

# Contemporary Aesthetics

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## Short Notes

Editorial Office

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## Short Notes

*Contemporary Aesthetics* is trying something new! Welcome to our section for shorter, more targeted pieces of current interest in aesthetics and philosophy of art. This section consists of submissions of 300-800 words that offer an opportunity for discussions that are more targeted and focused than the regular articles. They might offer points of view on topics such as modes of appreciation of environment or of a theater performance, or an insight gained from an essay or book. Short Notes should be of general interest and relevance to *CA* readers whose disciplinary and cultural backgrounds are diverse. With the exception of discussions of books or articles, Short Notes do not require citations.

Short Notes should be submitted following the guidelines on submissions accessible from our Home Page and will be refereed. Like papers, Notes will be published in the order accepted with most recent Notes appearing at the top. The Short Notes section is being inaugurated as a trial in the current Volume 14 (2016). We invite your submissions.

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## Thoughts On the Aesthetics of Water

*Tom Baugh*

Water. There is a lot of it around. It may not always be in the form that we want, nor in the location where we need it. But there is a lot of it, Three-quarters of the surface of Earth is covered with water. Ninety-eight percent of our body is composed of water.

Water also features largely in our appreciation of nature. Rivers and streams, seashores and lakes...water. The aesthetic use of water plays a role in many cultures in Asia and West Asia and less largely in Western cultures. Water occurs in spiritual and religious rituals from the Mikva of Judaism to the Baptism of Christianity and decorative water features are a frequent component of public and private sites. It may be that the oldest recorded water gardens, or perhaps 'water features,' were in what is called the Cradle of Civilization in Mesopotamia millennia ago. The idea either spread rapidly or occurred almost simultaneously involving Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, China, India, Japan, Rome, Persia and a number of other places among the evolving cultures of Earth.

Other than the obvious need that we have for water to sustain life, what is it that we look for in these waters of Earth. Aesthetically, what do we see or hear, or feel in quiet pools, tumbling streams, or crashing waves along a shore? I doubt that there is anything in the environment that attracts me more quickly or engages my attention and fixes me so raptly, than a pool of water. The context doesn't even seem to matter much. A pool alongside a path through the woods or bubbling

from sandy desert soil in the natural environment or a decorative water feature in the built environment, are like magnets pulling me to them and through them and into them.

Is it only water as a liquid that claims our attention? Water in its many forms has a unique ability to redefine its self and its aesthetic aspects. In winter, water oozing from seeps and springs, that once dripped from rocky faces, becomes translucent steps of icy stalagmites. Perhaps the most fascinating redefinition occurs when the limbs and twigs of winter grey trees and shrubs become coated with shimmering and often translucent crystal coatings.

Water has a special tactile quality...an aesthetic of touch; the feel of water pouring through the fingers or caressing some muscles at the end of a long, hard day. The various sounds of water have a special quality. For example, the sounds of moving water evoke a spiritual and a psychological sense. Recorded sounds of water are used to induce relaxation, a deep sense of peace, and healing.

It is easy to take water for granted unless, like me, you were raised in a very dry place where you don't take water for granted...not even a tiny trickle or a stagnant pool. Even in a place literally overflowing with water some places are special. For example, there is a small stream only a few miles from our home. Not much more than a trickle, this stream wanders down a canyon beside a trail. There is one place along the trail where I always stop to take a closer look at the stream. At this spot the stream flows into a quiet, shallow pool. The pool is surrounded by lush grass and framed by a fallen log. I'm not sure what it is about this spot that grabs my attention. I suspect it might be something about the peace that I feel here and, possibly, the harmony with which Nature has arranged the elements of the place. I think most of us seek these special places in our lives, at least those of us who have some sense of the wild and the beauty in Nature.

Tom Baugh  
[springmountain1@att.net](mailto:springmountain1@att.net)

Chair, Environmental Aesthetics Study Group

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### **Explication of Events and Dialogues in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot***

*Erick Verran*

#### **1. Argument**

Samuel Beckett's once spurned existential tragicomedy *Waiting for Godot* has received its critical due some order of magnitude over. Its dialogical prose withstands the regular prod and likely occasions enough these each semester to rival Andrew Marvell. However, the play's more mundane articles continue to elude the attention of commentators, and I suspect this variety of neglect peculiar to Beckett alone. Much allusive pleasantries abound yet a missing watch is consigned to the jurisdiction of metaphor (viz., lost time). But where did

it go?—the question is simply not brought up.

Irish literary critic Vivian Mercier's well-known, in fact laudatory summation, "[H]e has written a play in which nothing happens, twice," of course concedes *things happen*. Rather, Mercier's contention is that nothing especially occurs and, unless one is willing to drape grander tableaux of myth upon the text, I find myself in agreement. Indeed the miracle is that stage direction, in conjunction with minute passages of speech, too clearly spells out the humdrum goings-on contained between its acts. Meanwhile, evidence planted before the reader is passed over and not comprehended.

Dutifully intending to keep an ironic eye out for the playwright's mirth risks evading dirty potholes of detail. Such an approach to texts seems to me entirely suitable to fiction, which superficially delights in metaphysical themes of damnation and self-knowledge, the building blocks of who, what, and where almost without exception laid neatly before us and speedily traversed. In this drama there is no purposeful obfuscation nor symbol where none intended. Ultimately, it is all too loathsome an endorsement of *l'esprit poétique* to scratch one's head in flattering ponder, pleased at least for having taken part in the collective puzzlement.

It is exactly because the reader is accustomed to declaring comprehension of a tale upon breaching its metonymic stratum that he or she fails to address baser articles, such as Estragon's dreams and Vladimir's bladder. Gaining the symbolic high ground typically indicates one has finished with plot, having climbed by aid of its sequence of broad rungs. Because Beckett's literature *begins* with the symbolic, readers are enabled to browse as if allegory were a skin stretched over rough incident, on which otherwise we snag and fight for understanding. Suffice it to say this primacy of parable in *Waiting for Godot* dissuades investigation, so you believe yourself underground when but kneeling in ash.

## 2. Questions

*Who beats Estragon?*

Vladimir's urinary incontinence necessitates sleepwalking to relieve himself. He tramples Estragon in doing so and refuses knowledge of his dreams lest the tormentor be known.

ESTRAGON. Who am I to tell my private nightmares to if I can't tell them to you?

VLADIMIR. Let them remain private. You know I can't bear that.[1]

POZZO. Help!

ESTRAGON. And suppose we gave him a good beating, the two of us.

VLADIMIR. You mean if we fell on him in his sleep?[2]

*Who is Godot?*

A resultant neologism of the double misapprehension of "Pozzo." Immigrant farmers, Vladimir and Estragon seek employment with Pozzo. Unfortunately he has forgotten their appointment.

POZZO. I present myself: Pozzo.

ESTRAGON. He said Godot.

VLADIMIR. (*conciliating*). I once knew a family called Gozzo.

POZZO. Waiting? So you were waiting for him?

VLADIMIR. Well you see—

POZZO. Here? On my land?[3]

*Has time stopped?*

An immobile stage light is mistaken for the sun. Given the material luxury of timekeeping a clock remains the source of Pozzo's authority.

VLADIMIR. Time has stopped.

POZZO. (*cuddling his watch to his ear*). Don't you believe it, Sir, don't you believe it.[4]

*Silence. Vladimir and Estragon scrutinize the sunset.*

VLADIMIR. Anyway it hasn't moved.[5]

*What happens to Pozzo's watch?*

It is concealed beneath Lucky's hat inadvertently and destroyed. Beckett's delight of Vaudevillian irony is obvious here.

POZZO. Give me that! (*He snatches the hat from Vladimir, throws it on the ground, tramples on it.*)

POZZO. [W]hat have I done with my watch? . . . (*He searches on the ground, Vladimir and Estragon likewise. Pozzo turns over with his foot the remains of Lucky's hat.*) Well now isn't that just—[6]

*What about the boy?*

Eavesdropping the jumble of names and other conversation from off-stage this character's bogus account substantiates a Godot, tragically perpetuating the tramps' plight.

ESTRAGON. How long have you been here?

BOY. A good while, Sir.

BOY. (*in a rush*). Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow.[7]

LUCKY. Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua[8]

VLADIMIR. (*softly*). Has he a beard, Mr. Godot?

BOY. Yes Sir.

VLADIMIR. Fair or . . . (*he hesitates*) . . . or black?

BOY. I think it's white, Sir.[9]

Erick Verran  
[everran9@gmail.com](mailto:everran9@gmail.com)

Erick Verran is a freelance copywriter and poet. He lives in Boston.

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## Endnotes

[1] Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), pp. 10-11; [2] p. 90; [3] pp. 19-20; [4] p. 37; [5] p. 98; [6] pp. 48-49; [7] pp. 53-55; [8] p. 45; [9] p. 106.

The following group of Short Notes on environmental aesthetics was guest-edited by Tom Baugh.

## Thoughts on a Holographic Aesthetics of Nature

*Tom Baugh*

Things change and what was once considered suitable material for aesthetic appreciation now has a lot of company. Changes in subject matter have been accompanied by new models and even new methods for assessing that subject matter. Over the past century Aesthetics has been subject of studies in sensation and perception and, more recently cognition and consciousness. And over the past several decades, the development of science and technology has presented a number of challenges to Aesthetics. For example, did the displays at the Lumiere London Light Festival represent art, artifice, both or do we or should we care?

Since the mid-part of the last century Environmental Aesthetics has evolved as a subdiscipline of Philosophy facing the same challenges of inclusiveness and exclusiveness as the broader discipline. The rapid development of the live sciences and environmental studies enhanced by technology present beauty in new and different ways. In this regard, I have suggested that the science of Ecology allows for the development of a multidimensional perception of the aesthetics of living systems. Increasing experience with living systems thus helps develop a more holographic perception of the beauty of 'nature' subjects. (The term holographic as used here does not refer to a laser generated three dimensional image but rather is adapted and adopted to refer to a condition of perception (and cognition) that views nature as multidimensional). In this same regard, consider the beauty of W.L. Kubiena's soil profile illustrations (<http://blogs.agu.org/terracentral/2015/06/14/art-in-science-kubienas-soil-profiles-in-watercolors/>) where the roots of a plant penetrate the substrate and its leaves reach for the sky.

Kubiena's color renderings are beautiful but two-dimensional. Think for a moment how the view would change if you could see 'into' the prints, into the third dimension of space where a holographic image emerges...the roots become round, the grains of soil are increasingly granular. We come closer to holographic perceptions with the Cosmic Spider Web sculptures of Tomas Saraceno (<http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/enter-the-cosmic-spiderweb-sculptures-of-tomas-saraceno>). In these sculptures, living spiders create three dimensional webs in transparent cubes. These webs are not static creations but develop over time thus adding a fourth dimension to the

hologram. The evolving tools of virtual reality may also provide a possible vehicle for similar immersion in and appreciation of the beauty of living systems.

Think about this as if you were looking into a round, clear plastic cylinder, perhaps a cylindrical aquarium or terrarium stretching floor to ceiling a crystal tube without distortion. The cylinder descends into the sand of a pond or lagoon. Your eyes move upward passing the roots of aquatic vegetation such as seagrasses or rushes and then up the stalks, through the water into the air above where a mollusk or a damselfly rests near the top of one of the stalks. All of this in three dimensions with small fish darting about and among the stalks, snails crawling along the stalks and small insects or crustaceans buried in the muck below.

Can we see all of these things at a glance? No. But those of us who have worked with these living habitats and systems can see them in our mind's eye. We're immersed in them. They surround and envelop us. Ecologists who work in a watery environment, with snorkel and mask or SCUBA, may experience the beauty of these living holograms, more than others, just as those trained in art appreciation or architecture are aesthetically involved with a painting or building.

A holographic appreciation of the beauty of nature helps develop an aesthetic appreciation that includes an understanding of nature in depth, as living systems, and in process with the dimensions of time and motion. In these holograms beauty is, indeed, more than surficial. As Adorno (1997) tells us "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore." As we shall see in the following Notes, things change.

Tom Baugh

[Springmountain1@att.net](mailto:Springmountain1@att.net)

Convener, Environmental Aesthetics Study Group

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#### **Reference**

T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p. 1

### **Using Soundscape Ecology in Design and Function**

*Wieteke Holthuijzen*

Although broadly defined, environmental aesthetics tends to focus on the aesthetic value of human and human-influenced systems in addition to that of natural systems. It places strong emphasis on physical manifestations, often analyzing the design and function of structures. Sound, however, is rarely identified as a critical component of an aesthetic analysis. This short note examines soundscape ecology—an emerging discipline in ecology—and its strong ties and potential contributions to environmental aesthetics.

Soundscape ecology, as put forth by Pijanowski et al. in 2011, broadens the field of bioacoustics to include not only the study of biophony (sounds created by organisms), but also geophony

(nonbiological, ambient sounds such as wind, storms, rain, and rivers) and anthrophony (sounds caused by humans and human-related activity)—collectively referred to as the “soundscape” of a given landscape. Pijanowski suggests that “processes occurring within landscapes can be tightly linked to and reflected in patterns of sounds in landscapes.” Thus, the soundscape provides a wealth of information about a particular landscape. In addition, its acoustic patterns over various spatial and temporal scales can be used to evaluate its state or processes that transpire therein. For instance, Bernie Krause used sound as a proxy to determine ecosystem health through his underwater recordings of coral reef ecosystems in Fiji before and after bleaching events. Sound recordings can also serve as a (rough) index of biological diversity, in which a species’ presence is determined by its recorded vocalization(s).

The interactions between the soundscape and the organisms that inhabit a landscape can be quite complex and unexpected. For example, if a threat is perceived, an individual organism may sound an alarm to alert its kin and mate. Such calls can also be eavesdropped upon and shared by other species so they can take appropriate action. In human influenced systems with “noisy” soundscapes, anthrophony may mask such alarm calls and inhibit them from being communicated to specific audiences. This, too, is the focus of soundscape ecology: how anthropogenic sounds affect soundscape function and composition, how soundscapes differ with land-use patterns, and how species coordinate communication and vocalizations across different landscapes. The results of this research complements other ecological information and helps to create more effective and holistic approaches to conservation.

Beyond “natural” systems, sound is an important component of our day-to-day lives and has an explicit aesthetic value. Moreover, sounds influence our perception of our environment and direct—to some extent—our behavior. For example, relaxing music in airports and hospitals induces feelings of calmness and comfort, yet upbeat music can make consumers buy more products in a grocery store. On the other hand, white noise pumped into office settings shields office workers from unwanted distractions. Just as in more natural settings, the soundscape provides us with much information about a certain location.

Some structures are specifically designed around sound. For instance, theaters and concert halls are constructed in such a way that sound emanating from the stage is amplified and reflected back to the audience. Other structures inhibit sound, as seen (or heard) through sound walls along busy motorways that reduce (unpleasant) noise. This then begs the question—what message should sound convey?

With the construction of transportation networks, office buildings, neighborhoods, and more, we ought to evaluate these collective effects on the soundscape. While this is done to a certain extent by federal and state agencies, sound is considered only within basic and limited measures such as frequency (pitch) and amplitude (loudness). For example, strict regulations by the Federal Aviation Administration that

ban all supersonic flight by aircraft over the United States represent an intersection between soundscape ecology and environmental aesthetics. After all, we may not want sonic booms going off overhead in our neighborhoods. But this does make the question of sound's aesthetic nature salient—and what constitutes the difference between sound and noise (likely non-aesthetic)? And why?

We must think of sound as part of the structure or environment in question and also as a product. Just as we analyze the visual aesthetic nature and value of a structure and its function, we must consider sound as an equal factor. For instance, we might ask what sounds (or noise) a structure will produce. Will the sounds produced (before, during, and after construction) mask the surrounding soundscape? Will we need to mitigate for potential negative impacts? How will we do that?

And so, soundscape ecology invites us to take sound into consideration and broaden the field of environmental aesthetics. After all, our environment is one of interaction and complexity. In turn, a greater awareness of soundscapes in human systems may ultimately lead to more acoustically aesthetic and sound designs of structures and environments.

Wieteke Holthuijzen  
[wholthuijzen@gmail.com](mailto:wholthuijzen@gmail.com)  
University of Idaho

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#### **Reference**

B.C. Pijanowski, et al., "Soundscape Ecology: The Science of Sound in the Landscape," *BioScience*, 61(3), (2011), 203-216. DOI: 10.1525/bio.2011.61.3.6.

#### **From Things to Relationships: Architecture of the Ecological Mind**

*Lejla Vujicic*

Architecture, as a matter of aesthetic appreciation, has a very long history. For as long as we know, through writing and symbols humans have expressed aesthetic concepts. Since prehistoric times, 'secret' geometries have been embedded in the writing and symbols... geometries that established proportions to enhance visual harmony. Over the millennia, humans built structures with aesthetic intention guided by these geometries. Coming to relatively recent times, empathy theory introduced the concept of form-feeling, emphasizing the direct connection between what is seen and what we feel...between the objective and the embedded geometries.

However, what is beyond the seen: "imaginative vision" or "new vision/visibility" has not always been discussed as part of the larger perceptual field since it required admitting or recognizing the existence a scale that is beyond immediately accessible to the humans. More than a decade ago, architectural theorist Anthony Vidler (2004) asked for an expanded field of ecological aesthetics that would show new process-oriented spatial formations and new inter-

disciplinarity. Vidler maintained that some of the most important notions of ecological aesthetics are not in the sphere of "vision," or the seen, thus calling for a careful "reorganization" of the world as we perceive it.

Ecological consciousness and "new vision" as the artist, writer, and educator Gyorgy Kepes described it, are therefore the starting points for the aesthetics of relationships rather than aesthetics of objects. Ecological consciousness requires seeing things below and above the mezzo-scale of nature. It teaches us that as our understanding of the relationships between "things" grows, so will the spaces that we will build have an additional ethical dimension.

There are two ways in architecture and related fields today in which this aesthetics of connectedness instead of aesthetics of separation shows itself: on one hand are projects that insist on visualizing the invisible – such are those visualizing climate change. It also includes metaphorical use of patterns, what Kepes thought to be a primary visual source of interconnectedness, in the urban and landscape design as well as on façade design. Being able to understand things on micro and macro scale are part of necessary knowledge. On the other hand, and probably more substantial, is a level of complexity involved in human life that is being introduced into architecture.

We will have to learn to think in terms of relationships rather than objects on all levels of architectural effort; and that is where ecology is invaluable to architecture. Ecology teaches us to appreciate the visible in a new way, but it also teaches us to assume, until the moment we understand the invisible relationships, that there is more that what we can see. This concept needs to be included in ecological aesthetics, at least when one discusses architecture. As a field, architecture has an unlimited potential of creating environments that propagate beauty as we know it but, at the same time, it has ethical dimension of creating environments that include a myriad of life functions that are part of the architectural program. It just seems that beautification of an architectural object will not be enough anymore; every architectural effort carries the potential to include life processes and organizational thinking particular to relational world that ecology offers.

Lejla Vujicic  
[lejlavujicic@hotmail.com](mailto:lejlavujicic@hotmail.com)  
University Nikola Tesla Union

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