

## REVIEWS

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**Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott (eds). *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008, 472 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-13887-1**

The anthology *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*, edited by Sheila Lintott and Allen Carlson, a pioneer of environmental aesthetics, is devoted to one of the most dramatic shifts undergone by aesthetics in the second half of the twentieth century. By this shift we mean a transformation of the understanding of the relationship between artistic and extra-artistic areas of values, which are probably most evident in the rehabilitation or reinvention of a path to aesthetic qualities and values of nature. The anthology is one of the current and, in a way, expected consequences of this transformation. Environmental aesthetics has established itself as a relatively new discipline over the last three decades, and its examination is increasingly crossing over into other realms connected to our environment – whether this concerns, for example, environmental studies, landscape architecture, sustainable development, environmental-planning assessment, or design. This group of articles is the first comprehensive attempt critically to encapsulate not only the present state of this continuously developing discipline, but also to refer to its roots and to map out its overlaps with connected problematic fields.

The extensive anthology *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics* (first published 1962) edited by Joseph Margolis was for a long time one of the most widely read collections. Re-edited several times, the volume made an important contribution to delineating or, rather, confirming the boundaries of the most important tradition in predominantly Anglo-American aesthetic inquiry. Back in the early Sixties, few theorists thought it odd that no attention is paid in the volume to either nature or other areas of extra-artistic aesthetic values. As Carlson himself emphasizes, not a single article was devoted to these fields in this or subsequent influential anthologies. From today's perspective, the glaring absence of a demand for a theoretical appropriation of the extra-artistic and, above all, natural dimension is expressed best by the title of Margolis's anthology. English-language works on aesthetics, reduced by that generation of predominantly analytically minded authors to a *philosophy of the arts*, focused exclusively on problems and themes connected to artistic creation, but remained blind to the extra-artistic aesthetic field. Carlson and Lintott's anthology can be understood as the result of one of the processes of rectifying this.

By saying 'one of the processes,' we wish to emphasize two points. First, the theoretical blindness to, or neglect of, the aesthetic dimension of nature and the environment in the first half of the twentieth century was certainly not specific to Anglo-American aesthetic theories. Rather it was the case that the most influential trend in this field – analytic aesthetics – probably went the farthest in the reduction of aesthetics to a philosophy of the arts. The preference for artistic aesthetics during this period was common also to all the most important Continental currents of thought, although in comparison with the other side of the ocean they set out on other paths, sometimes even antithetical ones. Second, although both traditions of thought share a common modern European heritage, which includes a theoretical degradation of the natural dimension of aesthetics, they start out from somewhat different environmental experiences. (Whilst Expressionism can, with certain amendments, be imported over the ocean relatively easily, it is not so easy to import the Colorado plains to Europe.) To a certain degree this difference is connected to the emergence of deep traces of American proto-environmental thought, which has its roots in the nineteenth century, for example, in Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), and is only partially related to the Romantic view of the natural terrain of Europe, cultivated and remoulded over the centuries as it was. The immediate vicinity of enormous formations of wild American nature further opened up the possibility of its natural-scientific and geographical study. The historical reflections contained in this anthology (the articles by Eugene Hargrove and J. Baird Callicott) reveal the important role played by both these currents in discovering the aesthetic potential of natural environments, alien to European taste, which tended to prefer the picturesque landscape. The progressive uncovering of the value of these atypically attractive natural environments eventually connects to a pioneering endeavour to protect and conserve these enormous landscape features. By way of the frequent reception of these sources in a European – and thus also a central European – context, this trail forms to a certain extent the basis of a different story, which from our perspective, that is, the Continental tradition, has demonstrated itself and continues to demonstrate itself to be in several respects inspiring.

The intention of the editors, Lintott and Carlson, can usefully be seen as being on two levels. The first consists in the presentation of a thematically arranged and commentated anthology of the most important works published in the last three decades as part of this restoration of the broken link between theory and aesthetic values of nature. The second level consists in the substantiation and interconnection of these discussions with an

historical reflection on the inception, development, and present status of the themes.

The book comprises four sections, each of which contains six selected articles by British and North American authors. Each section begins with a brief introduction by the editors, in which they characterize the problem, that the selected articles tackle from various, more or less polemical standpoints. The anthology thus to a certain degree retains its openness, although the sympathies and preferences of the editors with regard to the adequate conception of the aesthetic assessment of natural (or environmental) qualities and values are more than evident. Both editors otherwise lay their cards immediately on the table in their introduction, 'Natural Aesthetic Value and Environmentalism'.

In the course of at least the last two years of the century there was a gradual expansion or transformation of this field of subjects, which deserve not only our attention but also protection and conservation. We now look upon certain actions and decisions of our recent ancestors (and in many cases also contemporaries) with shame or outrage, whether this relates to now worthless urban complexes, ordinary or neglected landscape formations, or rare biological species living there.

The positions formerly occupied without reservation towards products of beautiful art, that is, respect, protection, and an interest in their preservation for their own sake or for their 'intrinsic' value (rather than externally implemented value, and thus not merely for their immediate, temporary, usually economic, utility) is now widely taken up also towards objects of apparently non-artistic or even non-human origin. If, however, the realm of objects to which this position is applied is extended, artistic creation becomes only one of the components of this naturally and culturally bestowed 'heritage'. The theoretical justification of this position and its implicit values thus becomes an essential prerequisite for the confirmation of this widely accepted, but often naively formulated demand for protection and conservation, particularly in the case of natural objects, where this demand – in comparison with works of art – comes ever more frequently into conflict with opposing demands and requirements.

It is precisely the relationship between the two types of values, expressed by the appropriately chosen subtitle of the anthology, 'From Beauty to Duty', that Lintott and Carlson identify as the common, linking theme of its articles, though only Part Four, 'Nature, Aesthetic Value, and Environmentalism', is devoted directly to it. If one asks the simple question of how we are to justify a seemingly obvious respect or feeling of obligation (duty) to conserve and protect our environment, the most endangered component of which is nature,

one encounters clear difficulties from the outset. How do we argue in favour of the inviolability, protection, or means of conservation of something that historically extends beyond our necessarily limited and particular interests and does not at this moment depend on whether we connect it with our own person, generation, or culture?

A purely historical-cognitive justification, namely, that objects worthy of conservation are future 'monuments' (potential bearers of historical value) of either contemporary culture (urban and non-urban landscape) or historical processes of a larger scale (for example, geological buckling and volcanic processes), does not hold up, since this potential historical or information value is borne essentially by all natural and cultural processes, and it is thus difficult to prefer some over others. A practical or utilitarian justification is similarly erroneous, since it promotes criteria that are imposed upon the surrounding environment by these limited interests, and thus tend to be a source of direct and indirect threat to the thing that, in our pre-theoretical intuition, merits conservation and protection. The justifications promoted in Lintott and Carlson's introductory essay find their expression in a body of aesthetic imperatives that would protect and help to conserve the thing that is distinguished in aesthetic value. According to the authors, the view that 'This is beautiful, so destroy it' verges on a contradiction similar to 'This is morally good, so do not do it'. 'The power of aesthetic imperatives can be seen in our responses to works of art and other cultural artefacts of aesthetic value', Lintott and Carlson conclude ('Introduction. Natural Aesthetic Value and Environmentalism', p. 16).

This elliptical return to the aesthetic dimension of our respect for the natural environment is present in one form or another in all the authors in this anthology, whether they devote themselves to seeking an adequate conception of this dimension or to tracing the genesis of today's practically self-evident assumption of responsibility for the endangered natural environment to aesthetic motivations of the 'founding fathers' of the American environmental movement. The path from beauty to duty, according to Lintott and Carlson, is of central importance to the inception and establishment of environmental ethics, and also one of the methodological starting points. Upon closer examination, however, we see that a retrospective search for arguments in support of ethical behaviour towards the natural environment shows itself to be an important factor in the inception of the reinvention of a path to the aesthetic dimension of nature on the part of aesthetic theory (which was long blind to all extra-artistic manifestations of aesthetics). Rather than from beauty to duty, from a certain moment we observe, with the editors, a return journey – from duty to beauty.

The first section of the anthology, 'Historical Foundation', is devoted to the roots of American aesthetics, mainly to authors who made important contributions to the formation of the discipline and continue to be an important source of inspiration for it. The aesthetic relevance of several natural formations, revealed to society through the collaboration between natural scientists and artists, has fundamentally contributed to the establishment and development of American environmental attitudes. Eugene Hargrove in his summarizing historical article illustrates the means by which artistic and scientific studies of new natural environments have shared in the transformation of the register of accepted aesthetic categories, and how this value has indirectly contributed to a range of decisions relating to the protection and conservation of several currently admired regions of North America. This article is supplemented with a selection from the discourse 'Nature' by the American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, the chief exponent of American Transcendentalism, followed by the essay 'Walking' by his friend and pupil Henry David Thoreau, an important figure in contemporary ecological and environmental movements. The section concludes with a selection of works from three early American representatives of the conservation and environmental movement, John Muir (1838–1914), John Burroughs (1837–1921), and Aldo Leopold (1887–1948).

The need for an explanation of the relationship between aesthetics and ethical value, which in turn requires a cogent model of natural aesthetics, is the driving force of the second, perhaps central section. A plausible and argumentatively strong aesthetics of nature, based on the most adequate model of the aesthetic appreciation of nature, is shown to be one of a range of important factors of reliable, convincing conservation policy and land management.

This section contains articles by six contemporary authors, in which several mutually, more or less competing, models of the adequate assessment or appreciation of nature are presented. They nevertheless share a common point of departure, taking their assumption from moral discourse, according to which a model of aesthetic appreciation will never be adequate if we assess nature according to standards alien to it, unless we – in the words of Yuriko Saito – appreciate nature on its own terms. J. Baird Callicott, Allen Carlson, and Patricia Matthews believe that a correct and suitable appreciation of nature must be based on scientific knowledge. Saito insists that an assessment or appreciation of nature on its own terms is a moral obligation, and refers to the relevance of other cultural narratives as a clear alternative or supplement to the scientific basis of previous models. A special position amongst these writers is held by

Stan Godlovitch, who believes that the only way we can appreciate nature as it is, and not as we need to see it, is in observance of its unpronounceable and inexplicable mystery. For Godlovitch, an appreciation of nature for itself means recognition of its mysterious independence from, or indifference to, our fortuitous existence and limited abilities. According to Godlovitch, nature for us is fundamentally inaccessible and, in the final analysis, foreign. The last possibility is forwarded by Noël Carroll, according to whom an appropriate appreciation of nature embraces the state of emotional arousal, which is ruled out by the science-based model.

This plurality of models, which faithfully mirrors the apportionment of individual approaches from the introductory study to the anthology as a whole, however, casts suspicion on two points. First, if the authors presented here believe, as Lintott and Carlson assert they do, that there are several ways to understand what an appreciation of nature on its own terms requires, there is nothing wrong in this. In that case, however, we require certain criteria of adequacy of the individual hypotheses, since it is clear that we cannot combine them into a single image without mutual contradictions. It is hard to imagine the absurd whole, in which Carlson's science-based 'natural environmental model' and Godlovitch's model based on the irreducible foreignness and mysteriousness of nature could both be valid. If one is adequate, the other is inadequate. Since our cognitive abilities are limited, it is hard to verify which of the models corresponds better to what is 'genuinely' the case. None the less, it is possible at least to compare the models to determine which is able to explain more (while not excluding alternative models) and thus better reflects the investigated field of values. If we restrict ourselves to such an activity, the required investigation of the aesthetic foundations of environmental ethics becomes a field in which it is possible to find application for any consistently formulated model. Then, however, we are precluded from seeking support in aesthetics for a criticism of dogmatically defended environmental decisions resting on competing models.

The second problematic aspect, which could become a stumbling block for the adequacy of the individual models, is the insufficient or entirely lacking differentiation of the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic. We frequently encounter a declared necessity to differentiate an aesthetic judgement of nature from an aesthetic judgement of art or of other human artefacts. The clarification of this boundary between the natural and the artificial or artistic aesthetic is indisputably arduous, but from the perspective of the overall focus of the anthology it is an essential task. Nevertheless, without a functional differentiation of the aesthetic and non-aesthetic field we lose touch with the

pursued basis of the ethical relationship to the natural environment. Let us take as an example Carlson's 'natural environmental model'.

It is certainly justifiable to assume that an expert in the field of Cubist painting may enjoy a more differentiated experience than a person seeing a Cubist painting for the first time. It thus seems that for us to reach a similarly well-developed, objective, and substantiated aesthetic judgement of nature, and not to fall into the trap of an unjustified application of (artistic) categories, we require a certain equivalent to the 'categories of art' according to the example provided in Kendall Walton's influential study.<sup>1</sup> Carlson's science-based model discovers this pursued basis of aesthetic judgements about nature in the knowledge provided by the natural sciences, primarily biology and the environmental and ecological sciences. Again, it is thus possible to expect that a person who recognizes the variety of forms of the family of *Carabidae* including sub-varieties, lineages, and individual types, will be a more competent critic than a mere layman.

Here, however, we may fall into the same trap as when considering art. An outcome contrary to our expectations is just as possible: a peevish recording of some kind of beetle may stand in opposition to an erudite and detailed interpretation of the peculiarity and uniqueness of the relevant type, just as the dynamic nature of encountering something new as against the weary routine classification of what is repeatedly seen. What is it that differentiates our aesthetic appreciation of nature, following the environmental model, from merely subsuming given phenomena under the relevant category? In other words, what makes this cognitive and indisputably important experience aesthetic? We could ask an analogous question with regard to the other approaches we named. Without a satisfactory answer, we believe, these otherwise well-considered conceptions are incapable of meeting the expectations placed upon them.

The third section, 'Nature and Positive Aesthetics', comprises a relatively extensive discussion of a theme that is again on the boundary of the aesthetics of nature and an ethical attitude towards nature. How do we justify the need to conserve areas or components of nature, which are generally, according to the standards of the day, regarded as ugly or unsightly? Here Carlson presents his thesis, compatible with his natural environmental model, according to which all nature embodies a positive aesthetic value if it is adequately classified into the correct categories provided by the natural sciences. The articles in this section

<sup>1</sup> Walton, Kendall (1970). 'Categories of Art.' *The Philosophical Review*, 79 (3), pp. 334–67.

are a record of a debate on the validity or sustainability of this hypothesis, which has become known as 'positive aesthetics'. In the final, fourth section, the imaginary arch based on an investigation of the relationship between aesthetic and ethical values of the natural environment is completed. The authors return in detail to the initial theme, that is, the connection between the aesthetics of nature and environmental problems. The individual articles demonstrate and substantiate the practical importance of an investigation of the aesthetic dimension of nature, but also refer to an opposite trend, which we have also already seen – namely, a revival of an aesthetics of nature, which draws on current debates about environmental problems.

In wrapping up this overview, which has not aspired to be an exhaustive characterization of this diverse but consistent anthology, we take the liberty of making a forecast rather than a conclusion. The problematic areas covered within the anthology remain open, a fact which should be attributed to the positive aspects of this commendable work. Environmental aesthetics in the form presented here is certainly not without gaps, antagonisms, and vague or problematic areas. That, however, is the nature of a living discipline. The whole anthology, which from a certain perspective brings to a close a certain stage in the existence of this new (or renewed) field of inquiry, indisputably has the potential to become a classic source not only for students of aesthetics and philosophy, but also for people engaged in fields upon which its theme encroaches everyday.

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