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How To Speak of Nature? The Exemplary Position of Mount Koli in Environmental Research

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Yrjö Sepänmaa

Abstract

Mount Koli in Eastern Finland is a useful example for environmental aesthetics and landscape research. In case studies, an example represents a general set and the conclusion becomes a precedent. Koli provides a wealth of material: descriptions of local nature, art featuring Koli, and documents concerning the environmental debates around it. One can outline both the development of Koli into a culturally significant location and the activities and policies of the process, as well as the values and appreciations that guided them. The material we have can be used to examine an environmental institution designed to have the structure of an artistic one. In both, a chain is present connecting an author via interpreters to a person who experiences. This cognitive model needs to be clarified by using practical situations as examples. Again, the question is one of preparing for the future as well as researching past events and the practices involved.

Key Words

Koli, landscape research, environmental aesthetics, evaluating environment, environmental criticism

1. The paradigmatic object

An object or work is paradigmatic in discussions of the environment when its position cannot be meaningfully contradicted. It is firmly placed, it has the character of a basic case and thus a defining role among its kind. It has earned its position and justification in the test of time, and in study and debate on the environment. This position is not formed through natural processes, but created culturally.

We compare actual landscapes to model ones, and by using familiar, fixed ideas we characterize strange ones. Natural and cultural monuments and scenically important areas are used as basic examples by nature writers and photographers. They form basic examples that affect general consciousness. As a paradigmatic object and a model case, Koli Mountain in eastern Finland has a stature comparable to classics in art. (See end of paper for illustrations.) A landmark like this becomes the embodiment of long-standing, established appreciations. It has withstood the test of time by nature writers and researchers of nature, as well as by artists and travelers. However, limiting oneself to the most spectacular places does have the general drawback of neglecting the "ordinary," which is, after all, the kind of place we spend most of our lives in.

Model landscapes correspond to classics in art. Both of them--exceptionally significant environmental locations and classic works of art--have the nature and role of articulating their respective fields. Using them, it is possible to address larger and less-known groups of things. Such an object can be assumed to be generally known within its cultural circle. It is individual and unique, and at the same time displays the essence of the characteristics of its class. Reino Kalliola, the Finnish naturalist and nature conservationist, educates his young travelling companion on the understanding of nature by writing about Koli and the panorama that unfolds from its summit, saying that nothing needs to be taken away from it or

added to it.^[1] In doing so, he repeats an old aesthetic ideal and points out the perfection of Koli; others can only more or less try to simulate its qualities. The clearest case of being classified as a paradigmatic landscape is being listed as a national landscape, but it is also significant to be accepted as a valuable scenic area. The UNESCO World Heritage List is probably the greatest recognition possible.

A national landscape is a particular kind of paradigmatic landscape that, along with purely scenic values, is associated with national symbols, memorable historical events and mythical tales, art connections, and interpretations guiding its examination. It has become standard to repeat the statement by the writer Juhani Aho on Koli, that there is a Janus-like dualism that unfolds from its peak, a symbolic border point between the west and the east: wilderness to the east, warm, cultural landscape to the west.^[2]

2. Speech and criticism

Through classics one can speak as with sayings and proverbs. They reflect long-term appreciations in culture, holding them together. Speech about landscapes, the counterpart of critical speech on art, is formed by these places. Environmental criticism is born.

Environmental criticism, with nature writing and travel literature as its central varieties, and the general or artform-specific criticism of art are comparable in character and in objective. In both, there is description, interpretation, and evaluation. In both, exact language and logical conclusions are needed, but also the presentation of emotional experiences. The person experiencing is present, not just as an individual but as an informed anybody, a representative of his community and an investigator. Such an individual doesn't just stand mutely in front of the landscape he or she surveying, at least the matter is not left there, but has the professional duty of interpreting the experience in the language of criticism. Similarly, a critic or researcher of art cannot limit him or herself to simply experiencing: one's profession and skill are an illustrative and vibrant declaration of private experience and context.

By utilizing Koli as an example, we can develop and test new modes of speech and analysis that can be used in other cases. A researcher ought not only to be limited in a metacritical sense to handling questions already posed, but should develop the ability to answer questions about the nature of beauty and aesthetic value. Research should be able to form functioning modes of interpretation and analysis to be tested by open discussion,; and also to form ways of valuing aesthetically, ethically, and culturally. This means being responsible about the quality of environmental criticism in journalism and in research.

General philosophical research on the foundation, nature, and validity of criticism is metacriticism, talking about talking; so likewise, is the analysis of actual criticism. The analytic-linguistic approach that broke through in the fifties wanted to limit aesthetics to precisely that. Its mission was to examine claims about beauty and ugliness and not to come out with declarations and to bind oneself to a particular perception of beauty, let alone to consider oneself to be qualified and obliged to give judgements about the beauty or ugliness of objects. The aesthetician's skill, knowledge, and expertise were, according to this view (which I still consider to be close to my own) useful concerning the language of criticism and, in a

wider sense, its logic, not its targets. The speech is therefore metaspeech, talking about talking, and not object-speech or speech about the objects being examined.

This also spawned a clear division of authority. It became the business of someone else, the nature writer or photographer, or the natural scientist, the art critic or scholar and not the aesthetician, to know or at least claim to know, and to give assertions that could be expanded to form research material for aestheticians.

There has always been a social expectation for the aesthetician to have an opinion on emerging cases, to define a position, to participate, and to accept the risk of being wrong. If this expectation is met, if the aesthetician goes along with it, the paradox arises of having to give up the role of an aesthetician and to become something else: a critic of art or of the environment. This kind of role change has, of course, been possible all along; people can fill several functions in public and personal life. But here the nature of activity becomes that of a critic, and it must therefore be evaluated as such.

A functioning solution, which can be used by others as a model, has been developed by Arthur C. Danto, who began as an artist, worked as a philosopher contemplating questions of history, language, and art, and eventually found (or created) a career that was noticed across professional boundaries in what could be called philosophical art criticism, in contact with large spheres of aesthetic culture. Of this he uses the term *artphilohistocritisophory*.^[3] Danto and the field in general have been through a major transformation in which the role of an integrating force is being returned to the aesthetician.

3. Two cultures of description

Edward O. Wilson, the editor of the anthology *The Best American Science & Nature Writing 2001*, writes in his introduction, subtitled "Life is a Narrative," about two different kinds of description, one involved in natural sciences, and the other, essayistic, in the humanities or letters. ^[4] Here we have also a difference between two languages and styles, and so between two modes of speech.

The question of whether the descriptor is portrayed within the description or not creates the most crucial division. The scientific description is limited to the coolly objective analysis of the object's properties, whereas in essays one centers on the relationship, the way the object is experienced, and how it affects the one experiencing. Therefore, it's a matter of emotions and sensations. These don't just appear out of nowhere; there must be something in the object to which they are reacting. Descriptions of nature in the form of essays and travelogues, for instance, are typical genres of this kind of interaction-based literature, where the point of contact takes a clear literary form and which has communal significance in molding the perceptions of readers.

The challenge of developing and refining the way we talk about landscapes B how to describe, interpret, and value objects B is one that aestheticians must take up. Along with its theoretical character, but not instead of it, this kind of discussion should be practical and applied. When natural beauty is to be understood and protected, in Koli and elsewhere, we must be able to talk about beauty, and to argue by referring to it. This has been achieved in art to a reasonable extent, and the best descriptions of nature do not fall behind.

Arguments from beauty are promptly rejected as a "there's no

accounting for taste" type of situation. I don't mean to say that rare species and matters of cultural history aren't a reasonable ground for protection or that they are irrelevant to the aesthetic value of the environment. However, if they are claimed to have an aesthetic significance, the chain of argumentation must be stretched to the specific way their existence affects the aesthetic value of the environment. Perhaps it is the case that rare species have become a strategically effective but morally dubious instrument for the protection of something that is more conceptual and immaterial, and generally difficult to prove. In any case, when we want to promote the interest of beauty we must be able and willing to talk directly and openly about it. A language is needed, a language of aesthetics as a humanistic discipline, a language of environmental criticism and aesthetics. This is the challenge.

However, it goes against intuition to think that someone would seriously try to give a chain of reasoning to annul the beauty of Koli. We may remember that the shadowy side of Koli has been regarded with some degree of aversion, or at least that some people have dared to belittle it. Koli, like any paradigmatic object or landscape, is tested, and at some point even the strongest 'remnants of the past' can be momentarily displaced to make way for new models. The beauty of Koli is considered to be a given, an axiomatic matter of fact. Therefore, the basis and starting point is that, upon recognizing and understanding its beauty, one would not need to argue for one's view. Koli, at least in Finnish consciousness, is a kind of world hub: a fixed point on which we can build.

The work of nature writers and photographers shows what these aesthetic foundations might be like. Environmental criticism has the model and background support of art criticism. The aesthetician Monroe C. Beardsley, in his work *Aesthetics B Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, condensed the criteria of goodness in a work of art into three catchwords: *unity*, *complexity*, and *intensity*.^[5] These can, of course, manifest themselves in innumerable ways and combinations. The nature writer and naturalist Aldo Leopold spoke in his earlier (by a decade) posthumous work, *A Sand County Almanac*, of *integrity*, *stability*, and *beauty*.^[6] To him, beauty is one of the three properties of nature that together represent an ecologically enduring ideal environment.

These are real attempts, one on the part of art and one on the part of the environment, to answer questions about aesthetic valuing factors. They are not based on references to the effect that many, most, or all people say they like such-and-such, even though there commonly exists a wide consensus about top objects and locations. It should always be possible to answer the question: what in the object justifies liking it? Liking is not justified by a false or expedient interpretation, or by deficient observation, the absence of meaningful background information, or blindly following others.

Helen Knight asserts in her article about the use of the word *good* that the guarantee and sign of a criterion for the goodness of a work of art is simply that it is used.^[7] This is true, but it leads us to query the hierarchy of criteria, as Knight proceeds to do. Some valuing principles, and their merits, are clearly more valuable than others. It cannot, for instance, make sense for a principle to be as hard as possible to attain, since valuing mere difficulty would over-emphasize technical ability and tricks. It is also not crucial to be the most noble or rare, as important challenges are found in the commonplace: "A real national landscape is in fact the commonplace

landscape that people look at in their everyday living, that forms the scene for this life." This is what Maija Rautamäki, a professor of Landscape Architecture at the Helsinki University of Technology, writes in her criticism of the thinking behind celebrated national landscapes.[8]

The level of universality for criteria is a problem. What kinds of concrete things are presented by the aforementioned three: unity, complexity, and intensity? In what ways, both valuable and worthless, can they be achieved, and should they be considered to be worth achieving? The answer must be sought from a lower, more differentiated level, where adjectives familiar from descriptions of nature are used, such as *great*, *sublime*, *mighty*, *grand* or *balanced*, or certain words describing the effect caused, such as *touching*, *unforgettable* or *uplifting*. These should be reducible to "measurable" properties by reasoning, and thus we come quite close to the language used by a researcher working from the natural sciences. The gap between these two separate cultures and ways of talking isn't as impossible to bridge as it seemed at first.

There is yet another mode of speech, one that deviates from both natural sciences oriented and humanities-oriented language, both of which belong to the sphere of scientific research and scholarship. This third mode is art. Essayistic language approaches and touches it. From the point of view of science, the essayistic-literary way of talking is a precursor or, idealistically, a higher level of discussion, since it uses multiple meanings and loose associations, and because it appeals to emotions and sensations that are more difficult to verify than scientific meanings. The language of science should be more unequivocal and logical; it should be built on knowledge and research that has been tested and peer reviewed by the academic community; and it should also improve on that knowledge but also add to it, for the ideal of science and scholarship is the accumulation of results along with self-improvement.

Art, even exploratory art, distances itself from all this. Free art creates imagined, independent worlds; tendency art, such as the exhibition titled in Finnish *Sovitus* ('*Reconciliation*'), presented at the slopes of Koli in the summer of 2000, participates quite concretely in the discussion about the future of the area and its inhabitants.

4. Not speaking

The basic aesthetic case is not so much one of speaking as it is of someone inspecting an object in peace and with concentration, contemplating, and cutting off the surrounding world. What happens in one's mind: Is one looking for interpretations for the object? Is one experiencing strong sensations? Or have his thoughts traveled to his own life through unexpected associations? Information on this can only be had by asking, as the researchers of aesthetic sensation have shown. Even then, there are factors contributing to uncertainty: lying, poor command of the language of criticism, and joking. It is clear that an inner life can be rich without outward signs to display it, such as seriousness, emotionality, or laughter, or that the signs can be seen in action: repeatedly seeking out exhibitions or scenic points, inspecting a landscape for a long time, photographing the object, and resting at it. Kurt Vonnegut remembers, from a trip to Koli arranged by his Finnish publisher, the taste of frozen blueberries, which he later mentions in an interview published as the preface to his work *Fates Worse than Death*.^[9]

Even this is not all. Snowboarders begin their descent from the front of the Koli hotel. Downhill skiers circulate between the hill and the ski lift. Rock climbers find a suitable precipice for their hobby. Hikers and campers cover distance on rough terrain and on paths, and drivers and cyclists stop by Koli on their holiday trips. Depictions and descriptions of this kind of brisk, vivacious, and even blustering life can already be found in travel brochures. They no longer only show people sitting on top of Koli, looking over the Lake Pielinen, and posing for the camera in front of a well-known national landscape.

The difference between contemplative and active enjoyment of the landscape is roughly a question of differences of generation, age, and perhaps gender. It is the pride and delight of physical ability, skill, and success coming to exist alongside intellectual and spiritual pleasure. It is reminiscent of canoeing the rapids, going on and on downstream, trying to navigate the rapids without capsizing. It is difficult to come up with an explanation other than the sensation of survival brought on by success.

Traditional travel on Koli has been built primarily on the experience of the contemplative traveler who, at most, does a little cross-country skiing, traditional slalom, or hiking. In more active forms of travel, especially using the ski lifts those activities demand, and the tears and fissures in the forest covering that are cut out to accommodate them, a danger has justifiably been seen. Koli quite simply cannot, without difficult compromises, be adapted for both of these kinds of traveler. One kind comes to Koli as into a holy place, a church; the other wants excitement and action.

In this dilemma, a good hundred years since Aho, the writer who looked to the wild east and to the cultivated west, I see the dualistic symbolic nature of Koli. It is in one sense a comparably Grand Canyon-like, halting, silencing, eternal Koli; in the other, a Koli full of hubbub and happening. This is a modern visage of Janus, in Koli as well as in Finland and the world.

Endnotes

[1] Reino Kalliola, "Koli," in *Luonto sydämellä. Kirjoitelmia ja puheita 1930 B 1977* [Nature at Heart. Writings and Speeches 1930 - 1977] (Helsinki, Porvoo: WSOY, 1978), pp. 171-174; ref. on 174. Article first published 1944.

[2] Juhani Aho, "Kauniita näköaloja Suomessa, I. Kolivaara" [Beautiful Views in Finland: I. Koli Mountain.] *Uusi Kuvalehti*, 29 (1893).

[3] Arthur C. Danto, "Introduction: Artphilohistocritisophory Today," in *Encounters & Reflections. Art in the Historical Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), pp. 3-11; ref. on 7-8.

[4] Edward O. Wilson, "Introduction: Life is a Narrative" in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2001*, ed. Edward O. Wilson (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), pp. xiii-xx; ref. on xviii-xx.

[5] Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1958), p. 462.

[6] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 224.

[7] Helen Knight, "The Use of 'Good' in Aesthetic Judgments," in *Aesthetics and Language*, ed. William Elton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), pp. 147-160; ref. on 159. Essay first published 1949.

[8] Maija Rautamäki, "Kansallismaisema B kulttuurimaisema" [National Landscape B Cultural Landscape] in *SMAFLA, vuosikirja 1992 B 1993* [The Finnish Association of Landscape Architects, Yearbook 1992 B 1993] (Helsinki: Suomen maisema-arkkitehdit, 1992), pp. 50-59; ref. on 53.

[9] Kurt Vonnegut, "Preface. Vonnegut's responses to questions from the British publication, *Weekly Guardian*," in Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death. An Autobiographical Collage of the 1980s* (New York: Putnam, 1991).

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