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## A Few Remarks Towards Environmental Aesthetics. Aesthetics of Landscapes and its Impact on Human Emotions

Kilka uwag na temat estetyki środowiska. Estetyka krajobrazu i jej wpływ na ludzkie emocje

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**Abstract:** The following paper focuses on the current meaning of environmental aesthetics and the aesthetics of landscapes. Its purpose is to show the relationship of human artificial living to natural living and human health as well as aesthetic and social emotions depending on health landscapes. The terms “environmental aesthetics” and “aesthetics of landscapes” are analysed in the broader philosophical and interdisciplinary context of Norberg-Schulz’s theory of architecture, Konrad Lorenz’s theory of ethology, and Wolfgang Iser’s transhuman aesthetics. What are the mechanisms of a human relating to a landscape? What mechanisms of our emotionality are related to a devastated or healthy landscape? These are the central questions of the following consideration. The methods used in my research are analyses, etymology, the phenomenology of emotionality, and phenomenology of the landscape. The primary and expected findings are that people appreciate and enjoy scenic landscapes to satisfy their emotionality, cooperation, and well-being. Conclusion: Landscapes create our identification, surroundings which create our feelings, experiences, and emotions. A good example of such a relationship are inhabitants of today’s uninhabited islands who were not able to cooperate, who destroyed their environment, destabilized and deforested their surroundings up to their complete extinction.

**Keywords:** environmental aesthetics, landscape, nature, emotions, disgust, admiration

**Streszczenie:** Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na aktualnym znaczeniu pojęcia estetyki środowiska i estetyki krajobrazu. Jego celem jest ukazanie relacji między życiem człowieka w sztucznym środowisku, a jego życiem w środowisku naturalnym, a także aspektów zdrowotnych krajobrazu i ich wpływu na zdrowie człowieka, oraz jego wrażenia estetyczne i emocje społeczne. W szerszym, filozoficznym i interdyscyplinarnym kontekście teorii architektury Norberga-Schulza, teorii etologii Konrada Lorenza czy estetyki transhumanistycznej Wolfganga Isera, pojawia się termin estetyka środowiskowa i estetyka krajobrazu. Jakie są mechanizmy kształtujące stosunek człowieka do krajobrazu? Jakie mechanizmy emocjonalne łączą się ze zdewastowanym lub zdrowym krajobrazem? Poniższe rozważania dotyczą głównie tych właśnie kwestii. Przyjęte metody badań obejmują analizę, etymologię, fenomenologię emocjonalności i fenomenologię krajobrazu. Podstawowym i przewidywanym wnioskiem jest to, że ludzie doceniają i cieszą się malowniczymi krajobrazami, ponieważ zaspokajają one ich potrzeby emocjonalne, wyzwalają w nich potrzebę współpracy z naturą, oraz zapewniają im dobre samopoczucie. Wniosek: Krajobrazy mają wpływ na naszą tożsamość, jest to otoczenie, które kreuje nasze uczucia, doświadczenia i emocje. Dobrym przykładem takiego powiązania są byli mieszkańcy dzisiejszych bezludnych wysp, którzy nie byli w stanie współpracować ze środowiskiem, niszczyli, destabilizowali i wylesiali swoje otoczenie aż do własnego całkowitego unicestwienia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** estetyka środowiskowa, krajobraz, przyroda, emocje, odraza, podziw

I want to lose myself in nature, to grow again with her, as she does, to have the stubborn tones of the rocks, the rational obstinacy of the mountain, the fluidity of the air, the heat of the sun. In a green my entire mind flows with the sap of the tree.

Paul Cézanne (1978, 124)

The transhuman stance cannot be reached by correcting the decidedly human or anthropocentric stance through a turn to its inhuman or nonhuman counter pole, but only by turning to a basis where this opposition no longer applies and where instead insight into the deep connectedness between the human condition and the feature of the world is foundational.

Wolfgang Welsch (2001, 22).

## Introduction

Why am I addressing the remarkable topic of environmental and landscape aesthetics? I perceive increasingly insistent importance and value of turning to environmental aesthetics which I am advocating in the following paper against the opinion of enlightened encyclopaedists. For example, Denis Diderot understood man “as the unique concept from which we must start and to which we must refer everything back” (Diderot 2009, 213).

I suggest, instead, turning to environmental and transhuman aesthetics which sees beauty and other aesthetical categories in a larger than human context considering for example natural environment, landscape, and our connectedness with nature. My point is not to claim that sophisticated aesthetics appears in the animal kingdom; there is no Shakespeare or Vincent Van Gogh among animals. However, aesthetic attitude might have originated as Wolfgang Welsch said in the animal kingdom (Welsch 2004, 15). A good starting point for understanding my perspective is the philosophy and aesthetics of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the act of perception, we enter according to him a reciprocal relationship with the perceived. It means we are open to the outside world and receive “something” from it, but at the same time, we add “something”

from us; we organize it “according to ourselves.” We react to reality, outlining a certain primal, sensual sense of the world. To explain this, he uses an example of the specific spatial-motor structure of the human body. Neither the body nor the senses exist outside the time flow and shared materiality. Each has its own dynamism and style that manifest in the interaction. Merleau-Ponty claims that there is a dynamic preconceptual layer of our encounter with the surrounding world, the field of sensual experience in which we are interconnected with the environment. He wrote in an essay on Cezanne: “We forget the vicious, equivocal appearances, and by means of them, we go straight to the things they present. The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain closed in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things. Only one emotion is possible for this painter—the feeling of strangeness—and only one lyricism—that of the continual rebirth of existence” (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 77). I will discuss the phenomenon of environmental aesthetics of landscape in an interdisciplinary point of view, using philosophical, anthropological, aesthetical, ethological, neuropsychological, and evolutionary research and issues.

## 1. Environmental aesthetics

Let me discuss the term environmental aesthetics first. Environmental aesthetics originated as a reaction to the emphasis on art and beauty of art, which has been dominated within analytic aesthetics in the last third of the twentieth century. It focuses on the investigation of the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments. The revival of environmental aesthetics was the result of several different factors. First, it was a response to the growing public concern about the apparent degeneration of the environment and aesthetics. Secondly, it was also the result of the academic world becoming aware of the significance of the environmental movement. Also, the emergence

of the philosophical study of environmental ethics dates from the last third of the twentieth century.

The work of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty applies to the development of environmental attitudes in contemporary aesthetics, as Norberg-Schulz, to whom I will refer later, once mentioned. The continuing globalization of environmental aesthetics, as well as continuous research in Eco aesthetics, suggests that the work that is most productive for supporting the aesthetic preservation of all kinds of environments, both natural and human, is that which depends not simply on any one particular approach to environmental aesthetics, but rather on attempts to bring together the resources of different approaches (feminism, neurobiology, neuropsychology, cognitivism, animal treatment, weather, and climate changes Innovative, eclectic contemporary approaches, coupled with the globalization of environmental aesthetics, will hopefully not only further a wide range of environmental goals but also foster a deeper understanding of the aesthetic potential of the world in which we live and belong to. There are at least two basic approaches to contemporary environmental aesthetics. One could be called cognitive environmental aesthetics and the second could be called non-cognitive environmental aesthetics. What cognitive positions in environmental aesthetics are united by the thought that knowledge about the nature of the object of appreciation is central to its aesthetic appreciation?

These positions tend to reject aesthetic approaches to environments, such as that governed by the idea of the picturesque, that draw heavily on the aesthetic experience of art for modelling the appreciation of nature (Parsons 2002; Carlson 2007). Non-cognitive position in environmental aesthetics means that something other than a cognitive component, such as scientific knowledge, or cultural or historical tradition, is the central feature of the aesthetic appreciation of environments (Brady 2003).

## 2. Aesthetics of landscapes

We prefer beautiful scenic views of landscapes with a good environment and ecological health. People all the time tend to enjoy it. Positive emotions are aroused with perceiving pleasant natural surroundings. Besides the effectiveness of the aesthetic experience on positive emotions, the benefits of the ecological attitude in the landscape are also considered in the following paper. Landscape aesthetics has been studied for long decades, and the interactions between us and landscapes as well as the results on the affective and cognitive responses and the composition of landscape aesthetics characters were revealed. These approaches accept that aesthetics experience derives from the perceptual process of landscape visual quality assessment. Ecological quality is important for landscape appearance, beauty, emotions of admiration, and pleasant emotions, but the human cannot perceive and judge ecological quality. As Lee-Hsueh Lee mentioned, "...people view landscape as a habitat, and aesthetic pleasure is derived from the experience of humans seeking a suitable habitat. Meanwhile, the aesthetic experience leads people to change the landscape, and these changes affect environmental processes and ecological functions. Therefore, there is a gap between the human-dominated landscape design and the ecologist's work, indicating that ecologically sound landscapes may not be aesthetically pleasing. In turn, ecological services and aesthetic attractiveness are like two parallel lines. This is not merely due to human influences on most landscapes, but also to the challenge of climate change and sustainable development" (Lee 2018).

Indeed, the border between naturally pleasant and beautiful ecological landscapes and our judgment on something as being aesthetic, may be thin. It seems very often that untouched, uncultivated nature has a terrible, maybe even repulsive effect on us, we feel possible predators, bacteria, parasites, discomfort, inhospitality, and therefore also our experience is not

aesthetic. And consequently, we cultivate the landscape and create safe, comfortable, pleasant sceneries. We are in a vicious circle. Ethnologist Konrad Lorenz in his book *Civilized Man's Eight Deadly Sins* provided a list of sins (let's say results of this vicious circle) both the sins against nature and contribution to its own disappearance. The eight deadly sins of Konrad Lorenz include overpopulation; this fact really forces humans to excess of social contacts which results in tremendous strain on individuals who live in large numbers in a small area. Then environmental devastation and alienation from nature resulted in the decline of human ethical and aesthetic sensibilities (which I am mentioning in this text). Competition of a man with himself means that people are in constant competition with competitors, and they lose self-reflection, one of the most important skills of human beings. Extinction of strong emotions – mankind is getting softer – thanks to technology, and medicine; consequentially mankind, for example, loses its ability to experience a great joy that follows a hardship or great suffering; an individual finds himself in a constant feeling of boredom. Genetic decline, Lorenz related this fact to a prevalence of social parasites. Dismissal of traditions – disintegration of the traditional family; intergenerational misunderstanding and misperceptions. Indiscrimination to doctrines, which according to Lorenz leads to uniformity and loss of individuality; the individual becomes easier to manipulate, more susceptible to succumbing to authority, ideologies, advertising, etc. And the last sin is the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which leads to definite destruction of society, although this risk can be easily removed (Lorenz 2001).

Lorenz published the book and wrote about these human sins in 1974, most of which are still topical. Even more topical seems to be the concept of culture and nature or cultural and natural evolution of a contemporary philosopher, Josef Šmajš. He draws attention to the fact that

the conflict between natural and cultural evolution is the deepest cause of today's existential threat to culture. Šmajš highlights the evolutionary creativity of nature and understands it as possibilities of spontaneous activity in nature, which are, however, limited not only by specific cosmic conditions but also by earthly conditions. Thus, natural evolution consists of all developing branches of the divergent developmental process of the cosmos. Only human activity partially modifies nature and forces some organisms and ecosystems to cooperate in the creation and functioning of culture. Although culture arises in the biosphere and just because nature made it possible, according to Šmajš, this does not mean that it arises in accordance with the order of nature, on the contrary, it goes against it. Šmajš' connection to the philosophical tradition when solving the question of the evolutionary concept of culture is minimal. The expansion of cultural existence inevitably causes the decline of natural existence. From this follow, according to Šmajš, a fundamental philosophical question of the present – the degree of permissible expansion of culture (Šmajš 2008, 12-20).<sup>1</sup>

Another interesting concept of considering nature in the relation to human living is Christian Norberg-Schulz's<sup>2</sup> conception of the landscape which inspired me to think deeply about the relation of artificial places to nature. Šmajš represents contemporary environmental philosophy based on evolutionary ontology, and Norberg Schulz represents rather represented history and theory of architecture, nevertheless, I see parallels in the conclusions they reached in their concepts. Norberg Schulz sees three ways of relating to nature: man would like to specify the natural structure and express

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Šmajš' concept of environmental philosophy see (Lipa et al. 2022, 5-14).

<sup>2</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, a theoretician of architecture, is not environmental philosopher, or aesthetician, but he analyzes in his theory the relationship between a healthy landscape and pleasant feelings of the perceiver.

his existential support. In order to reach this, a man build what he saw. For example, where nature is supposed to make a direction, he creates a road, or where nature offers open space, he builds a closed place. The second way of relation to nature is “filling” where something is missing, and finally, the last way is a symbolization of human’s understanding of nature. For example, the natural character is reversed to construction that becomes a cultural object and a more complex situation (Norberg-Schulz 2010, 17).

Man generates *imago mundi* or microcosmos which concretizes his world. In order to inhabit a certain country, to make friends with a certain environment man must identify with it. Northerners must be friends with ice, snow, cold, and fog and on the contrary, the Arabs must make friends with the endlessly vast sandy desert and the scorching sun. It follows that the environment is experienced as meaningful (Norberg-Schulz 2010, 21). Our basic aspects of being our identification and orientation. Identification means the basic sense of belonging somewhere, while orientation is a function that allows us to be a *homo viator*, part of our naturalness. And how can a landscape be phenomenologically described? A landscape where a man lives has a structure and meaning. These meanings and structures conditioned the creation of mythology, and it created a base for habitation. The forest represents first of all a wild full of terrifying energies. When we limit forest range as groves, for example, it became meaningful and understandable. Norberg-Schulz suggests that we need somehow limited places, unlimited places unlock the fright and misunderstanding. The landscape consists of mutual interplay of relief, vegetation, water, and surface (Norberg-Schulz 2015, 37).

The health landscape functions as an extensive base for artificial locations. But this only applies when relationship between human artificial living and the landscape is in balance. As Steven Bourassa said,

“the everyday landscape is typically a combination of art, artifact and nature, and the relationships among those categories are complex” (Bourassa 1991,10-11). He also mentioned, following on Appleton concepts (Appleton 1980), that landscape is a better word than the environment in the context of aesthetics because the former implies perception, whereas the latter does not. He used the term landscape aesthetics to mean exactly what other researchers mean by environmental aesthetics (Bourassa 1990).

### 3. Emotionality related to an environment

My main point of interest is to show in what way human emotionality is connected to an environment and landscape. I will focus on the emotion of disgust which is a strong manifestation of human attitude to a devastated and unhealthy environment as well as the emotion of admiration which add to human satisfaction with life. Let me start with admiration. The etymology of the term “admiration” refers to the expression “to look”. The expression *divat se*, used in the Proto-Slavic language since the 15th century (*divat sa*), is derived from the Indo-European *dei-*, which can be translated as “shine”. The connection can also be seen with the words “theatre” (in the older sense, the term “theatre” meant an illustrative example, a model, what someone marvels at) and “spectator”. From the term “to look”, came “to admire”, “to wonder”. However, the etymology of the term “admiration” also refers to the expression “to wonder”. Derivatives are then “astonishment”, “wondering”, “wondrous”, “surprisingly” (Králik 2015).

Here, we can see a connection with the Latin expression *admiratio*, where we translate the prefix *ad* as “to” “towards something”, and *miro* as “to look”, so *admiratio* was used in the sense of wondering, being amazed, in awe. The Latin *admiratio* in the meaning of amazement or astonishment gradually weakened from the 16th century and took on the meaning of “to hold in respect”. Admiration is one of the positive emotions, it is present and expressed

appreciation of someone or something, it is related to other positive emotions such as wonder, awe, adoration, fascination. If we admire someone because, for example, he inspires us, according to Paul Ekman (2009, 330), it arouses in us feelings similar to wonder. However, it is a separate emotion and must be distinguished from wonder. The emotion of admiration does not involve the same physiological changes as those occurring when we experience the feeling of wonder. In the case of admiration, the accompanying physiological changes are the so-called goosebumps, changes in breathing, possibly shaking the head (Ekman 2009, 329).

“We want to follow the object of our admiration, we feel drawn to it, but in amazement we just stand still, we don’t need any action” (Ekman 2009, 328). This also applies to the environment, landscape and its rivers, islands, woods and other structures, reliefs, and surfaces which Norberg-Schutz described. Let me continue with the emotion of disgust, which may be considered as the opposite of admiration in many cases of our experience, perception and relation to objects, other persons, or environment. Evolution clearly gave us the emotion of disgust to avoid dirty things and contaminants.

Darwin investigated the manifestations and reasons for experiencing disgust in more detail than the emotion of admiration. According to him, it refers primarily to the sense of taste and then secondarily to everything that causes a similar sensation through smell, touch, and sight. Physiologically, according to Darwin, we experience it very similarly to the feeling of contempt, i.e., with closed eyelids, possibly averted eyes or even the whole body (we express by this that the despised person or thing is not worthy of our gaze or even our presence and participation). The basis of the expression of contempt is the movements around the nose and mouth, if we express them more expressively, we already indicate disgust. “The nose may be slightly turned up,

which seems to come from the upper lip being turned up, or the movement may be limited to just wrinkling the nose. The nose is often slightly constricted so that the passage is partially closed, which is usually accompanied by a light snort or exhalation (through the nose). All these actions are identical with those we use when we perceive a foul odour and wish to prevent or expel it” (Darwin 2020, 202). Disgust originally evolved to optimize responses to the omnivore’s dilemma. Individuals with a balanced sense of what is disgusting and what is not were able to consume more calories. Food was not the only threat.

When ancient hominids climbed down from the trees and began to live in larger groups on the ground, the risk of infection and transmission of infection from excrement increased significantly. Psychologist Mark Schaller stated that the feeling of disgust is part of what he called the behavioural immune system – or otherwise a set of cognitive modules that activate symptoms of infection or disease in other individuals and make us feel the need to avoid them (dirty, smelly subways in the city, for example, illegal waste dumps, abandoned buildings that have become a refuge for drug addicts or homeless people). Jonathan Haidt (2013) even links the feelings of disgust to the realm of morality, arguing that disgust provides us with a valuable warning that we are going too far: the fact is that in this day and age, when anything is permitted as long as it is done freely and when our human nature no longer inspires any respect and we look at our body as an instrument of our autonomous rational will, the feeling of repulsion may be the only, last voice that is still heard in defence of the very core of our humanity. Haidt assumed that we always feel moral disgust when we see that someone behaves in such a way that he belongs to the low levels of some imaginary scale of the social dimension (the peak belongs to moral perfection, in some concepts to God and gradually descends to people, animals, monsters, evil spirit up to absolute evil).

“When someone robs a bank, they are doing evil, and we want them to be punished. But a person who betrays his own parents or forces children into prostitution seems downright vile – as if he lacks some basic human feelings. Such acts arouse in us revulsion and seem to trigger the same physiology of disgust as, for example, the sight of rats running out of a garbage can” (Haidt 2013, 141). We do not know when the feeling of disgust was born in our ancestors, but we know that it does not exist in any other animal. Some mammals reject certain food because it does not taste good or smells unpleasant, but only humans reject food because it came into contact with someone or something “unclean” or unattractive. We refuse for the same reasons, and if we cannot refuse, we at least eliminate staying in spaces that are dirty, smelly, and that repel us. We avoid dirty, smelly underpasses, dark, unventilated corners and places that seem dangerous and repulsive at first glance. As noted by Miroslav Marcelli (2011; 2009), the city is created in opposition to wild nature, but gradually makes it its domesticated (and necessary) part. Even in Claude Lévi-Strauss, we can find a consideration: “(...) And the city, where nature and the human mind meet, is perhaps an even more precious reality than works of art.” As a group of animals that enclose their biological history within its boundaries and at the same time model it as thinking beings with conscious intentions, the city embodies the laws of biological reproduction, organic development and artistic creation in its genesis and form. It is both a natural object and a cultural subject, an individual and a group, a lived reality, and a dreamed reality: it is a supremely human thing” (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 83).

The greatest transformation of our ancient ancestors began with the cultivation of the land, the cultivation of the earth is already something artificial, far from hunters and gatherers, it is the transformation of nature, as Spengler (Spengler, 2011, 392) put it “to cultivate does not mean to take something, but to produce”. Cultivation of the soil

becomes a prerequisite for the emergence of culture and even the city. All great cultures are urban cultures. Spengler goes so far as to claim that world history is the history of urban people, which can be understood in the way that all religions, art, science, and political systems rest on one primitive phenomenon of humanity, the existence of the city (Spengler 2011, 390-395). Bad environmental quality in relation to bad social emotions of group may lead to society decline. An interesting result can be seen in a reflection on settlers of Mangareva, Pitcairn, and Henderson Islands, which was described by Koukolík (1997).

Henderson island has the size of about 36 km<sup>2</sup> there is no source of drinking water, very little fertile soil and volcanic glass or other material of which it would be possible to produce solid tools for Henderson’s inhabitants is absent. Originally the island was rich in fish, shellfish, birds, and turtles. Colonizers brought a variety of plants to this island. Approximately 50 people inhabited this island. Pitcairn is an inactive volcano of 4.6 km<sup>2</sup> and is located about 180 km from Henderson. Settlers of both islands were in contact for several centuries. They cooperated firstly; they exported birds from Henderson and volcanic stone from Pitcairn. Mangareva is about 400 km from these islands, and the first colonizers of Henderson came from here around the year 1000. The population of Mangareva gradually began to grow. They cut down trees, so the land was affected by erosion and the same happened at Pitcairn, while inhabitants of Henderson exterminated all the birds and turtles. The war accompanied by cannibalism broke out on Mangareve, as a result of imbalance between resources and needs of the population. In the mid-15th century, the barter between the islands came to an end. Only inhabitants of Mangareva survived. The last people on Pitcairn and Henderson islands died around the year 1600 (Koukolík 1997).

What happened here? Why did those human populations die out? The reasons for the demise of human groups may be various.



For example, if the number of group members drops below a certain level, sooner or later there is a sexual intercourse between close relatives, which would increase the number of hereditary diseases in subsequent generations. The reason for the disappearance of a group may be an unfavourable climate change and long-term social isolation (in this case the members of the group suffering of emotional “cabin fever” go insane). Another reason may be inability to adapt (Koukolík 1997).

Koukolík states that even if the people of Henderson and Pitcairn avoided pitfalls described above, they would have to deal with the most significant risk, a necessary survival of a certain number of group members (this fact does not concern only human populations). If the number of members of a species drops below a certain level, the species dies out. In the case of humans, it is the smallest number of individuals who can pass not only their genes but also a cultural tradition (mem), and the quantity of 50 specimens appears as low. For example, the original population of Tasmania was about five thousand individuals and managed to survive ten millennia. But gradually they lost the abilities known to them when they colonized the island; they ceased to develop until the Australian Aborigines exceeded them in everything.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show the close relationship between the human environment, healthy living, emotionality, and landscapes. The purpose was to analyse the impact of a devastated, deforested country on human emotionality and well-being. When we separate ourselves from natural beings, devastate, and deforest the country, we cannot expect to be satisfied, or experience pleasant emotions, but rather expect the society to be on the brink of extinction, its end, and decline. The methods used in this paper were analyses and synthesis, with reference to ethymology, phenomenology of landscape, and phenomenology of human

emotionality. The primary and expected findings are that people appreciate and enjoy scenic landscapes, as has been showed in many studies and research (for example, Tveit 2009; Rosley et al. 2013; Lee 2018).

Landscapes enable our self-identification, surroundings shape our feelings, experiences, and emotions. A good example of those who failed to realize that are the past inhabitants of today’s uninhabited islands who did not manage to cooperate, but destroyed their environment, destabilized, and deforested their surroundings thus bringing themselves to complete extinction.

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