

# Aesthetic experience of (landscape) nature as a means for environmental awareness

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## Abstract

Aesthetic experience of nature is seen as a mean to promote environmental awareness. The traditional approach to some classical concepts such as nature, beauty and landscape must be updated incorporating those values which are generally accepted and involve the relationship between humans and their environment. The current cultural context which is biased towards a superficial and formalist approach of aesthetics is also reviewed. Later, stress is put on the sensitive and cognitive sides of aesthetic experience. It is argued that our dependance on environmental processes carries with it the need to hold a responsible approach towards the aesthetic experience of nature and landscape.

**Key words:** landscape, aesthetics of nature, environment, environmental awareness.

**Resumen.** *La experiencia estética de la naturaleza (paisaje) como medio para la concienciación ambiental*

La experiencia estética de la naturaleza es entendida como un medio para promover la conciencia medioambiental. El enfoque tradicional de algunos conceptos clásicos tales como naturaleza, belleza y paisaje debe ser actualizado incorporando aquellos valores que son hoy generalmente aceptados e incluir la relación entre los seres humanos y su entorno. También se revisa el contexto cultural actual y su tendencia a un enfoque superficial y formalista de la estética. Posteriormente, se subrayan el aspecto sensible y cognitivo de la experiencia estética. Se argumenta que nuestra dependencia de los procesos medioambientales implica la necesidad de asumir una actitud responsable hacia la experiencia estética de la naturaleza y del paisaje.

**Palabras clave:** paisaje, estética de la naturaleza, medioambiente, concienciación ambiental.

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## Summary

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## Introduction

Doubtless, aesthetic experience of landscape is a means to favour responsible attitudes of people towards their environmental heritage. Environment provides resources which are indispensable for living, however their availability and quality are limited and the processes which sustain them are fragile to human intervention. The state of life resources and the balance of their processes make up for the main part of nature, and can be approached from our aesthetic experience of nature if adequately handled.

It seems necessary to take a systemic view on environment and nature which could incorporate human action and human responsibility. Landscape is seen here as the perception people have of their environment. Environmental resources and processes are crucial for human living so they must be adequately dealt with within the aesthetic experience of nature, particularly in relation to its cognitive side but not only. The different aesthetic reactions to nature and landscape include different cognitive approaches towards environmental features, qualities and processes which can be promoted accordingly.

### 1. Nature, environment and new values

The idea of nature is still too much influenced by its 18th century origins when environmental sciences had not been yet developed. So it falls short of embracing the full complexity of natural reality as currently understood. Several important values which are currently accepted by people and science are not properly dealt with by that classical concept of nature which philosophers and aesthetic experts still take as an almost exclusive reference. Values such as healthy environment, environmental balance or ecosystem fragility; ethical references such as global and local limits to economic growth or human footprint on nature as well as many others fall outside currently considerations taken on the idea of nature. Nevertheless, the fact that those are values of a clearly earthly nature, has a positive aesthetic dimension in contemporaneous culture and govern current prevalent ethical attitudes seem not to be insufficient in relating them to a classic view on nature. It would be desirable to widen that old idea of nature, awe, absolute and distant from human capacities to a more complex and dynamic view of the reality of natural processes and values and their aesthetics.

Environment is proposed by some authors as an alternative to the traditional idea of nature. Environment must be taken as a system, comprised of a dynamic set of different elements and their interrelationships on whose continued survival Earth and its inhabitants depend. This concept allows approaching separately those features of nature on which life is dependant. Partial elements of nature such as air, soil, land or flora can thus be experienced separately. Appreciation of natural elements on a one by one basis is possible without diminishing a sense for the full set of complex interrelationships which allow for their survival. These environmental relationships, which were



Fig. 1. A view of Gernika Mouth (Photo by I. Español).

identified by recent scientific achievements of the 20th century, have their own aesthetic tradition. They have been brought into people's knowledge and attitudes through both formal and informal education. The dryness and heat of thermic and arid climates are in themselves aesthetics experiences, as is the close relationship between physiognomic specialisation of flora and fauna which can also be easily appreciated by humans senses.

Through the idea of environment as a system, nature becomes a relative and partial feature of reality instead of the absolute concept embeded in its classical understanding. «Natural» is now a quality which relates to life and other spontaneous processes which take place on Earth regardless humans. Volcano eruptions, rain and spring cycles are «natural» and can be aesthetically felt as such while ports and villages, although expressive human creations, are subject to elements of «nature» such as seatides or nearby forest fauna. Their interaction is also appreciated through aesthetics. Physiognomic, forms and features of nature and culture are interwoven and merged into these heterogeneous systems which trigger different aesthetic reactions.

Humans also come to take part in the environmental system. Elements and relationships created by humans operate within environmental processes and dynamics. Tamed nature is seen now as a system under a certain degree of human control or dependance. Crops, forestry or urbanization, human creation, are part of the environmental network of relationships and as such condition natural processes to a certain extent.

Nevertheless, nature and wilderness are kept as solid references since they clearly display a high degree of spontaneity and independance from human intervention. Although still dependent on nature resources and processes such as water, air or energy sources, aesthetics of human environments such as urban

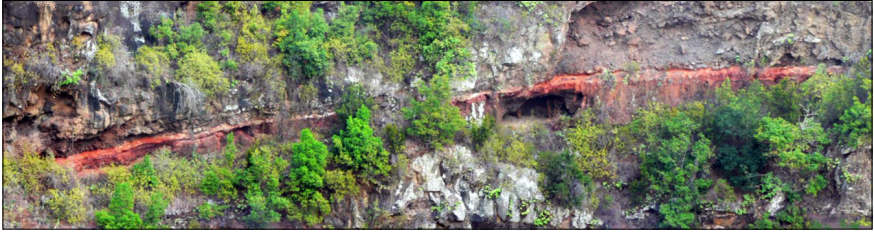


Fig. 2. Red almegre in Ravine of Alen in La Palma (Photo by I. Español).

spaces, steelworks or transport infrastructures are far removed from nature's features and emotions.

The interaction between humans and nature, that is, between human creations and natural processes, forms mixed systems for whose pheseability human actions are responsible. Environmental disasters such as deforestation, oil spills, global pollution or famines have attracted attention to human responsibility in perverting the dynamics of natural processes. These disasters have also brought a negative aesthetic view which is basically rooted in feelings of rejection and condemnation of adverse human intervention in nature's processes.

Aesthetic experience faces these so-called mixed systems, systems which are part natural and part human and are ostensibly combined in a positive interactive structure or, by contrary, they are unbalanced and lack vitality. These systems set off different aesthetic reactions which reflect their qualities in diverse ways. These will be reviewed later on in this article.

## 2. Natural beauty and other aesthetic experiences in environment

Secondly, the attention of aesthetic thought was centred on plastic beauty. Later romantics brought awe and a picturesque sense of nature. However, these are not the only aesthetic experiences one can obtain from nature, countryside or any environment. There is a full array of emotions which we feel when we approach environment and its processes.

Appreciation of colour, shapes and scale brings about aesthetic reactions of different kinds. These can range from abstract plastic pleasure to different moods or states of mind as well as many other different feelings related to sensuality. The contrast between intensive almegre red and luxuriant green in the huge volcanic ravines of the island of La Palma produces a mixture of plastic pleasure and colour sensuality. Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother that he had tried to paint a landscape to reproduce in colours and shapes the «sad feeling a railway keeper would have on cloudy rainy morning when watching that landscape». In a similar way, romantics pointed out how some landscapes reflected the mood of their souls. Yet, plastic enjoyment and moods



Fig. 3. The drago tree (*Draconeia drago*) in Icod de Los Vinos (Tenerife). Note, the size of a couple admiring the tree (Photo by I. Español).

are not the only aesthetic reactions we can have from experiencing the environment.

Reassurance, satisfaction, surprise, exoticness, spectacle or paradox are feelings which one can have while experiencing a landscape depending on our expectations and knowledge about such a place. The old drago tree of Icod de los Vinos (Tenerife) is admired for its age, size and exotic organic form. Its massively rooted trunk and rising bunch of branches are surprising for a tree while its out of scale dimensions evoke the completely different biological era to which this exotic plant seems to belong.

The contrast between our previous information, knowledge and experiences and the aesthetic experience of environment confirms or contradicts our expectations. Often conventional assumptions are contradicted by the direct experience of natural or cultural phenomena, this produces a feeling of paradox and uncertainty. The roots of a tree opening a crack in a rock are both surprising and paradoxical, just because we are not really aware of the strength of biological perseverance. This sense of paradox and spectacularity (the latter being stimulated by huge dimensions, effective contrasts and surprising shapes in the landscape), are a very common aesthetic reactions which attracts tourists to some places such as de millenary drago of Icod, Niagara falls or a sunset over the sea anywhere.



Fig. 4. *Romería* of Holy Mary of Snows. Magic sense of weather (Photo by I. Español).

Emotions such as familiarity, evocation, homesickness, indifference, alienation or loneliness, come from the affective relationship the observer feels he or she has with a place. Travellers think some landscapes evoke their homeland when they identify certain features they thought to be unique of that homeland. White villages of Andalusia and the Eastern Iberian coast can be easily confused with Greek coastal villages if full attention is not paid. The traveller feels security, satisfaction and comfort when checking that forms and features of a well known landscape are still there. Everyday environments produce this comforting reaction. On the other hand, alienation and loneliness are triggered by those environments which follow patterns we neither understand nor can handle. When left alone in a wild forest, a desert or on the height of a high mountain most urban dwellers feel such alienation.

A certain sense of magic was involved in the aesthetic experience of some nature phenomena by primitive communities. Many traditional celebrations have preserved the «*mise en scene*» of primary attitudes towards nature. Every 5<sup>th</sup> of August, peasants in Teguisse (Lanzarote) walk up the hill to the hermitage of Holy Mary of Snows to ask her to bring good weather for their crops. Consistent droughts can ruin harvests so that knowledge brings fear and uncertainty to peasants from a continued lack of rain. Although utility is behind their worries, they also had a deep fear for angering the dubious fate of weather.

Fantasy involves most of aesthetic reactions which surge when confronted with environmental phenomena which perform effective and unexpected results. Storms at sea, water falls, seaside grottos or the simple blossoming of flowers in spring and the regular fall of leaves in autumn are generally felt with a sense of fantasy.

Similar aesthetic reactions of a magic nature are produced when entering a cemetery where memories of dead relatives and friends are evoked. This magic emotion is also impressive when one visits graveyards of unknown people. Approaching testimonies of the past like such as visiting ruins or touching old furniture brings an unavoidable feeling for mystery and disassociation.

The list of aesthetic categories for experiences is long and varied but in all cases a cognitive process together with emotion is involved. This stems from previous

experiences of a similar kind, also from information and knowledge available to the observer as well as to a more or less successful attempt to understand.

### 3. The idea of landscape reviewed

The perception of environment as the aesthetic experience of the complex system which keeps nature alive, was firstly proposed by González Bernáldez (1981) in human ecology as a definition for landscape. Later, perception of an area by people was established as an institutional definition of landscape by the European Convention of Landscape (Florence, 2000). This idea of landscape stretches the classic aesthetic view and widens its scope to a social character. Traditionally landscape had been seen as an art product, a painting depicting a landscape or an extensive naturalist garden. As art products, landscape features were determined by the aesthetic aim of the artist and, although being an interpretation of reality, were different from those which are part of real environments and thus of real landscapes. Landscape had been thought to be a cultural construct since environmental reality, it was said, was seen through the filters of the references provided by those art products, paintings, gardens or poems. Just as any other cultural reference models such those western society has built for the idea of town, countryside or even society, landscape construct is made up and regularly fed by an extensive collection of varied realisations which come from art as well as from other sources of social and cultural education and experiences.

Such an intellectual understanding of environment (the landscape) is aesthetic in nature. Thus in addition to sensitivity, it also involves a wide and complex range of cognitive processes. Landscape aesthetic response in people is built up from features and forms of the real environment, features and forms which are the result of environmental processes of different kinds (Martínez Pisón, E., 2003). Therefore, aesthetics of landscape relate through perception to environmental structure and processes.

However, this relationship which takes place through aesthetic experience is everything but simple.

Updating the classic concept of landscape now bring us to incorporate all different perceptions which society currently obtains from its environment. It is important to realise that perception refers to an intellectual understanding of the object (a real one in this case) not just a mere visual or sensitive approach. Scientific divulgation and education of people are crucial in providing a base for their aesthetic approaches. Of course, these are not the only references being handled in the aesthetic process nor the main ones either. Take, for instance, everyday aesthetic experiences together with the overwhelming influence of mass media and publicity campaigns.

The classical idea of landscape as an art product which conditions the perception an illustrated traveller obtains from reality must be seen now in its current context. Numerous and diversified forms of art production are present in contemporaneous everyday life and play an important role in the aes-

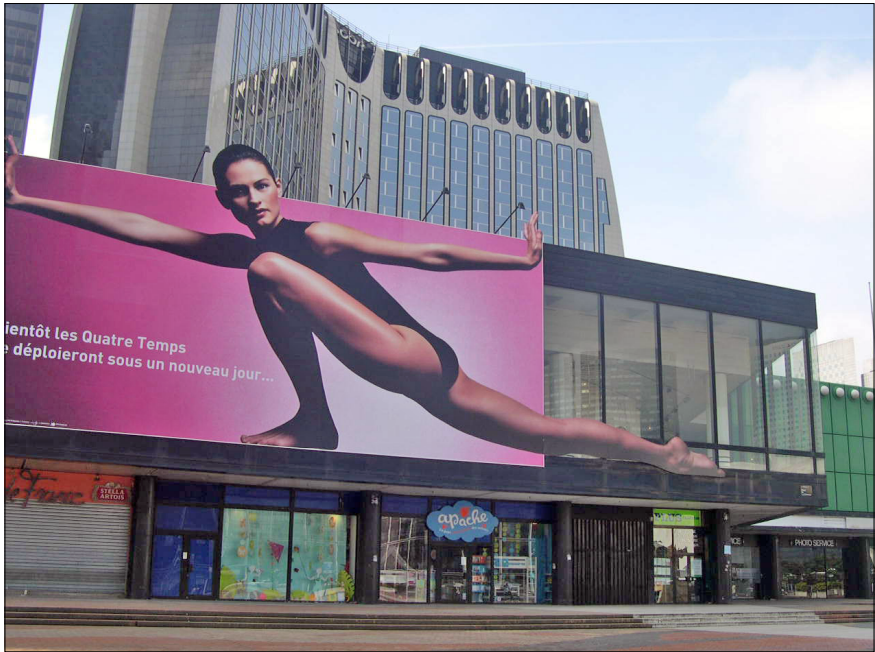


Fig. 5. Parfums and a female stereotype superimposed on an urban scene, La Defense, a business centre in Paris (Photo by I. Español).

thetic education of people. As it was pointed out previously, special attention must be paid to the approach that media, publicity, tourism and leisure industries as well as local lobbies take of environment, nature, town and countryside and even explicitly to landscape. Publicity, for instance, has a very special way of assuming individual ideals and frustrations in order to stimulate consumption (Berger, J., 2001). Although their main aim follows trade patterns, it builds or, at least, strengthens some aesthetic values and attitudes.

The media and the public debate of ideas take place primarily in a virtual communication environment where time constraints the message format. This in turn affects the message contents. Ideas must be presented in a short time, supported by solid visual contents and little intellectual elaboration or depth since time for contemplation and thought is virtually non-existent. The emotive side of the aesthetic experience of receiving information or joining the public debate is over-dimensioned while the cognitive side is reduced to a very small and squalid content.

As in other social values, in landscape, the role of «mediators», that is agencies which organise and propose public criteria, is crucial in establishing references and attitudes in contemporaneous society. Mediators such cultural leaders, public institutions, art critics and experts, leisure markets and other



influential agents define what deserves attention and what does not what is heritage and art and how it must be approached and taken into account (Leoniaud, JM, 1992). In the specific field of nature, they do determine or at least condition the perception of landscape and natural values for the public at large.

The aesthetic experience of nature takes place within this contemporaneous cultural context greatly influenced by those attitudes promoted by the mass media and other mediators. Aestheticism is generally overvalued while knowledge and understanding are limited to the most simplistic forms, emotions are favoured against intellect. Yet, although the cognitive is extremely minimised, aesthetics cannot avoid the knowledge and understanding which such an experience always involves.

#### 4. Responsibility and awareness in the aesthetic experience

The special marriage of cognition and emotion which takes place in the aesthetic experience allows for the abuse of intellect by the emotive side of it. As it has been said, this is a common approach in media interest groups' communications. Unfortunately, this is also the case among attitudes of individuals facing social issues and values. Yet, that special mixture also allows for emotion to help understanding.

In the field of aesthetic experience of nature, knowledge can always play a positive role. This can be found in each of the previously defined aesthetic categories. Plastic pleasures for colour, shape and scale are just a sensitive approach towards the changing morphology of environmental processes and structures. Although some environment dynamics need scientific information to be identified and appreciated, information required is generally at hand, therefore most environmental processes are within the reach of individual abstract thinking. Moods, emotions and sensitivity operate then as an additional feedback for the understanding of the experience. An effort should be made to advance in responsible thinking instead of letting ourselves to be carried along by the emotional strength of the experience.

Spectacle and paradox are just the result of adjusting our knowledge to new information which comes to us in the aesthetic experience. Attention should also be paid to those clues and features which despite not being spectacular, provide for a better understanding of systems and dynamics. An open mind and a balanced attitude are generally recommended if a responsible attitude is to be taken.

Affective attitudes towards landscape features of alien communities and places direct our sight towards the circumstances and qualities of others. In a similar way, reassurance and satisfaction from patterns we feel to be our own displayed in those landscapes, which we feel close to, should pave the way to self-analysis and positive criticism. Self-indulgence should be avoided by independent observation and analysis which again must be balanced and we should not be afraid of confirming negative aspects or results of our behaviour.

Finally, a sense of magic which results from facing the transcendence or unexpectedly grandiose manifestations of environmental phenomena is just a

primary step towards asking oneself about the main questions of Earth and life. Life and earth cycles and basic environmental processes are approached by human intellect when we fantasize about weather, sea storms or death. Nevertheless, these great and profound questions must be dealt with with appropriate rationale, concrete information and solid arguments.

Abstract thinking requires a special effort to be made, especially when facing seductive nature phenomena. It is not easy to avoid bias nor to prevent emotion eroding solid logical understanding of environmental processes which exhibit their picturesque and impressive forms and rhythms before our senses. This personal effort has to be strong enough to counteract the decisive and consistent influences of contemporaneous attitudes and mass media bias which place emotion before knowledge.

However, it should not be forgotten that what it is perceived in aesthetic experiences of landscape and nature is a unique vital resource, those cycles and processes on whose continuity our live depends. It is the land where our community everyday life takes place, which provides the energy and biomass resource needed for survival. All these ideas show themselves in the landscape through forms and shapes, often clearly sometimes hidden but always available to be appreciated by our aesthetic experience.

Landscape also displays those features which reflect the footprint of our present and past cultures. It does so illustrating the effects which the long-lasting relationship between nature and culture and their dynamics and cycles had on the features and forms of landscape. The results of human action on landscape, sometimes compatible and positive, sometimes damaging and destructive can be appreciated through aesthetic experience.

A responsible aesthetic approach requires knowledge and understanding the extent of the fragility of the environment and its values. The enjoyment of plastic features of landscape should never ignore the reality of culture patterns and biodiversity which lie underneath our impressive aesthetic experience. By doing so, the aesthetic experience should direct people to be aware of functions, mechanisms and relationships involved and never in the opposite sense.

Approaching nature aesthetic should make people sensitive to the degree to which human action has affected the vitality of natural systems. Landscape should not be seen as a faded static picture of reality but as a mirror of ourselves, our acts and responsibilities through perception of human action in our environment.

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