frequent, the steadiness of average weather is a relief.

Normalized darkness can become aesthetically interesting and worth protecting for the same reasons. Getting familiar with mundane, unscenic, dark environments, learning about life in shadows, and perceiving it in different conditions assist in understanding the particularity of the night-time environment. Moreover, the awareness of nonhuman lifeforms and their dependence on the dark environment can cause a shift in our attention from human preferences and demands to a broader context.

The idea of a caring attitude toward the material world emphasizes the connection between aesthetics and ethics. These two are intertwined in various ways, so aesthetic choices are not without an ethical dimension. Neither seems dominant, but they are connected from both directions. Marcia Muelder Eaton (1997, 359-361) sees that moral development requires both “style and content,” which entails aesthetic skills. The aesthetic aspects of ongoing climate change and the sustainable future are connected to moral problems requiring action (Brady 2014, 552-553). According to Brady (2014, 554), the aesthetic dimension of climate change includes, for instance, the effects it has on nature itself, the aesthetics of technologies that deal with climate change, and changes to human practices and constructions induced by the changing climate. The aesthetic quality of these changes will produce uncertainty as they take place in the future, but considering the repercussions of the possible changes is required to promote a sustainable future—both ecologically and aesthetically.

Kevin Melchionne’s (2017, 289, 290) analysis of aesthetic choices can provide a potential method for considering their consequences. Melchionne’s analysis relates the aesthetic choices in the context of consumer behavior, but connecting his ideas with the choices in the broader environment context seems feasible. Melchionne sees that aesthetic choices are customarily connected to leisure and entertainment; they are voluntary and low-risk decisions. In addition, they are contingent and constructive, which means that the choice is not based on a consistent method; instead, the procedure takes place organically. Furthermore, aesthetic choices can have different weights. Sometimes, the choice is casual *picking*, more critical *choosing*, and in some cases significant, usually irreversible, *opting* (Melchionne 2017, 292). Melchionne places most aesthetic choices toward the lighter end of the scale, which is probably correct in making preferences for art or cultural products.

In aesthetics and sustainability, aesthetic preferences and choices have more weight. There is, or at least there should be, an ethical obligation to make aesthetic choices by considering a sustainable future and adopting a caring attitude toward our environment and other species. Linking ethics and aesthetics emphasizes the relationship between background knowledge about an environment and its appreciation in a correct manner, as well as the ability to make the right choices concerning it. Melchionne (2017, 296) also sees the problem of low-risk consumerist aesthetic choices and introduces the idea of aesthetic *plans* that work on underlying contingent aesthetic choices, giving a coherent direction to the unity of aesthetic choices.

He describes everyday aesthetic choices as a mechanism that steers a drifting choice-making individual, whereas the aesthetic plan works as a motor that propels one's aesthetic life (Melchionne 2017, 295). I want to add ethics as a compass that points the direction, at least when one opts for a significant choice that has a significant impact.

Adapting the concept of aesthetic plans to the context of night-time aesthetics and sustainability has consequences: when we consider the case of the night-time environment in the context of ecological sustainability, we should be able to think outside our prevalent aesthetic inclinations (low-risk choices) and human privileges, pay attention to the interests of the other species, and act accordingly. However, a shift in individual preferences can generate only partial changes. In order to accomplish a fundamental transformation of our approach to the night-time environments, the normative element of night-time lighting should be based on a new ideology that balances the current priority of security and the ecological necessity of darkness, which requires a turn in collective behaviors in the appreciation of the night.

6. Moderation of the Artificial Light

Changing our appreciation of night requires concepts and tools to facilitate the shift. When aesthetic values are based on a more profound understanding of the perceived object, the attractive surface is not enough to make it desirable or positive (Lehtinen 2021, 261). Understanding the environmental impact of a product, service, or habit can make a previously appealing object or arrangement unpleasant.

One possible start for shifting our appreciation of the night-time environments is the concept of *aesthetic disillusionment* that Cheryl Foster introduced in 1992. Aesthetic disillusionment occurs when the object of admiration changes because of new knowledge. For example, Foster provides situations when an object that one has admired as a skillful work of art turns out to be a natural formation and when the beautiful colors of a sunset turn out to be a result of airborne pollution (Foster 1992). With the new knowledge, one can enjoy the sight only in brackets—it is beautiful, but we must admit that the previously beautiful thing still looks the same, but we cannot enjoy it anymore.

Foster's idea can be applied to the context of artificial illumination. The application would involve finding a new mindset that assists us in abandoning our fascination with a brightly illuminated night like other visually im-

pressive ecological issues such as pollution-induced sunsets. If this viewpoint is achievable, it can lead to disillusionment with night-time illumination. Asking for a change in the typical taste for night-time lighting, a disposition that has prevailed since the late 19th century (Nye 1994, 176), might be impossible. However, a gradual dimming of the night or planned darkness as a special event could develop tolerance to darkness or at least generate an understanding of the positive experiences a gloomy environment can reveal (Tainio 2019).

Another method for making the shift towards darker nights more conceivable is to speculate with future aesthetics: the aesthetics of objects, conditions, and events we have not perceived yet (Brady 2014, 557). This aesthetic future calls for a similar use of imagination as the concept of an aesthetic footprint. It is not easy to obtain accurate data about the relationship between our choices in general and the aesthetics resulting from them. One option is to predict the coming condition by combining our current situation and our (aesthetic) options. After the speculations about the potential future aesthetic qualities, there is a need for actions that assist in achieving the desired outcome. While *choosing* a completely different future, for instance, a darker night-time environment, is not probably feasible, changing the direction of our *drift* is possible by consistent minor changes. By opting differently, it should be possible to shift our current aesthetic preferences and gravitate one's lifestyle towards fulfilling the expectations about a sustainable turn, despite that being aesthetically more demanding. The ethically right minor decisions (directed toward a sustainable future) can make a difference if recurring.

The theoretical concepts are the foundations for practices and tools required to reduce ubiquitous artificial illumination as a more desirable option. One practical possibility is to make the actions leading to darker environments appear more alluring. An example of making the change preferable is David E. Nye's (2010, 216) use of the *greenout* to describe voluntarily switching off night-time lights. Nye writes about greenouts as a form of energy conservation, but today, they can be used in the broader context of sustainability. According to Nye (2010, 56), greenout does not mean darkness but abstinence, using considerably less light, as in the earlier *brownouts* in the United States after the Second World War. When the greenouts are compared to previous acts that were similarly a collective effort, it is much easier to see them as beneficial. Today, comparable abstinence is possible with modern technology that activates the lights only when required by human activity. This way, the unlit night feels less intimidating and allows one to see shadows as a proper choice.

If it is possible to see a pollution-induced sunset as superficially beautiful and displeasing, then modern night-time illumination is also likely to lose its charm when we learn to understand the extent of its effects. Awareness of the effects of artificial illumination on other species, and consequently on biodiversity and a sustainable future, is a substantial reason to reconsider the current manner of illuminating the night. The necessary shift towards darker nights is more straightforward to accept if we, in addition to the sublime, starry skies, take an interest in the less spectacular forms of darkness and learn to enjoy cloudy nights, different kinds of shadows, gloomy landscapes, and all the joys of living in a darker night.

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Peatland Restoration as Aesthetic Engagement

Abstract

In the ongoing ecological crisis, mere conservation of ecosystems in their current state proves insufficient; a pressing need to restore degraded ecosystems arises. Such restoration efforts challenge traditional conservation paradigms and the prevailing norms of environmental aesthetics. Reconceptualizing restoration as a co-produced ecosystem service fosters a paradigm wherein a symbiotic human-nature relationship is central, potentially transforming perceptions towards what might be termed 'awkward restoration aesthetics.' This paper focuses explicitly on forested peatlands, examining the evolving perceptions surrounding them in the context of ecological restoration. By integrating insights from environmental philosophy, this analysis aims to illuminate the nuanced interplay between ecological integrity and aesthetic valuation in restoration practices.

Keywords

Aesthetic Engagement, Ecosystem Services, Peatland Restoration, Relationality, Restoration Aesthetics

Introduction

Despite commitments under international agreements such as the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity, ecosystems continue to deteriorate. Merely conserving the remaining ecosystems, which are currently in a relatively undisturbed state, is insufficient; restoring ecosystems that have already deteriorated is imperative. This restoration is crucial for mitigating climate change, conserving biodiversity, and maintaining the Earth's habitability. The mainstreaming of ecological restoration marks a profound shift in conservation thinking, moving away from traditional

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preservation approaches towards active rehabilitation and sustainable management of natural resources (Higgs 2003). Whereas two decades ago, conservationists were concerned about whether restoration is a way to avoid conservation and expand human technoscientific domination of nature even further (see Gobster & Hull 2000), now the United Nations (2019) General Assembly has proclaimed the years 2021–2030 as the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. In practice, ecological restoration means measures designed to help ecosystems that are impoverished, damaged, or destroyed due to human activity to revert to their natural state or as near to their natural state as possible (Similä *et al.* 2014). What it entails more concretely depends, among other things, on the ecosystem and the type of land use in question.

William M. Jordan (2003), credited with coining the term “restoration ecology,” perceived restoration not merely as a means to aid nature but as a crucial step in mending the problematic relationship between humans and the natural world. Jordan posited that restoration transcends the sentimentalization of untouched nature, advocating instead for a paradigm of caring stewardship. His vision of restoration encompasses a blend of technoscientific knowledge, human experiential understanding, and an element akin to performing art. Over the past two decades, restoration science has significantly matured. The techniques and benefits of ecological restoration are now well-established and documented extensively in best practice manuals, reflecting the field’s evolution from Jordan’s foundational ideas (see Similä *et al.* 2014). For example, stakeholder engagement has become the state-of-the-art in conservation, restoration, and ecosystem management, a matter emphasized earlier by Eric Higgs (2003).¹ Uncertainties naturally remain and will never be erased due to the complexity of eco-social systems.

However, I think the potential of restoration in reconfiguring human-nature relationships remains unfulfilled. As we have entered the era of the Anthropocene, transformative changes to human-nature interactions for creating resilient development pathways are called for more than ever (Pörtner *et al.* 2021). Yrjö Haila (2012) has formulated this as the need “to get human-induced change in the environment to parallel with natural dynamics that take place without human influence.” New social-ecological approaches and transdisciplinary collaboration are thus needed (Fischer *et al.* 2021).

¹ Higgs (2003) emphasized the importance of engaging communities and local people in the practice for restoration to be successful.

Ecosystem restoration also presents challenges to the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments. Traditionally, there has been a tendency to value ‘untouched’ environments, which have thus been prioritized in conservation efforts. Restoration requires changes in aesthetic appreciation and engagement: the Kantian tradition of disinterestedness in aesthetic appreciation does not work with hands-on restoration, which is all but a disinterested practice. Thus, ecological restoration may challenge people to cultivate aesthetic sensibility.² So far, discussion on restoration aesthetics seems virtually nonexistent. I posit that a focus on aesthetics offers a promising avenue for enhancing ecological restoration efforts. By appealing to the aesthetic sensibilities of individuals and communities, we can potentially up-scale restoration activities and engage a broader spectrum of society. This approach could tap into the emotional and cultural dimensions that shape our interactions with the natural world, fostering a deeper, more meaningful connection. Moreover, such an aesthetically driven engagement might pave the way for a transformative shift in human-nature relations.

I discuss restoration aesthetics in the context of peatlands. Wetlands, including peatlands, are one of the most critical ecosystems on Earth, but at the same time, they are among the most degraded habitats and require restoration (Similä *et al.*, 2014). In Finland—my geographic context—over a quarter of the land area is covered by peatlands. In addition to their ecological importance, the rich cultural history and diverse land uses of peatlands make them aesthetically especially interesting. Currently, peatland restoration is discussed mainly in terms of technoscientific expertise (also Ruuskanen 2016), referring to, for example, tons of carbon dioxide equivalents or species of soil microbes. These discourses exclude many people’s experiences and may obscure restoration aims. I claim that connecting the restoration of peatlands with their aesthetic appreciation may generate understanding and support for the sometimes aesthetically awkward peatland restoration.

Finnish and international environmental policies are closely linked to the ecosystem services approach, aiming to ensure nature’s contributions to humans (Similä *et al.* 2015). Like the earlier restoration idea, the concept of ecosystem services has faced many criticisms (see Schröter *et al.* 2014). To date, many conservationists refuse to use the term due to its anthropocentrism. The ecosystem service concept seems to render human-nature

² Noora-Helena Korpelainen (2021) has discussed cultivation of aesthetic sensibility as a sustainability transformation.

relationships one-directional and exploitative. As such, the concept contradicts notions of ecological restoration that emphasize caring stewardship of nature. In reference to Robert Fish *et al.* (2016), I propose conceptualizing ecosystem restoration as a relational cultural ecosystem service, pointing to human contributions to ecosystem service production. Restoration as a relational ecosystem service could, at best, entail notions of playfulness, productivity, and artful aesthetic engagement. The reconceptualization may allow the reframing and broadening of the peatland restoration discourse to achieve broader resonance in society.

My approach in the paper is theoretical and exploratory, inspired by anecdotal observations and reflection on restoration aesthetics. I draw on multidisciplinary research literature to address the aesthetics of peatland restoration and to conceptualize restoration as a relational cultural ecosystem service. I will next discuss the context of peatland restoration in Finland before moving on to awkward peatland restoration aesthetics. After that, I will introduce the concept of ecosystem services and its critiques and discuss how the formulation of relational cultural ecosystem services may allow restoration to fulfill the task envisioned by Jordan (2003): to repair problematic human-nature relationships. I will close with a brief discussion on the timescales of awkward restoration aesthetics.

1. Changing Perceptions on Peatlands

Wetlands are home to approximately forty percent of the world's species and are crucial against the effects of climate change. They retain and purify water, remove pollutants and excess nutrients, store atmospheric carbon, moderate flooding and coastal storms, support a variety of wildlife, and offer recreational, well-being, and economic benefits to surrounding communities. At the same time, wetlands are globally the most degraded habitats, facing numerous pressures. Finland is an especially wetland-rich country: whereas internationally, circa five percent of the land is mire, in Finland, peatlands cover almost a third of the land surface. Peatlands have been, however, over-exploited and damaged due to drainage, agriculture, forestry, and mining for fuel and horticultural uses (Similä *et al.* 2014).

Furthermore, there is no one kind of peatland habitat, but based on the degree of tree cover and other vegetation, peatlands in Finland have been classified into seven main categories. Over half of the mire habitats in Finland are threatened. The diversity of peatlands and their uses means that there is no one format for peatland restoration either, but the costs and benefits of restoring a given area must be weighed, and the restoration mea-

asures must be carefully planned. Scaling up is difficult as restoration builds on place-based practices, situated knowledge, and local socio-ecological histories.

In general, restoration of wetlands strives to re-establish an ecosystem's natural hydrological conditions to improve the quality of species' habitats and biotopes and to reduce carbon emissions from the organic soil. The biodiversity and emission reduction targets may conflict and must be prioritized case by case. Globally, wetland restoration has taken place slowly and locally, and the areas restored are fragmented—international policies like the United Nations's Decade for Restoration aim to scale up restoration efforts. In Finland, the peatland restoration history goes back to the 1970s. Initially, drainage ditches were blocked manually, but from the mid-1990s, the peatland area restored annually has increased, and since then, peatland restoration work has usually involved machinery. Scaling up the restoration methods may affect people's opportunities to engage with restoration as large-scale works require various expertise—a concern already raised by Andrew Light (2000) and Eric Higgs (2003). Also, the result of large-scale nature restoration may appear different from that of small-scale restoration.

The perceptions and appreciation of peatlands have varied significantly over time. Esa Ruuskanen (2016) describes how for centuries bogs and mires were perceived as unhealthy areas where diseases, disease-spreading mosquitoes and rotten water originate. Ruuskanen describes how peasants feared mires (also Laurén *et al.* 2023) but at the same time utilized them as natural pastures, as hunting places, by digging peat for heating and roofing, and for harvesting herbs and berries. From the 18th century onwards, peatlands were considered useless pristine wastelands to be tamed and made valuable. Large-scale drainage of mires started in the early 19th century as extensive areas of peatlands were converted into agricultural land. In the late 19th century, peat was exceedingly extracted for fuel, and the growth of the forest industry resulted in draining peatlands into productive forestlands. Ruuskanen (2016, 132) writes how “bogs and mires as such were hardly ever conceived as aesthetically valuable and inspirational in the ways that conifer forests and pastoral landscapes were in the nineteenth and early twentieth cultural contexts. Quite to the contrary, they were regarded as forbidding and disturbing places.” Drainage for forestry peaked in Finland relatively late, between the 1960s and 1970s. Ruuskanen (2016, 129) writes, “Finland holds the unofficial world record when it comes to peatland drainages for forestry in the postwar era.” Some mires were earmarked for recreational use, but other interests did not interfere with economic priorities until the rise of conservationism in the late 1960s.

Anne Tolvanen, Artti Juutinen, and Rauli Svento (2013) studied residents' opinions toward different peatland use options in peatland-rich Northern Finland: timber production, peat production, protection, restoration, and recreation. Across different stakeholder groups, there was a preference for increasing the protected peatland area and a disagreement on reducing the restored peatland area. Hence, the authors concluded there was a common understanding of the ecological values of peatlands and management methods such as restoration. When there is no trade-off between use and existence values and provisioning services, the public commonly accepts restoration.

Kirsi Laurén *et al.* (2023) have studied changing mirecultures: during the current ecological crises, people's attitudes and perceptions of mires are changing again, "with a greater emphasis being placed on more-than-human aspects." The authors conceptualize the changing mirecultures as living heritage and highlight the importance of communities constantly recreating their traditions in relation to the peatlands. Laurén *et al.* describe how, in modern societies, mires have long been places to seek counterbalance to everyday life—peace, quiet, and enjoyment of nature. Common recreational uses of peatlands include berry picking, hiking, camping, different forms of exercise, and hunting. The new mireculture has introduced carnivalistic and art events, such as swamp soccer and floral-dress-and-high-heels-skiing. The common characteristics of the mire trend of the 21st century are, according to Laurén *et al.*, a sense of community, experientiality, affectivity, and ethics. The difference from former recreational use is that the peatlands are considered to provide not only a place for peace and quiet but also a social space.

Parallel to the emergence of the new mirecultures, increasing understanding of peatland ecology, and appreciation of peatland aesthetics, the need to scale up restoration is emphasized, for instance, in the European Union (2020) Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. In June 2022, the Commission proposed the EU's first-ever Nature Restoration Law (NRL), with binding restoration targets (EC 2022). The proposal became highly contested in Finland and elsewhere due to foreseen economic impacts. In Finland, the NRL was discussed primarily regarding forest policy and even called, erroneously, Forest Restoration Law. Considering that the peatland area to be restored in Finland is twice as large as forests needing restoration (Räsänen *et al.* 2023), the proposal could have better been called Peatland Restoration Law. The focus on forests can be partly explained by the number of forested peatlands in Finland: approximately a quarter of forest growth occurs in peatland forests.

Considering the changing mire perceptions, restoration aesthetics may pose an additional challenge to upscaling peatland restoration. For most people, peatlands are not part of their everyday environments anymore, and the experience of mires is limited. Peatlands are places for recreation, cultural experiences, and beauty, to which restoration may bring an undesired disruption. The recovery of a drained peatland takes time after restoration. Furthermore, the peatland type and its earlier uses affect the post-restoration aesthetics. In a peat mining site, restoration measures, such as rewetting, afforestation, or paludiculture, are probably perceived as an improvement to the landscape. If the peatland has been drained for productive forestry, restoring it may not make sense, whereas a not very productive peatland forest may be restored. When the water level rises, the trees start to die if they are not cut down and left to decay. In Finland, peatland restoration is carried out mainly in conservation areas, which are also popular places for recreation. Stumbling upon a recently restored site may be an aesthetically unpleasant surprise (Laurén 2021). Against this background, I will next discuss the awkward restoration aesthetics, especially in the case of forested peatlands.

2. Awkward Aesthetics of Peatland Restoration

The aesthetic pleasures derived from appreciating natural environments constitute significant cultural ecosystem services. These services are not merely incidental but crucial in shaping human attitudes and behaviors toward the environment. Aesthetically pleasing environments often inspire greater care and stewardship among humans. However, in discussing aesthetic sustainability, Sanna Lehtinen (2021) writes, in reference to Yuriko Saito (2019), that in contemporary theories, the aesthetic is not understood to refer only to aesthetically positive qualities such as beauty, picturesque, or cute but also to aesthetically negative qualities such as ugliness and grotesqueness, as long as they raise some level of attention and interest. Peatland perceptions are ambivalent and multifaceted: they can be “good, bad, and ugly” at the same time (Byg *et al.* 2017).³ People may perceive peatlands as bleak wastelands, beautiful, wild nature, and cultural landscapes. The multiplicity of views seems compatible with Lehtinen’s formulation of the aesthetic, and it may be fruitful for learning and tolerating awkward restoration aesthetics. As Anja Byg *et al.* write, it is vital to understand and manage ambivalent views towards landscapes.

³ Byg *et al.* (2017) have studied public perceptions of peatlands in Scotland.

Ecosystem restoration can be done on a small or large scale, but in any case, it means human intervention in the natural landscape, and it may be aesthetically awkward. In the case of peatland restoration, the activities entail, for instance, cutting trees, building dams, and filling up ditches to enable the recovery of the ecosystem. In current restoration practice, some attention is already given to aesthetics. Pekka Vesterinen *et al.* (2014) write how decisions on collecting and removing logging residues such as branches and small-diameter trees from restored peatlands should primarily be based on the ecological objectives of restoration. However, in areas widely used for recreation, it may be necessary to clear away such residues for aesthetic reasons.



Fig. 1. Restoration may resemble destruction
Source: This is Finland, Bird 2021. Photo: Philippe Fayt/Metsähallitus.

Restoration may be done using heavy machinery (Fig. 1), often associated with heavy land use, commercial logging, and violent environmental destruction. The traces of restoration can be seen as scars in the landscape for a long time. It may take decades for the vegetation to grow and for the peatland to become aesthetically pleasing. For the untrained eye, it may be challenging to distinguish commercial logging from cutting trees for restoration

purposes or draining peatlands from building dams for restoration with the same excavator. When the use of heavy machinery and the resulting disruption in the landscape is perceived as aesthetically unfavorable, negative responses may be alleviated by providing information and opportunities for engagement in restoration. Awkward restoration aesthetics requires understanding and appreciating restoration work's future ecological and aesthetic potentials. In line with this, Kate Flood *et al.* (2021) have proposed a process perspective for understanding the cultural services of ecosystems: people attach values to ecosystems by engaging with natural environments in different practices over time, and it is important to recognize a broad range of values and new associations between people and peatlands.

Green aesthetic thinking emphasizes aesthetic experience as multisensory engagement and bodily and spatial involvement with the environment (Berleant 2010). Similarly, Roberta Dreon (2023) has emphasized living beings' structural embeddedness and situatedness in their environment and discussed aesthetic engagement as fully embodied and embedded perception. Aesthetic sensibility requires cultivation (Korpelainen 2021). For most people, however, peatland restoration does not fall within the realm of the everyday, and they may not have opportunities to cultivate their aesthetic sensibilities embedded in the environment. The aim of upscaling restoration efforts introduces distinct challenges, particularly in aesthetic engagement. Small-scale restoration projects, often involving volunteers, tend to provide more opportunities for direct, multisensory, and bodily interaction with the environment. These intimate experiences are crucial for cultivating aesthetic sensibilities based on personal and communal engagement with nature; in contrast, large-scale restoration, frequently reliant on machinery, may diminish these sensory and aesthetic experiences. Therefore, exploring and implementing strategies that facilitate aesthetic engagement in tandem with the upscaling of restoration efforts is imperative.

Much of the peatlands in Finland have been drained for forestry purposes, and thus, people enjoying recreation in natural environments have become accustomed to the appearance of tree-growing mires. If a peatland was drained long ago, the ditches may be partly overgrown and do not stand out in the landscape as a disruption. A problem with the aesthetic appreciation of forests is that people do not necessarily know anymore what an old forest looks like in its natural state (Elonen 2019). Untouched, old forests are so scarce that most people have never seen a forest that is left to natural succession. People's experiences of forests are often from a nearby, accessible forest that is managed either for recreational or commercial purposes,

and they usually appreciate a forest that is easy to walk in and where the tree canopy allows light to enter the ground. A forest in a more natural state, with lower visibility, may induce insecurity and fear. The same issue may be encountered with peatland restoration. Since so much of peatland is drained, people do not necessarily have the aesthetic experience of a natural mire or cannot imagine the appearance of a mire after restoration. Familiar, drained peatlands may be perceived as safer and more accessible.

An example of a restoration conflict due to cutting trees is the so-called “Chicago Restoration Controversy,” described by Paul H. Gobster (2000). The debate concerned a Natural Areas Management Programme designed to restore seven thousand acres of forest around Chicago to the oak savanna and tallgrass prairie the area had been before European settlement. As the plans were publicized, there was strong community opposition against clearing the forest, as the people felt excluded from the process. Even though public engagement is the state-of-the-art in restoration projects today, it is not unimaginable that people oppose a radical change to a familiar landscape.

Studies in environmental aesthetics have shown that aesthetic values may change with knowledge and awareness and are closely connected to ethical and epistemic values important for ecological understanding (Lehtinen 2021). Aesthetic appreciation may slowly change when people learn to appreciate natural environments formerly perceived as aesthetically unfavorable, such as wetlands (Saito 1998). Tolerating the awkward aesthetics of peatland restoration requires that people know why restoration measures are taken and understand their importance for humans and nonhuman nature. As Lehtinen (2021) writes, ideas of green aesthetics, such as cultivating flowering meadows to help pollinators instead of short-mown lawns, have already become mainstream. What was previously perceived as neglect in care is now understood as a valuable ecosystem service benefiting both humans and other-than-humans and, vice versa, what was previously understood as caring aesthetics—the short green lawn—is now increasingly seen as a biodiversity-poor “green desert.” From the perspective of human-nature relations, however, there is a significant difference in learning to appreciate the flowering meadows and the restored peatlands. The former means not doing something, leaving nature to take its course—perhaps with some human aid in spreading the seeds. Letting the meadow grow is compatible with conventional conservation thinking, excluding human interference. On the contrary, restoration is an active human intervention in nature; as such, the aesthetic changes may be perceived even more negatively as environmental destruction.

Restoration literature also considers cultural ecosystem services provided by peatlands, besides other ecosystem services. Cultural ecosystem services of peatlands include diverse benefits such as recreation, aesthetic experiences, and identity formation (Waylen *et al.* 2016), and peatlands also serve as a material memory of past livelihoods. Pirjo Rautiainen and Henrik Jansson (2014) discuss the cultural heritage of peatlands, including artificial landscape values such as long abandoned peat excavation pits that have become essential elements of the landscape. These ambivalent examples—human-made scars in the landscape now valued as cultural heritage—may pave the way for appreciating awkward peatland restoration aesthetics. To fulfill the potential of restoration to repair problematic human-nature relationships, I propose conceptualizing restoration as a relational cultural ecosystem service, including humans in its production.

3. Restoration as Relational Ecosystem Service

Ecosystem services are the diverse services and benefits ecosystems and natural environments provide humans. The concept was popularized by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) which grouped ecosystem services into four broad categories: provisioning, regulating, supporting, and cultural ecosystem services. The ecosystem service concept has faced many critiques, summarized by Matthias Schröter *et al.* (2014). The concept has been criticized as being anthropocentric, promoting an exploitative human-nature relationship, focusing on economic valuation, and even conflicting with biodiversity conservation targets. According to counterarguments, however, the ecosystem services concept may be used to reconnect society and nature by highlighting human dependence on Earth's life support systems.

Cultural ecosystem services entail ecosystems' life-enriching and life-affirming contributions to human well-being, such as spiritual and recreational benefits. Scholars, policymakers, and practitioners have struggled to incorporate cultural services into ecosystem management because they seem to lack clear boundaries to allow us to measure them. The perception has been that dimensions of lived experience, such as spiritual enrichment or aesthetic pleasure, cannot be neatly linked with changes in natural environmental processes (Fish *et al.* 2016, in reference to Cooper *et al.* 2016). Cultural ecosystem services are commonly perceived as non-material and intangible, obscuring the material cultural dimension of human-ecosystem relationships. To amend this, Fish *et al.* (2016) advance a relational under-

standing of ecosystem services, starting from the perspective of peoples' interactions with and understandings of places, landscapes, and species, which allows exploring human meaning and experience in material contexts. The framework advanced by Fish *et al.* understands the cultural ecosystem services as co-produced and co-created outcomes of peoples' interaction with nature (also Flood *et al.* 2021).

Cultural ecosystem services are about understanding modalities of living that people participate in that constitute and reflect the values and histories people share, the material and symbolic practices they engage in, and the places they inhabit. These practices may be creative, ceremonial, celebratory, but also everyday and routine (Fish *et al.* 2016, 210).

Another issue with cultural ecosystem services research, from the perspective of ecosystem restoration and caring stewardship, is its tendency to discuss the services in terms of non-work activities, especially recreation (Fish *et al.* 2016). As such, cultural benefits from nature are easily understood as something "extra," even luxury, and subordinate to other ecosystem services vital for human well-being, making valuing them increasingly difficult. Nonetheless, conceptualizing cultural ecosystem services as non-work opens restoration for volunteers and various expertise, allowing diverse engagement with peatlands.

The relational cultural ecosystem framework presented by Fish *et al.* (Fig. 2) points to contributions that humans necessarily make to ecosystem service production, not being just recipients of the benefits, allowing the conception of ecosystem restoration *as* cultural sustainability. Fish *et al.* argue that environmental spaces and cultural practices should be considered mutually reinforcing cultural ecosystem services through which cultural benefits to well-being arise. Furthermore, the framework distinguishes four—often interrelated—cultural practices: 1) playing and exercising, 2) creating and expressing, 3) producing and caring, and 4) gathering and consuming. Producing and caring entail activities that span and blur work and non-work engagements with the natural environment; for example, diverse land-based professions and more informal conservation and management of the natural environment, such as citizen science, gardening, and participation in environmental stewardship. Human participation in the provision of ecosystem services allows us to develop solutions to environmental problems and shows that the human place in nature may be ethical, sustainable, and honorable; understanding restoration as a co-produced ecosystem service opens space for caring material cultural practices.

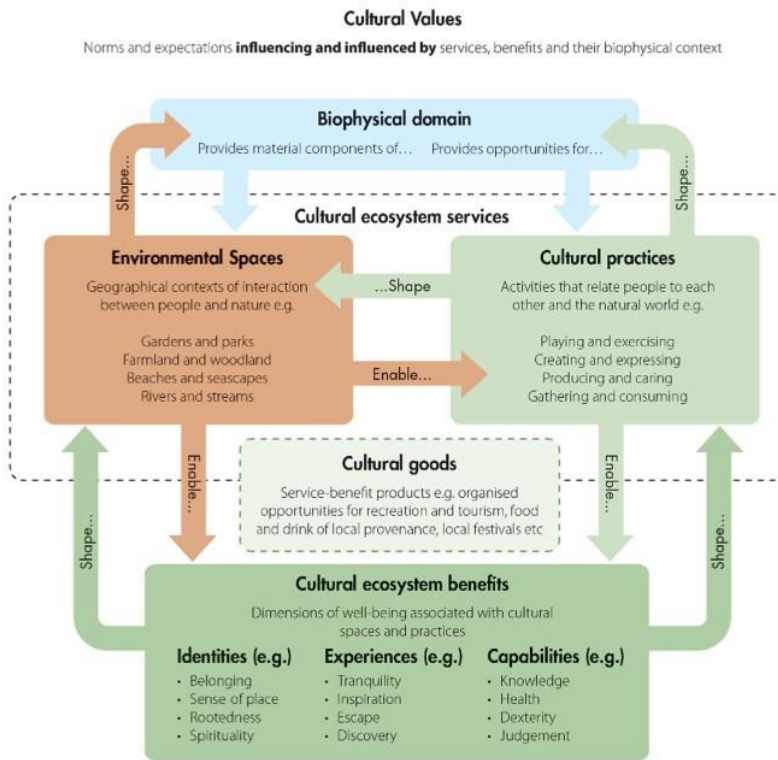


Fig. 2. A relational conceptual framework for cultural ecosystem services
Source: Fish *et al.* 2016, 211.

Ecosystem restoration is also conceptualized as a Nature-based solution (WaterLANDS 2022), a concept similar to ecosystem services but newer. Nature-based solutions are promoted as hybrid technological solutions to sustainability issues that engage nature. Carsten Herrmann-Pillath *et al.* (2023) have emphasized the aesthetic dimension of nature-based solutions in harnessing the co-creative potential of humans and nonhumans. They conceptualize nature-based solutions as more-than-human art, highlighting the open-endedness and creativity in practices such as restoration. It may be somewhat problematic, however, that ecological restoration emphasizes lost species and takes a historical state of nature as an objective towards which to proceed when the drivers of change are pointing at the future (Herrmann-Pillath *et al.*, 2023).

4. Restoration Time

According to Lehtinen (2021), aesthetic sustainability applies to those elements that sustain changes and stand “the test of time.” From the perspective of ecosystem restoration, this is difficult, as restoration means actively making environmental changes, even if it is to bring back previous conditions. I find the backward-looking view of restoration problematic; it may evoke resistance. Time does not stand still, and in a changed environment, maintaining an ecosystem in a previous state is impossible. Restoration should be perceived as future work. Successful restoration requires identifying the future potentials of a degraded ecosystem, including aesthetic potential. This identification requires understanding aesthetic sustainability as a process. According to Korpelainen (2021), aesthetic sustainability invites us to deepen our temporal sensitivity, and the continuous cultivation of aesthetic sensibility may power an ongoing societal change. This conceptualization of aesthetic sustainability is compatible with restoration as a relational ecosystem service. It allows thinking of restoration aesthetics as aesthetics of care.⁴ Upscaling peatland restoration requires ever-evolving mirecultures—new relational values, practices, and ways of thinking.

Understanding ecosystem restoration as a relational co-production of cultural ecosystem services facilitates reconfiguring the human-nature relationship to allow humans to be seen as active caretakers of the environment. This repositioning may be a decisive step for sustainability transformation. Working with an understanding of aesthetic sustainability that emphasizes change and cultivation of temporal sensitivity may help to see the future aesthetic and ecological potential of restored ecosystems.

Acknowledgments

This work was funded from the EU Horizon project WaterLANDS (grant no. 101036484). I thank the anonymous reviewers and the journal and SI editors, especially Noora-Helena Korpelainen, for their helpful comments and careful editorial work.

⁴ Yuriko Saito (2022) has recently discussed the aesthetics of care.

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