

# Aesthetics versus Beauty

## — Form and Meaning in Nature and in Art —

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The arguments in this essay are based on the claim that contrasts and connections between natural and artistic beauty have not yet satisfactorily been investigated and that a clear comparison between beauty and aesthetic quality has not so far been attempted. I will try to show that the basic difference that we can generalize about art and nature is that nature offers an experience of beauty whereas in art we are primarily dealing with aesthetics, in the sense of finding meaning through form. By this comparison I imply that the beauty seen in nature and the aesthetic experience of art are different things. Modern and contemporary art has shown us that aesthetics is not always necessarily involved with beauty. One can also think about the aesthetics of nature, which is the investigation of how nature is perceived. On the other hand, when nature is contemplated with the intention of finding meaning, it is transformed into landscape, which is a representation involving artistic transformation, resulting in meaning. Here, my claim will be that the perception of art always results in meaning, even if this meaning is not translatable into verbal form, as opposed to the viewing of nature which gives us an experience of beauty, or of the sublime.

Since Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, which is the first elaborate discourse on the experience of beauty, there has not been sufficient interrogation on the difference between the experience of nature and the experience of art. In Kant's *Critique* which is mainly concerned with the perception of beauty and of the sublime in nature, the problem of meaning is not accosted.<sup>1)</sup> Kant's thought which has been criticized because of its essentialist nature, has nevertheless touched upon the fact that the consciousness of beauty in nature is always non conceptual. Kant's definition of this conscious experience of beauty in nature seems to be quite different than the experience offered by art. In line with this argument I will try to show how the aesthetic experience of nature is basically an experience of beauty which arouses feeling while the aesthetic experience of art is always involved with meaning and relates to 'intention'.<sup>2)</sup>

We can consider three different ways of viewing nature. One is immediate and without intention, as it happens when we walk in a field or forest. Our movement does not allow time for interpretation or contemplation. In this case, a practical kind of perception, which, guiding our movement, may also be in effect. Practical perception is immediate, in that it applies presupposed meanings in an almost non-reflective manner. Thus we can move on being guarded by our practical perception, but also perceiving what is around us only as form that is completely mute. The immediacy of perceptual responses to nature could be seen as part of the survival mechanism where response without reflection is of utmost importance. On the other hand, all throughout

history, in Eastern as well as in Western cultures the contemplative approach has received attention in the aesthetic perception of nature. In modern aesthetics the contemplative attitude has been opposed to with the view that all perception is engaged or interested. One of the foremost advocates of this view is Arnold Berleant whose many books on environmental aesthetics and engaged perception constitute important literature on the subject.<sup>3)</sup> It has also been argued that throughout history, attitudes towards nature have mostly been conditioned by economical and moral incentives.<sup>4)</sup>

Understanding and defining nature is a difficult if not impossible task. It is impossible to view nature 'as it is'. In fact, all our perception is conditioned by our cultural background as well as by our physiognomy. Although we can never approach and perceive anything 'as it is', it is safe to assume that there is a difference between viewing nature in an immediate way, without representing it, and viewing it as landscape. The first is an immediate perception which can often be loaded with emotion, awe or joy. I understand this way of facing nature similar to what Ken-ichi Sasaki means when he writes about viewing or experiencing nature by leaving culture behind. In this case there is no framing or special focus. One gives oneself to complete perception with all the senses.<sup>5)</sup> The second approach is the perception of an already mentally restructured nature; it is already a representation and implies a choice of venue and frame of view. Taking a photograph of nature transforms the immediacy of nature into a landscape with a definite order. Transforming nature into landscape also involves representation which happens through the contemplative gaze. As all representations, this involves intention and renders the resulting image with values and meaning.

On the other hand, no matter how we represent nature, nature essentially offers no meaning. It is the human eye or mind which projects human responses upon it. One may see nature as sad or joyful, but this is simply a projection of one's feelings. One of the well known landscape artists has given us the clue about the difference between nature and landscape: "*My landscapes are not only beautiful or nostalgic, not only romantic or apparently classical like lost paradises, but most of all they are "untruthful" (even if I did not always find the means of showing exactly this aspect), and by "untruthful" I mean the transfigured way in which we look at nature, the same nature that is always against us in all its forms, because it knows neither sense, nor mercy, nor compassion, because it does not know anything: absolutely mindless, it is the total contradiction of ourselves, absolutely inhuman*".<sup>6)</sup>

According to Theodor Adorno the beauty of nature is painful to observe: "*Pain in the presence of the beautiful—which pain is especially vivid in one's experience of nature – is both the yearning for what is promised but never unveiled by beauty and the suffering in the face of the insufficiency of the phenomenal appearance which wants to be like the beautiful but does not succeed.*"<sup>7)</sup> Adorno assumes that '*the beautiful in nature is close to the truth except that at the moment of closest proximity it beclouds itself anew*'. When Adorno mentions '*the meaningful silence of nature*'<sup>8)</sup> as Gerhard Richter claims, this meaningful silence offers no specific meaning. Nature's silence and muteness, if it has

any meaning at all, is our search for meaning. For Adorno nature also offers meaning when it gives one hope for the future, or suggests the not-yet. Many other writers, especially Japanese poets or painters have interpreted this feeling of pain as the result of the awareness of the temporariness of beauty. Another explanation for such pain is that whatever belongs to nature is enclosed in itself, in the realm of nature; and our inability to confirm any real dialogue in spite of our being strongly impressed gives pain. Yet this pain is mixed with joy, because beauty invigorates the senses and causes an elevation of the spirit. Thus the sense of beauty is mixed emotion. The immediacy and intensity of our response to beauty leaves us incapable of understanding the grounds for our response. Likewise Kant explained the response to beauty as completely sensory and non conceptual. Facing beauty in nature we are struck and spellbound. Gerhard Richter's above statement is a confirmation that nature has no meaning. For the human mind lack of meaning or the inability to derive any meaning out of one's experience causes pain and confusion. Anything or any perception the mind represents to itself is immediately rendered with meaning. The mind cannot tolerate meaninglessness which leads to a feeling of insecurity. One can say that any human endeavour either naturally creates meaning or is intended to create meaning. The emotional response to nature may suggest joy, pain, sorrow or fear, but one cannot consider these as meanings.

Reading Kant's thoughts on beauty as they concern art, one can understand the claims made by Modernist painters and by their spokesman Clement Greenberg early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century for whom art's content was the play of its forms. Greenberg insisted that all art, even if it was narrative was basically concerned with the abstract form.<sup>9)</sup> It is obvious that Kant is more concerned with form than with meaning in the work of art. He insists that any representation makes sense only through the appropriateness of its form: "*In painting, sculpture, and in fact in all the formative arts, in architecture and horticulture, so far as fine arts, the design is what is essential. Here it is not what gratifies in sensation but merely what pleases by its form, that is fundamental prerequisite for taste.*"<sup>10)</sup> This is further emphasized by his statement: "*To say that the purity alike of colours and of tones, or their variety and contrast, seem to contribute to beauty, is by no means to imply that, because in themselves agreeable, they therefore yield an addition to the delight in the form and one on a par with it. The real meaning rather is that they make this form more clearly, definitely, and completely intuitable, and besides stimulate the representation by their charm, as they excite and sustain attention directed to the object itself.*"<sup>11)</sup> To a large extent Kant conceives of artistic beauty in a way that is very close to natural beauty. The representation he is mentioning is related to the perception of the form or of the *design*.

According to Kant, all representation of nature, whether it is for decorative purposes or not is itself devoid of meaning and is enjoyed only for its form: "*Flowers are free beauties of nature. Hardly anyone but a botanist knows the true nature of a flower, and even he, while recognizing in the flower the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end when using his taste to judge of its beauty.... So designs a la grecque, foliage for framework or on wall-papers, &, have no intrinsic*

*meaning; they represent nothing- no Object under a definite concept – and are free beauties.*"<sup>12)</sup>

As the Enlightenment emphasized the importance of conceptual and cognitive faculties and gave priority to rationality, at the same time it found itself confronting the 'unfathomable'. The limits of understanding the mind, and understanding how we understand, have initiated investigations on unconscious and subconscious states of mind. Such investigations led to the evolution of psychology as a science and to psychoanalysis. In Kant's Third Critique, the unfathomable phenomena of nature are defined as sublime. It is clear that as the Enlightenment pursues rational explanations and lucid meanings in the human world, it is also confronting what cannot be understood. Romantic painters' favourite themes are often dramatic scenes from nature, such as those painted by Turner or Delacroix. On the other hand, the sublime in human nature, in other words what cannot be understood in the human realm, such as fear, rage, cruelty or madness form the subject matter of many romantic artists. As enlightened culture claims rationality, the arts reflect the other face of culture, the meaningless and the irrational, not only in nature but also in the impenetrable aspect of human nature. Man's insistence to solve the riddle of nature and to control it has not only been an ambition of science, the arts too, since the Renaissance and especially in the West have been preoccupied by it. In contemporary art biological human nature has also been a vital subject into which art has expanded its territory.

As examples of works dealing with nature (biological) we can cite the work of Damien Hirst, such as the dead shark or his recent work with butterflies; some artists have worked with and videoed dying people; photographs, videos and sound tracks of human anatomy and of interior organs have also often been on the agenda of contemporary art. More recently work with animals has also surfaced.<sup>13)</sup> The pioneer in this as well as for many works with nature (planting trees, working the land, etc) is Joseph Beuys whose performances with the dead rabbit and with the coyote are well known.

Especially since the 80's, ecological concerns and the extreme urban expansion which severed relations with nature have created a renewed interest in nature, in rural environments and in primitivism. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century as religion had lost its hold over people and economic conditions worsened, it was believed that the ensuing degeneration of society could be solved by a return to simple life, to nature and to the values of common people. Rousseau's and Voltaire's writings, the interest by the bourgeois and by the aristocracy in nature could be seen as initial movements which would gain widespread interest as industrialization posed a greater threat to nature. The revived interest in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century seems again to be the result of a fear about the earth's degeneration. Ecological Art and Land Art have directed the attention of many post World War II artists to nature in its raw form. It is often difficult to understand the meaning of art dealing with such subjects. Heidegger's essay on the *Origins of the Work of Art* can give us clues about how such works, where nature is forced into specific forms by artists, symbolize or bring to light what Heidegger calls the struggle between 'earth and world'. By earth Heidegger refers to nature and by world, to culture, or to the contextual in human existence.<sup>14)</sup>

Most Land Art, even when including formal aspects added by the artist, seem to be intended to draw attention to the beauty or awe inspiring muteness of nature, or to its sublime quality. Sometimes these works generate natural phenomenon such as the Lightning Field of Walter de Maria, or the circular rings on snow, drawn by Dennis Oppenheim. Even when artists intervene in nature by creating additional forms, obviously the reference is to a natural process. Artists have also been concerned with cycles of time and the historical process in nature. Works making allusion to the 'memory of the earth' give a new dimension to nature, simply that of human memory which will penetrate the muteness of nature, because evolution has sense only for human understanding. Otherwise nature, at any given moment, lives the absolute present. On the other hand, human presence in nature, or any evidence of it, transforms nature into an artefact and supplies it with subjectivity.

The notion of natural beauty has widened since ecological concerns have become part of art's subject matter. What used to be thought of as desert or steppe have now assumed a newly realized quality of beauty. Although the well tended green pastures and forested hills are still the paradigm of beauty according to general European standards, artists who have worked on land have brought to our attention the beauty of barren earth (Michael Heizer), of strange earth formations (James Turrell), of rocks and boulders (Richard Long), and of tempests and storms (Walter de Maria). Artists have also looked at the depths of the sea, the shores walled with seaweed or the forms left on the sand by tides (Melike Abasiyanik Kurtiç). One can also say that abstract art of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even more so the art of abstract expressionists have been influential in the growth of a new appreciation of natural forms. Abstract Expressionist artist who have favoured forms that emerged by chance, have often created images that resemble forms of wilderness in nature. Flying over the North Pole one can imagine seeing images from works of Pollock, Franz Kline or Motherwell. In fact American culture which evolved against a background of wild nature has been appreciative of such nature. Many Land artists, as well as the pioneers of ecological thought have been Americans. If European culture is basically urban and considers nature more in its domesticated forms, one can say that American culture is marked with an awareness of the conditions of wild nature. American landscape artists have often looked at prairies and wild plains while American Land artists have focused their attention on the qualities of nature from such venues.

As mentioned earlier, art as representation always intends to bring forth some meaning even if that meaning is not translatable into words at first sight. The way we perceive nature always ends in a sensuous response, and that is often related to the beauty of form or to the quality of the sublime, as explicated by Kant. In comparing responses to art and to nature Joseph Margolis has stressed how perceiving artworks, which are invested with intention lead to the understanding of ourselves. *"...our cognitive powers function very differently with respect to natural and cultural attributes..."* According to Margolis' arguments cultural objects or artefacts have *"predicated meanings (which) are quite different from physical properties."* As I intended to show, our perception of the *"natural-*

*kind*” objects, or of nature is the sensuous apperception of physical properties.<sup>15)</sup> When nature is treated as the subject and material of art, as it is with Land Art, even if a clear meaning does not issue, the intention of the artist to point at something specific becomes the content where meaning is looked for. In Land Art or in any other intervention nature is transformed and is no longer seen simply as nature. In contrast to this there is a way of seeing nature without any intentional effort to derive meaning. Adorno mentions the fact that nature can make us feel hopeful or positive for the future, as on a nice day. This means that we are being physically as well as mentally affected by light, colours and forms and we are content to let ourselves be taken over under the spell of nature.<sup>16)</sup> Nature is totally devoid of any meaning and intention and can be called abstract. One can also consider abstract art in much the same way as nature because forms do not mean by themselves unless we attribute meaning to them. On the other hand, in line with Ken-ichi Sasaki’s evaluation, nothing that culture produces can be as infinitely and in constantly changing ways beautiful as nature.<sup>17)</sup> While both abstract art and Land Art have certain affinities with nature, their approach is often a manipulation of either natural or perceptual qualities. In this respect, it is mostly Eastern art and prehistoric art such as cave paintings that have expressed admiration and modesty in viewing nature.

On the other hand, all representation is always a human interpretation which sees the represented object in a certain way, conveying a certain meaning. As mentioned before these meanings are not always immediately translatable into words, nevertheless they are always open to diverse interpretations. It can even be claimed that the intention behind all representation is to convey a certain meaning that the artist has discovered in looking at his subject matter.

Art, as something that conveys meaning and nature as mute and opaque both create ways of perceiving that contribute to the human psyche and to the cognitive capacity in different ways. However, Joseph Margolis reminds us that understanding nature is not possible without meanings afforded by culture: “...*nature itself and our knowledge of the independent physical world are, epistemically (not ontically), a posit abstracted from the reflexive world of human culture*”<sup>18)</sup> Paul Crowther insists on the importance of the arts in contributing to our cognitive faculties, stressing also that our relation to the world is enforced by artistic experiences: “...*it is art and aesthetic experience alone which give fullest expression to that fundamental encounter between human subject and the world wherein the fundamental reciprocity of both is affirmed.*”<sup>19)</sup> Paul Crowther further emphasizes art’s spiritual function, by referring to Hegel’s arguments.<sup>20)</sup> I would argue that it is both important to confront works of art and to try to understand them, while, on the other hand, observing nature as it is by intensely perceiving its forms. As art educates us in interpreting and understanding, nature sensitizes us in pure formal perception.

## Notes

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- 9) Greenberg, C. (1961) 'Modernist Painting' *Art in Modern Culture*, ed. Francis Francina& Jonathan Harris, New York: Phaidon, pp. 308-314
- 10) Kant, I., (1952) p.67, s.25
- 11) Kant, I., (1952) p.68, s.10
- 12) Kant, I., (1952) p. 72, s.25
- 13) *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, Volume 9 Number 1, 2010 see for various essays on art with and about animals.
- 14) Heidegger, M. (1950) 'The Origin of the Work of Art', *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, Ed. Albert Hofstadter & Richard Kuhns, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, pp.650-708
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