





*Aesthetic theory and the natural
environment: an exploration*
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Few subjects of philosophical thought have proved so resistant to clarity as what is known as «aesthetics»; yet at the same time, despite their murkiness, few waters have invited so many divers. Seldom too, have so many writers insisted on continuing to build the house despite the evidence of such weak foundations. A linguistic corpus made from the philosophical texts of the last century would show the omnipresence of the term «aesthetics» in all its variations, coupled with a lack of texts seeking to shed light on its essential concepts. This is an unfinished task to which everyone researching in the field should to some extent contribute —or at the very least, they should not obstruct that task.

It is true that it is not easy to avoid the term when discussing certain aspects of the human experience. Nor is it easy to find the right expressive clarity and concision in these murky waters. When people use the term «aesthetics», they are generally speaking with a certain vagueness or at the very least, with some ambiguity. It is used frequently in a range of discursive contexts, in reference to very different ideas. It alludes to a notion that has gained ground in recent decades to such an extent that it has filtered its way into the most popular terminology (muddying it all the more) —I am referring specifically to the area of

philosophical theory, within which it has been forged and has flourished as the central notion of certain discourses.

Two possible directions: Nature-Culture

Bearing in mind the above, I take as my starting point the elementary recognition (presupposed to be provisional) that there is in human existence a dimension that pertains to it, and that has a clear cognitive constitution which we might call the *aesthetic dimension* of experience. This dimension is crystallised and manifested in certain judgements and in certain actions motivated (or caused) by these judgements. These judgements may be prior or simultaneous, but they may also be retroactive: a mental state or a past action that can be rebuilt (described) in the form of an aesthetic judgement. From the very outset, we need to distinguish between two levels: the theoretical level and the level of the object of that theory. The first is the *aesthetic theory* or discourse. The second is the level of those aspects of reality which we consider to be the *objects* on which the theory lies, such as aesthetic judgements, aesthetic properties, etc.

While it is true philosophy has always contained questions and problems

¹ Where it begins to be used indiscriminately to refer to different things, just as when Kant himself introduces the term in his *Transcendental Aesthetic* to refer to something which is apparently unrelated.

pertaining to what today we call «aesthetics», it was only recently, in modern times, that it was established as philosophical theory. This does not mean that the concerns of this type of theory have their origins in modernism. Key issues for aesthetic theory are to be found from the very dawn of philosophy (in Greece). However, they did not take the systematic and categorical form later applied to such questions.

We might say that aesthetic theory came together, if it was not born, as a more or less consistent body around the eighteenth century. A series of questions crystallised into a new body, thus presenting the possibility of developing theory on them. The vocabulary was enriched and the literature multiplied. But the possibility of confusion in certain basic aspects also increased, primarily with regard to the central notion of «aesthetics» and its different uses¹, where thought can be contained within erroneous beliefs such as the idea of the existence of «aesthetic substances». Hence the importance of the previous distinction between levels, which helps remind us that, while it is possible to talk about aesthetic theory or aesthetic judgements (and the relations between that activity of judging and the things so judged), we cannot talk of things that are substantially «aesthetic», for example.

- 2 Despite the classic resonance of the word, it was coined in a work by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in 1735.
- 3 As I shall explain, the two directions are not opposed but should be mutually supportive.
- 4 Kant, Inmanuelle [1790] *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.
- 5 I refer back to the classical work in the area of British empiricism. See, for example, on the sublime: Burke, Edmund [1757] *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; and on the picturesque: Gilpin, William [1792] *Three Essays on the Picturesque* reprinted in Farnborough: Gregg, 1972.
- 6 There are some clear exceptions. Romanticism, with its concern for nature is one.
- 7 Kriesteller, Paul O. [1951] «The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics». In *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Volume 12, 4: 496-524. Reprinted in Kivy, Peter (Ed.) *Essays on the History of Aesthetics*. New York: University of Rochester Press.

At this modern juncture of proliferation of philosophical discourses on the recently baptised «aesthetics»², a dual theoretical direction emerges³, determined by the nature of the object towards which it is directed. On the one hand, we have considerations on art, on that which is produced by humans. At the same time, in the first important works of aesthetic philosophy (taking Kant's third critique as a milestone⁴), nature and its evaluation in aesthetic terms are vividly present. The emergence and development in the eighteenth century of concepts such as «the sublime» and «the picturesque»⁵ point to the importance of an appreciation of nature in the theoretical considerations of those first moments.

Initially, these two fields do not appear to have come into conflict. However, over time, the aesthetic consideration of nature faded and practically disappeared from the discourses⁶, as «the modern system of the arts» was consolidated and instituted⁷, aided by the binary opposition of the

idealistic Hegelian aesthetic of *art versus nature*.

There thus began a separation whose consequence was to be an almost exclusive prevalence of reflections on art, i.e. on that which ultimately lies on the side of individual and social action which is, at the end of the day, the domain of culture. This theoretical option means defining a series of specific issues linked exclusively to art as «aesthetic concerns», including the artist's intention; the history and interpretation of the work and the ontology of art in general. Evidence can be seen in the fact that for many years «aesthetics» was identified with «theory of art» with no apparent conflict, apparently ignoring the fact that aesthetic theory had also initially been concerned with a reflection on nature. «Nature» refers here to that which is given, that which develops without our intervention, despite the fact that, as is clear today, we are constantly intervening in its progress. We see then that aesthetic theory can take two possible basic directions: one oriented more towards nature and the other, towards culture (taking art as the maximum expression of the aesthetic sensitivity of a culture at a given time). Although the division may be problematic and obscure if we delve into it in detail, *grosso modo*, the natural can be said to be equivalent to the order of events,

- 8 On this distinction see Davidson, Donald [1982] *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 9 Essentially in the English-speaking world, and especially in the US, where there has always been a vigorous concern for the landscape and its conservation. See the compilation Carlson, Allen & Lintott, Sheila (eds.) [2008] *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism. From Beauty To Duty*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 10 Hereinafter EA.
- 11 Which also includes ethical, political and economic elements, but I think it is crucial to distinguish between these levels even though in practice they are intermingled and mixed, and seldom appear separately.
- 12 On this issue see the classic text in Edward Bullough «'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle». In *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 5 [1912], pp. 87–117.

whereas the cultural is equivalent to the order of actions⁸. Aesthetic theory thus splits into two directions distinguished by the nature of the object of study; and while one of the paths appears to have died out, the other is over-travelled. And it seems that the theory, faced with this twin possibility, proved to be far more interested in what people *did* when that aesthetic dimension of experience we mentioned intervenes, than by what they simply judged or valued in natural surroundings, which was given and was independent of human existence and participation.

Landscape and new landscapes

If we examine this supposed split from close up, we discover that it requires much greater qualification. But it is also true that when we look at the essential aspects of the panorama, the *route of nature* remained to a large extent paralysed until, in the second half of the twentieth century, those old issues re-emerged⁹ under the name of Environmental Aesthetics (EA)¹⁰. This re-emergence was derived precisely out of the issue of the identification drawn between *aesthetics* and *theory of art*. EA rescues some basic initial concerns, but develops them from a new theoretical perspective. In this

piece, I would like to look at where this new perspective takes us at a basic level.

Despite this parting of the ways, nature has seldom ceased to be valued in aesthetic terms and even less from the actual practice of art. The split must be seen as being confined to the field of aesthetic theory. Humans have been seen strongly affected aesthetically by their surroundings; and until very recently, their surroundings were predominantly natural. Landscape (as a subject, as a resource, as an object) reflects a certain way of looking at nature, and regardless of the ideological aspect¹¹ wrapped up in it, it is important to note that this is, above all, a way of looking *aesthetically*—and more than looking, of judging.

Landscape was born in the area of painting, that is to say, of art. Since the Italian Renaissance the concept of landscape has been built up (culturally) as a specific way of *seeing* nature, a way that has been largely visual and distanced¹². Much has been spoken in aesthetic theory on this idea of distance. A distinction has been drawn between physical distance (and the best sense to guarantee it is sight) and emotional distance, which was already mentioned in Aristotelian *Poetics*. Both reinforce a notion of the aesthetic subject as a spectator, as not being «touched» by things, but all these

13 Carlson, Allen [2000] *Aesthetics and the Environment*. London: Routledge.

14 Schafer, R. Murray [1977] *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books.

15 Carlson, Allen, *Ibid.*

things present themselves, precisely, as if it were part of just one pictorial landscape.

The contemporary view of nature found in EA, however, has developed beyond that classic paradigm of landscape. Nonetheless, it is still presented to us as a mirror in which we can see what was being silenced in that «dead end of nature». In the new situation of EA, several of these elements change. First there is a break with that *distancing* that is essential to the classical idea of aesthetic experience. As A. Carlson says¹³, in appreciating the environment, the subject is immersed in the object of his appreciation. Surrounded by the surroundings with which one is aesthetically related, that ideal distance vanishes. For, despite the pictorial origins of landscape and its exclusively visual nature, we should not forget that the environment affects us with the force of all our senses. And this incorporation of other senses is another new aspect, contrasting with the classic idea of the landscape. Here it is worth noting some recent work, such as R. Murray Schafer's idea of a *sound landscape*¹⁴, which opens the door to the other senses; if we accept sound, on what grounds can we justify the exclusion of smell, taste, or even feelings of hot and cold? If any justification for the argument of distance remained (outside artistic representation at least), it could only come

from a predominance of the visual. But with the incorporation of sound (a sense which is very different to sight) and the others with it, what we are left with is that immediate (sensorially influenced by certain directly activated senses) and direct presence.

In Carlson's own words, «since it is our surroundings, the object of appreciation impinges upon all our senses. As we occupy it or move through it, we see, hear, feel, smell, and perhaps even taste it. In short, the experience of the environmental object of appreciation from which aesthetic appreciation must be fashioned is initially intimate, total, and engulfing»¹⁵.

The landscape, which was exclusive to painting, drawing and the visual arts in general, has given way to a plurality of landscapes—or if you prefer, to a concept of landscape that has other *senses* and hence, a new *condition*. It is also important to bear in mind that landscape long escaped from the constraints of artistic representation. Thus, in the lexicon we have a meaning of the word that refers to the actual thing depicted (the landscape from Mount Arno) and no longer necessarily to the depiction made of that thing in the painting or engraving, for example (a Turner landscape). But this is nothing new.

There has been a shift from the object to the environment. Whereas previously

* Translator's Note: The original Spanish text refers here to the fact that the English word «environment» can be interpreted as meaning either the *medioambiente* (natural environment) or the *ambiente* (*milieu*, *ambience*). The references are to the Latin roots.

our attention was drawn towards particular objects, now the subject finds himself immersed in the centre of the appreciated «object»: the environment. In a similar shift, the discourse has been stripped of certain concepts such as the artist's intention and the properties. Other concepts, however, remain, such as «aesthetic experience» and «aesthetic judgement», revealing their fundamental nature in tracing a general aesthetic theory. Or to put it another way: what is left after the purge from artistic object to natural environment (with regard to aesthetic theory) are basic and fundamental elements that must be common to any particular case of aesthetic theory, whether it deals with nature, architecture, design or art. And because they are fundamental, I believe they will always remain in the fundamentals. This does not mean, of course, that other new elements may not be incorporated in each particular case of the theory, just as they need to be incorporated in developing an aesthetic theory of art, to cite an example.

One common starting point: the natural environment, aesthetic theory and basics

Environmental Aesthetics contains an interesting ambiguity. Although the important texts of this movement explicitly

state that they are talking about the «natural environment», the term might also be interpreted as referring to the *milieu* or *ambience**. The *ambience* is a much more basic and general concept, and this strikes me as being important. *Ambience*, from the Latin *ambiens* «that which surrounds», means the surroundings (generally spatial) in which we are situated as agents, a space that incorporates all the elements contained in a unit of greater or lesser strength: the environmental unit. *Ambire* (to enclose, to surround), also gives us some pointers, since the *ambience* involves something along the lines of an enclosure where the set of possible stimuli occurs and among which the agent *ambulates* or moves, and acts.

I find it interesting here to think of the environment as another side to the notion of «situation». An environment could be a situation seen in sensitive terms; more specifically, in terms of inputs for the senses. Unlike a singular object, the environment does not capture it all in one go; there is what one might call a more extensive cognitive limit, a limit that prevents me from embracing everything that is contained in it at once. I move within the environment as a part of it, affecting it and being affected at one and the same time. And this constantly refers me back to my centrality as a subject surrounded by

that *ambit*, who is sensorially affected by it. There is an insistent centrality of the subject, although it is not independent of things, but in constant contact and interaction with them, with the substances. It refers back to a cognitively evolved being, like any other natural being, but with special qualities; a being from whom the judgements are born, and the awareness of being affected in that special way (which we call aesthetic), and which, inescapably, also acts from that awareness. The case of the environment refers us back, then, to that single centre from which the two aforementioned directions lead; a referral back to a single starting point to which the aesthetic theory of art and the aesthetic theory of nature have to return. For this reason I said earlier that the two directions are not opposed; rather they should aid each other mutually.

In this article, I consider what has happened to aesthetic theory in positing an escape from the object to the environment. Environmental aesthetics bring us into contact with the natural *per se*, distancing us from the issues we have discussed (such as the ontology of art, for example). EA is first and foremost environmental. Environments can be created for an aesthetic purpose—examples can be seen since the historical avant-gardes—and thus enter the cultural field of art. But previously and primarily

(in evolutionary and biological terms), the human being's environment is a natural one. And this is one of the justifications for EA. I note that the interesting thing about it is the fundamental level we have reached; a perfect starting point for raising any general aesthetic theory (with occasional and possible sidetracks into areas such as art, design, architecture and culture). I think one has to get inside to listen to what EA is talking about, because it is a crucial terrain for understanding, at its most basic level, these aspects of the human aesthetic dimension. The vigorous reappearance of nature through EA, in the context of contemporary philosophical aesthetic theory can be seen, then, to be of enormous importance.

