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Landscapes of Human Experience

Martin Seel

Abstract

This essay begins with some observations concerning the interaction between nature and art. Relying on these reflections, in the second part experience of landscape will be interpreted as a model for the human stance within the natural as well as the historical world. In the third part some consequences for an ethics and politics of saving the conditions for individual as well as social well-being will be drawn.

Key Words

aesthetics, the arts, ecological destruction, environmental ethics, landscape, natural beauty, nature, relationship between nature and art

1. Dialogues between art and nature

A main source of experiencing and reflecting the delicate balances between human nature and nature in general has always been and still is the complex interrelations between art and nature. To shed light on the role of nature in these relations, let me begin with the slightly altered first half of the first sentence of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning nature is self-evident anymore."^[1]

For a long time now, many have realized that we are living in an era of increasingly frequent and severe ecological crises.

But this awareness has a peculiar characteristic. With each menacing report it flames up anew, only soon thereafter to subside back into a restless dozing. Yet there are more than enough disquieting circumstances that would be suitable for taking an unblinking look at the uncertain future of human as well as non-human nature.

The most sobering and obdurate fact is that nature cannot be destroyed. Human beings are not the center, crown, or guarantor of nature. They may nourish or exploit it, but they cannot take over its direction. If mankind were to fully destroy its own living conditions, what would remain would be nature, which wins every competition with it. A second concomitant fact is that alterations in nature belong to its very nature. The developments of industrial culture bring about changes in these alterations, accelerating them or imparting another direction to them, but they remain subject to its dynamic. We are a factor in the history of nature even where we set out to modify our genetic program. The third fact consists in the recognition that, under current conditions, local effects have a global impact in many cases. The emissions increasing throughout the world, the melting of the polar icecaps, the flooding of coastal areas, the wasteful use of water, the pollution of the oceans, the cutting down of atrophying forests, the erosion of soil—all these factors add up to an alteration of the landscape, which no nation-state can slow down on its own, not to speak of offering a cure. Social, political, and military confrontations over the distribution of

land, air, and resources are the foreseeable consequence. The politics of nature have become the domestic politics of the world, that is, they have become a matter of global justice.

A fourth irritating circumstance consists in the fact that the appearances of nature often continue to maintain their aesthetic fascination when their impact has become threatening or overwhelming. Our sensory grasp is unable to measure sufficiently the quality of external nature. It could be that we perish in a spectacle of cruel beauty. This suggests the fifth and, from a practical point of view, pivotal fact that there does not exist an objective, solely decisive indicator with regard to the treatment of nature. Our relationship to outer and inner (that is, human) nature is dependent upon a complex consideration of what we *intend* to undertake with our knowledge about the condition of the earth, and accordingly how the further shaping of the human life-form is supposed to look.

Clear-sighted policies with regard to nature will have to be concerned less with *physical* nature, in spite of the importance of the investigations which provide us with information about the ecology of the planet. The challenge lies much more in the protection of a *physiological* nature which sustains our own bodily organism, just as it does those of animal and vegetable life forms with which we are required to live in symbiosis and synergy for good or for evil. Because the conditions of our life are at stake, it is not only our life that is at stake.

The nature on which this depends is not an *object* which we can dominate to a greater or lesser extent, not a *counterpart* to which we can more or less correspond, not even an *environment* in which we have allowed much to become wrecked and that we are now desperately trying to repair. Instead, nature is the *global space* in which cultures and societies will remain capable of development or will stiffen in agony. For this space humanity, represented above all by the rich industrial nations, has a responsibility which it is presently failing to meet because it manages its economies without giving consideration to losses. The protection of nature is a protection from us ourselves, for the sake of us ourselves, from the neglect and dissipation with which we disregard our own living sphere.

But what do these uncomfortable reminders have to do with art, as indicated in my opening statement? A great deal, because they have to do with *its* discomfiting powers. There, where especially some of the more recent visual arts concern themselves with the phenomena of nature, the recent arts fathom the manifold disturbances of the modern relationship *to* and understanding *of* nature by means of unsettling presentations. Art here experiments with *its* forms in order to investigate those of nature. It establishes references to nature while being constantly overcome by doubt as to what it is in fact referring to.

"It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore...", the original first half of the opening sentence of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*,^[2] belongs together with my alteration (which replaced the term 'art' with the term 'nature'). That both versions of this sentence are interrelated, however, still is far from being self-evident.

From antiquity well into modern times, thinking about the interconnection between art and nature was defined by hierarchical concepts. "First nature was the model, then it became a replica of art; thus one could summarize a long history of their relationship in a single sentence.^[3] At first it was the role of the artist in shaping his work to orient himself with regard to the masterful works of nature, and hence with regard to the laws of an overarching cosmic order or the genius of a divine creator. Ever since the Renaissance, but especially since the end of the eighteenth century, an anthropocentric reversal of this normative order was initiated that was completed with verve in the nineteenth century.

Oscar Wilde simply gave striking expression to this turnaround when he laconically observed that "life imitates art much more than art imitates life." Connected to this was a direct reversal of the traditional doctrine of imitation. For Wilde asserted "that external nature also imitates art. The only effects that she can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings. This is the secret of nature's charm, as well as the explanation of nature's weakness."^[4]

Only recently, this hierarchical mode of thinking has begun to fade. Since the final third of the twentieth century, the inner yet always delicate and dynamic, complicity between art and nature was recognized more and more. This was impelled by diverse developments in artistic production and accompanied by increasingly sensitive theoretical reflection. From a contemporary perspective one must take into account that the reversal of the imitation *topos* falls short of the dialectic between natural becoming and artistic creating to no less a degree than does its original version. Misleading oppositions of this type nonetheless continue to be mirrored in many theoretical debates concerning what is actually to be understood by the term 'nature.' Ultimately everything is nature, so runs the naturalistic thesis. Everything is basically culture, so runs the culturalist riposte. But however these extreme positions are formulated and substantiated in individual instances, they miss the mark of the correlation which they grandly claim to explain. For the relationship between nature and culture cannot be understood by someone who is not capable of comprehending their infinite interweavings. All comprehension of nature is a cultural product, just as all cultural production is always dependent upon a performance of natural forces. Also the difference between nature and culture, including the fascination, strangeness, and endangerment contained within their coexistence, arises out of this complex connectedness. It is precisely the arts and maybe, above all, the visual arts, perhaps more than any theory, that are qualified to plumb the depths of these interrelationships. One could almost say that it is one of their fundamental missions to issue a reminder that we cannot allow ourselves to take things too lightly or too easily with regard to our cultural nature.

Art's recent history offers extensive evidence for an underlying adaptation of art to nature. The appearance of many works emancipates art from the fixation on an unambiguous image of familiar figures from the external world. "The more strictly the works of art refrain from natural proliferation and the imitation

of nature, the more closely the successful ones approach nature."^[5] This sentence by Adorno could be used as a motto for the uncovering of a central thread running through the visual arts of the last two centuries. Just think of the swift change from an imitation of a *natura naturata* to the pictorial adaptation of the forces of a *natura naturans* or, more recently, of the appropriation of natural configurations in the work of artists like Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Andreas Gursky, Beate Gütschow, or Tacita Dean, not to speak of the presence of urban and rural landscapes in films such as *Through the Olive Trees*, *Taste of Cherry*, or *Five* by Abbas Kiarostami.

However, the classical formulation of the reciprocal relationship between aesthetic nature and art was already found quite some time earlier. In §45 of his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* from 1790, Immanuel Kant wrote: "Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature."^[6] What Kant is concerned with here, already back then, is the resolution of the question as to what serves as the model for aesthetic perception and production: free nature or free art. Kant's solution lies in the thesis of a *double exemplariness* of nature for art and of art for nature. The presence of aesthetically perceived nature is a model for the inner vitality of the work of art; the imagination of the work of art, on the other hand, is at least one model for an intensive perception of nature. The reciprocal fecundation of art and aesthetic nature arises only when nature, among other things, can be perceived *as* successful art and when art, among other things, can be perceived *as* free nature, without the difference between art and nature being extinguished. It is neither nature perceived in the appearance of art nor art perceived in the appearance of nature that Kant establishes as the norm of an unrestrained aesthetic consciousness, but rather a *dialogue* between art and nature. This, of course, is always *our* dialogue. It is accomplished in both the production and the reception of art, as soon as we begin to sense how little self-evident our own nature actually is to us.

2. The model of landscape

In the diversity of their genres and forms, especially the visual arts give rise to quite different reactions to our reactions with regard to nature. Whether we think of painting, photography, sculpture, film, or video, however much these genres might make subliminal or overt deals with each other, or whether it is installations that integrate many of these genres into their own structures, they all allow themselves to become uneasy at the uncertain and vulnerable relationship that is maintained by contemporary societies and cultures to the natural aspect of their existence. That which impels the encounter between art and its counterpart is accordingly both the individual and the collective self-relationship of contemporary mankind that, at every random corner of the world and in the contemplation of each individual artificial or untreated object, knows itself to be situated in the middle of a global play of comprehensive social and natural forces. Where artistic shaping stages this play of forces in one way or another, it uses its techniques to investigate the *landscape character* of our relationships to nature, aspects of the circumstance that, in our various

activities, we move within realms that we know constantly exceed the horizon of our perceptual capabilities.

In the classical conception, landscape is that zone that is the culmination of the experience of natural beauty. But the experience of landscape is in no way limited to natural settings which are predominantly untouched or staged in the manner of parks. It can open frequently to an envisioning of domesticated and urban districts. In any case, we should remind ourselves that almost all landscapes today, even those on the fringes of civilization, are never purely nature but always also, even if to quite different degrees, *alloys* of nature and culture. At the same time, however, the structure of every landscape, even of those in the space of a large city, is also always a state and event of nature. Each one, however it may be marked and altered by the works of mankind, offers to the aesthetic sense an essentially unguided play of abundance and transformation, just as in predominantly untouched nature. (This is why one could bluntly say that nature is the nature of landscape.^[7]) It is precisely this reciprocal fecundation of nature by culture and of culture by nature in the configuration of landscape areas that allows us to conceive the experience of them as a theoretical model not only for the dialogue between nature and art but also for the interaction between natural and human flourishing in general.

The space of a landscape exists, like almost every space, together with a variety of objects *in* this space. What is fundamental for the experience of a space as landscape, however, is not the phenomenal encounter of individual or multiple objects, but instead the experience of being *under and amid* all of these objects: in their proximity and distance, in their constricting or liberating, eloquent, or dumb presence.

Whoever finds him or herself to be within such an abundance of appearances, for her or him there is *no middle* from which a fixed order of these appearances could be discerned. The space of the landscape *surrounds* the perceiving persons; it *reshapes* their location. Therefore, perceivers are in no way observers in command of a panoramic overview (which, on the contrary, is a common form of blindness to landscapes). Instead they are bodily subjects who sense themselves to be receptive and vulnerable beings amid a spatial occurrence. Thus the perception of landscape is not solely the experiencing of the existence and transformation of many things in a space. It is the experience of a *happening space*: the experience of what it is to be under and amid a multiform appearing of spatial shapes.

This occurrence, to be sure, can only take place in an extensive space. Its reality begins there where a space steps *out of its dimension* in the sense that its measurements cannot be comprehended by those who find themselves within it. The space of a landscape has neither edge nor border; it ends at a horizon: there where the contours, forms and delimitations become diffuse, or there where, in the case of a labyrinthine city, it palpably extends further, without it being possible to comprehend these extensions from one's own standpoint. Landscapes are thus spaces that can be neither surveyed nor covered. In the shifting of their horizons, they go past our own horizon.

It is only with this vertical and horizontal incompleteness that the space of a landscape opens up. This incompleteness always implies an openness on the side of subjects who conduct themselves in a certain manner to the space of their surroundings. Ultimately, the entire sense of entering landscapes in a mode of aesthetic awareness lies in the fact that in them we arrive from *outside*: into a simultaneously *real* and *metaphorical* outside. This outside is real because we depart from our own four walls, in fact from all clear and straightforward spatial coordinates. However, this is only a necessary, but in itself not sufficient, precondition for the experience of landscape. For an expansive space extending in all directions is, in its own terms, simply a *potential* site for the aesthetic awareness of a given landscape. There only occurs an *actual* experience of landscape when, in the real exterior, we also attain a *metaphorical exterior* when we loosen the attachment to the pragmatic orientations that define our normal behavior in space; when we no longer move through this space with specified goals but instead maintain an openness for the irregular presence of that extensive space itself. However we attempt to make such presences *possible* through forms of architecture and the design and preservation of landscape in city and nature, its presence exceeds all acts of making.

In the experience of landscapes, in other words, wherever it may occur, there resonates a feeling of the connectedness with nature in all cultural practice, in all social organization, and with it, in all technology. Inherent to this experience is a seed of the affirmation of the borders of all culture and thereby at least a trace of ecological humility. For however limited periods of time, it ushers us out of our imprisonment within the conviction that, for the sake of our welfare, we ought to be more and more able to dominate our inner and outer nature.

Even where its counterpart is not primarily a natural landscape, it guides us into the open dimension of our nature-bound, historical world.

The interaction between art and nature here once again becomes evident. Just as in the unchained experience of landscape, the arts confront us with the fact that all far-sightedness, no matter how extensive, succumbs to a blurriness which is only the flip side of our clarity. Art refuses an overview most emphatically where we deem ourselves to have a full view. It entices us to peer into the *claire-obscur* of our knowledge. It endeavors to awaken us from the dogmatic slumber with which the comfort of the industrialized world repeatedly lulls its prosperous inhabitants. Along the path of a disturbance of our world-views, it interrupts all self-certain handling of the difference between nature and culture.

Not only nature proceeds past our horizon; art as well can transcend it. In the best cases, it allows us to see our own blindness.

3. Landscapes of living

These observations lead to the point where the model of landscape achieves its ethical and political relevance. The aesthetic attraction of landscapes, and paradigmatically those of nature, enfold and deploy a contingent life of ever-changing forms, which in their synaesthetic simultaneity and succession

enables those who encounter them a unique mode of freedom. Especially within the realm of nature, a permanent process of evolving and dissolving, appearing and disappearing takes place. Here it becomes possible to loosen our personal and cultural fixations and obsessions. Here it becomes possible to step into non-instrumental relation to our environment. Here it becomes possible to voluntarily let our selves be captured by what we cannot sensibly wish to capture. This, on the one hand, implies an *affirmative awareness* of the limits of our mastery of our selves and world. This experience, on the other hand, reminds us of what it means to be a *temporary inhabitant* in a natural, cultural, social, and historical world. Moreover, this encounter can serve as a paradigmatic scene for what *genuine*, that is, undistorted and non-destructive *prosperity* of human societies, means: to live in a political environment in which natural as well as human flourishing is welcome.

From this sketch a number of ethical and political consequences can be drawn. First, the still primarily aesthetic moral lies in the very appreciation of the processes of natural unfolding itself, traditionally praised as the realm of natural beauty. However, we should avoid any restrictive understanding of the term 'beauty' here. To experience the world in clear proportion *or* in clear disproportion to one's own possibilities is not what is truly compelling. Rather, to be aware of the disharmonious in the harmonious and to the harmonious in the disharmonious is what is compelling. There is no beauty that soothes without irritating. No sublimity that unsettles without liberating can be elevating.^[8] Therefore, natural beauty as well should be conceived of along the lines offered by the model of the experience of landscape.

The second moral arises from the assumption that in the existence of areas of more or less vivid natural environments there lies a genuine possibility of human self-exploration. What follows here is a general pragmatic rule for the conduct of the individual and the collective. Regardless of how one might otherwise live, the conscious encounter with zones of (more or less) contingent natural growing is valuable for all, as it frees one in relation to one's own form of life. As an indispensable corrective of individual and collective orientations or ideals, natural beauty constitutes a specific dimension of human well-being.

The third, now strictly moral and political consequence follows almost directly from this much weaker perspective. If a prospering nature establishes a genuine occasion of human well-being, then the preservation of this condition is part of the general respect for persons. Thus, the protection and recreation of spaces of vivid natural development become a norm of universal morality. The ethics of nature therefore does not need to presuppose a right of nature *vis-à-vis* humanity in order to justify a strong obligation to protect the environment. More modestly, it can simply assert that the right to have access to more or less undistorted nature is one among the human rights.

The meaning of this right (and its corresponding duties) becomes clearer when we finally consider the consequences of its violation. Here, the moral and political scandal lies not so

much or not only in the destruction of a necessary *precondition* of a bearable life for all, but rather in the destruction of a universal *form* of flourishing human existence.

The destruction or preclusion of natural beauty liquidates non-instrumental relations with nature in the human life-world. As such, it leads to a destruction of positive contingency, realized freedom, and fulfilled time. It is the destruction of a special and irreplaceable domain of the human world. Just as there is *no life* for humanity without nature as a regenerative means of subsistence and no at least *bearable life* without physiological nature as an intact environment for human as well as non-human beings, so too the *quality* of human life is greatly impoverished without areas of an accommodating nature.[9]

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Endnotes

[1] The original text is: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore." Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p.1.

[2] *Ibid.* In the second half of the sentence, Adorno adds: "not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist."

[3] Cf. Martin Seel, *Eine Ästhetik der Natur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) esp. pp. 11-33 and 163-178.

[4] Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Ware: Wordsworth Library Collection, 2007), pp. 919-944; ref. on 943.

[5] Adorno, p. 120.

[6] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) p. 185.

[7] Cf. Seel, pp. 220-233, esp. p. 233.

[8] For a discussion of the intimate relations between beauty and sublimity *vis-à-vis* nature see Seel, pp. 59-62, 107-111, 169-172.

[9] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of *Contemporary Aesthetics* for helpful comments and suggestions.

