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LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS

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It. *Estetica del paesaggio*; Fr. *Esthétique du paysage*; Germ. *Landschaftsästhetik*; Span. *Estética del paisaje*. *Landscape aesthetics* can refer to 1) the aspects of a landscape that make it pleasant or enjoyable (e.g., “the aesthetics of the Tuscan Landscape”, i.e. its aesthetic characteristics, what we enjoy in that landscape), 2) the practices and activities aimed at designing the landscape to make it pleasant or enjoyable, or 3) the philosophical investigation of aspects of our relationship with and experience of the landscape that cannot be reduced to the purely sensory, scientific, or utilitarian, but that involve a feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the appreciation of the landscape’s value, in the light of our imaginative, creative, emotional, projective skills as well as our culture, memory, and feeling of identification (see D’Angelo 2014, 13-14). This entry will only deal with the latter meaning. Even within this restricted scope, and with the further proviso that I will not discuss *landscape aesthetics* as related to the genre of landscape painting, *landscape aesthetics* does not lend itself to a consistent definition, given the ambiguity associated with both words that compose the term.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

1. *Landscape and Environment*. Partly because of the conceptual and semantic confusion associated with the term “landscape”, *landscape aesthetics* has often been reduced to a subset of environmental aesthetics (or, in the case of painted landscapes, of philosophy of art, though I will not discuss this aspect here). Based on such restricted view, environmental aesthetics could be seen as a comprehensive discipline dealing with wild nature, or wilderness, and with anthropized nature, including landscapes. However, *landscape aesthetics* should be treated as a distinct, though related, field of investigation (Assunto 1980, Bourassa 1991, D’Angelo 2014). While environment may be “just” nature, i.e. an independent object, landscape is always nature mediated through culture, i.e. a structurally relational term of our experience. Thus, *landscape aesthetics* is both broader and more restricted in scope than environmental aesthetics: it

does not thematise everything that is thought of as natural, but it also thematises things that are not nature. The delimitation of the field is itself an open question.

2. *A Double Marginality: Landscapes in Aesthetics, Aesthetics in Landscapes*. While natural beauty, as opposed to artistic beauty, is a traditional topic of philosophical aesthetics, this is less the case for landscapes, which have traditionally been neglected by it (Bourassa 1988). Landscapes do not neatly fall under either traditional category of artistic beauty vs natural beauty. Besides, unlike both art and nature, landscapes are more easily associated with a utilitarian dimension (farming, dwelling, planning, etc.), hindering the possibility of a disinterested, purely contemplative appreciation, central to many aesthetic theories. In a parallel way, aesthetics (and philosophy in general) has played an increasingly marginal role in landscape studies. The latter tend to avoid aesthetic approaches, which are deemed as confusing, outdated and reductive, unable to grasp the substance of landscapes, or as outright ideological, elitist, and exclusionary. This double marginality reflects a double-sided fundamental instability between the natural and the cultural/artistic, and a corresponding openness in the debate, emerging both with the term "landscape", which covers at the same time a piece of land, its view or aspect, and its artistic representation, and with the contextual use of the term "aesthetics", oscillating between a more traditional, visual-based, and detached meaning and a more contemporary, holistic, and immersive one.

3. *Paradigm Shifts*. The double slippage just mentioned has raised the need for a more comprehensive, multisensory, and integrated *landscape aesthetics*, challenging traditional ocularcentrism, disinterestedness, and exceptionalism (see also Furia 2020). Also, the institutional framework has correspondingly witnessed a transition from an exceptionalist, experts-led, and top-down approach (epitomized by the Unesco's *World Heritage Convention*) to a horizontal, participated, and democratic one (epitomized by the Council of Europe's *European Landscape Convention*), with important political and ethical implications. On the other hand, the persisting uncertainty on the meaning and determinability of the aesthetic value of landscapes raises urgent practical matters, e.g. when conflicting with other, more tangible or quantifiable values dictating the final use of a specific landscape (agriculture, industry, tourism, energy production and so on). In the last thirty years, such uncertainty has led to the development of "Landscape Character Assessment" practices (LCA) as a global interdisciplinary challenge (Fairclough-Sarlöv Herlin-Swanwick 2019).

MAIN ORIENTATIONS IN THE DEBATE

Due to its pronounced ambiguity and openness, *landscape aesthetics*, unlike *environmental aesthetics*, is not a unified or well-developed field of research, and therefore no clearly defined approaches to it can be identified. *Landscape aesthetics* sits at the intersection of several disciplines and practices, such as geography, design and architecture, art history, anthropology, gardening, ecology, agronomy etc. It shares with them an interest in the different forms and results of the interaction between human beings and their habitats, yet it retains a specific focus on the at least partly cultural, experiential, appreciative aspects of such interaction. For the sake of simplicity, one can at least distinguish four main orientations,

responding not only to different conceptions of landscape, but, equally important, to different understandings of the nature and function of aesthetics.

1. *Modernist-Scenic-Isolationist*. This view is concerned with landscapes that are aesthetically valuable (beautiful, sublime, picturesque), i.e., mainly with landscapes that look like art, or, more generally, with scenic views. It relies on some version of aesthetic disinterestedness or romantic aestheticism and is connected with an understanding of landscapes as a typically modern concept and practice, emerging, with a compensatory role, from the scientific-quantitative-objectifying view of nature (see Simmel 1913, Ritter 1974, Berque 1993). One might add that the common, lay understanding of landscapes as extraordinary places allowing aesthetic pleasure, contemplation, wonder and so on largely reproduces this view, but without any explicit or conscious commitment to a philosophical/aesthetic theory.

2. *Critical-Substantive-Culturalist*. This view, very widespread in recent landscape literature, entails a definite criticism of the previous one. Accordingly, the focus on a supposedly aesthetic value obscures the “substantive” character of landscape “as a nexus of community, justice, nature, and environmental equity” (Olwig 1996: 630-631) or as “a composition of man-made or man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure or background for our collective existence” (Jackson 1984: 8). According to an even stronger version of this criticism, an aesthetic relation to landscapes ideologically removes their historical rooting in the bourgeois and individualistic mindset, as ways to control and exercise power over space and time, to serve the needs of politics, trading, military, navigation, and so on (Cosgrove 1985). On a similar note, Corner (1999) emphasises the sentimental, escapist structure of scenic landscapes: their apparent naturalness invites conservative nostalgia and suppression of the conflicts of the present, and Mitchell (2002) speaks of a “loss of innocence” of the landscape discourse, meaning how it finally came to be acknowledged how rooting it in a supposedly universal feeling of pleasure has insidiously legitimized imperialism and exclusion under a beautiful patina.

3. *Evolutionary-Cognitivist*. Accordingly, our appreciation of certain landscapes or characteristics thereof is rooted in biology and evolution, or at the very least it can be scientifically motivated and investigated. Drawing on Dewey’s reconciliation of aesthetics with ordinary experience and claim of a biological basis of aesthetic appreciation, Appleton (1975) advances a “prospect-refuge” theory: we are wired to aesthetically appreciate landscapes that suggest the presence of prospects and refuge, because they were evolutionarily advantageous. Different versions of this theory include the “savanna hypothesis”, according to which current habitat preferences, including landscapes, follow features that were evolutionarily favourable, such as the ones found in the African savanna where humans originated (see Bennett 2019). According to Carlson’s scientific cognitivism, we should consider and evaluate environments as nature (environmental model) rather than as art (landscape model); just like art history provides the categories and the grounds for an adequate aesthetic appreciation of art, natural history and science do the same for nature (Carlson 1981).

4. *Pluralist-Holistic-Participatory*. The theories included in this group, though very varied, concur in their tendency to overcome sharp oppositions and looking for a more pluralist and holistic approach. A good share of the Italian philosophy of landscape follows this path (see below). Besides, to limit ourselves to just

a few distinctive perspectives, Bourassa's paradigm, combining influences from psychology to critical regionalism and Marxism, is three-tiered, incorporating biological, cultural, and individual factors of landscape preference (Bourassa 1991); Berleant's "aesthetics of engagement" challenges the subject-object dualism as well as the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness, favouring instead a participatory, immersive model of appreciation whose culturalist pluralism opposes both the traditional-modernist and the cognitivist paradigm (Berleant 1997); Brady (2003) defends "critical pluralism" as a middle course between modernist monism/cognitivism and post-modernist relativism/hedonism and develops an "integrated aesthetic" in which the aesthetic value of natural environments, including landscapes, is the result of a negotiation between different components (multi-sensuousness, revitalised disinterestedness, imagination, emotion, and knowledge).

THE DEBATE IN ITALY

The contemporary philosophical debate on landscape is particularly thriving in Italy. The starting reference is Assunto (1973), a ground-breaking reclamation of the aesthetic value of landscape against its conceptual and practical exploitation and destruction for utilitarian purposes. Assunto stressed that in the aesthetic experience of landscape contemplation of the beautiful and embodied pleasure are conjoined, and that this experience is always an historical-cultural one. Landscape is nature turned into culture: from this point of view, Assunto attaches paradigmatic significance to the garden. Venturi Ferriolo (2002) focuses on landscape as an ethical product of human action and sense of responsibility. Landscape is first of all a human project, with a structural link to architecture, and just like the latter it needs to be shaped according to an ethically grounded principle of balance and beauty. In Bonesio's geo-philosophy, landscape is not an image to be contemplated aesthetically, but the concrete place of our life, historical identity, memory, etc., standing out in its individual irreducibility against the modernist utopia (or rather dystopia) of a global homogenised world (Bonesio 2017). D'Angelo (2014 and 2021) draws on a multiplicity of sources and methods (from classical philosophy to movies, from travel stories to legislative texts, from contemporary environmentalism to personal encounters) to develop a multi-layered philosophy of landscape that reclaims the conceptual specificity of the latter term against its widespread assimilation to the term "environment" (and its associated, merely "ecological" treatment) as well as the practical specificity of each landscape against aesthetic exceptionalism. Finally, Siani 2024 establishes a pragmatist, anti-dualistic dialogue between landscape studies and aesthetics. Following on the one hand the idea of an engaged ecology and on the other the indications of the *European Landscape Convention*, landscapes are not just ways of seeing the world as 'beautiful', but also of inhabiting it in a plurality of sense-making forms. On this basis, the intersection of landscape and aesthetics becomes a platform for improved communication between disciplines, ideas and cultures on urgent issues, including art and interpretation, environmentalism, temporality, lived spaces and infrastructures, justice and politics, education and interdisciplinarity.

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