

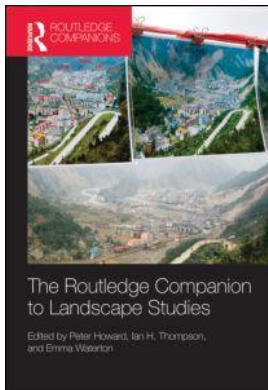
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Aesthetic appreciation of landscape

Isis Brook

WRITTLE COLLEGE

What is the aesthetic?

To study aesthetics is to explore, examine closely, and interrogate our experiences of feelings such as beauty or ugliness and the value we ascribe to them.

Aesthetics as a discipline has been entangled with philosophy of art for many centuries. If we are exploring the nature of the experience of an artwork such as a symphony, play, or painting, then our aesthetic response to it is an important component. However, that entanglement has meant that aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, the everyday world, and of our cultural landscapes came to be either ignored (Hepburn 1966) or examined through the framework of the arts. In this chapter on the aesthetic appreciation of landscapes I will focus primarily on the landscape as place and the aesthetic, taking its Greek root in *aesthesis*, as concerned with our sensory engagement and enjoyment, or otherwise, of place.

Whether the aesthetic resides mainly in the response of the experiencer or mainly in the qualities of that which is experienced is a complex question within aesthetics. Historically the shift has been from thing to person with an important turn taking place during the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century. The emphasis on the thing reached its culmination in Hogarth's 1752 objective 'line of beauty', which represented a rather formalized consolidation of Francis Hutchinson's ideas about the pleasingness of unity in variety. If there were a perfect serpentine line with the right degree of unity and variety it could dictate exactly how a landscape feature (or anything else) should be designed or how a landscape feature would be correctly judged against that objective measure such that persons of taste could be in agreement (Moore 2008). Around the same period, though, the aesthetic is coming to mean the inner response or affect of that which is experienced. The internalisation of the aesthetic can be identified by a number of theoretical developments and changes in worldview including the coining of the term 'aesthetics' by Baumgarten in 1735 and the rise of the role of imagination, first advanced by Addison in 1712 (Moore 2008). The development of most interest for us is the appreciation of the sublime in landscape. This, as we shall see, most clearly relied on an internal response to particular types of landscapes that had previously been seen as holding no positive aesthetic value. Internalisation could be seen as opening the way for an extreme subjectivity in which all views on aesthetic quality are equally valid, but this is not what is usually

meant. The aesthetic experience is one that is felt personally and relies on both our normal experiencing of life and particular qualities of attention, but it also claims some normative force such that it makes sense for one person to try to bring another to their way of seeing, to point out why they feel the way they do, and to get them to share that experience.

What is a landscape?

Definitions of landscape vary and some play on the relationship to landscape painting or the scene for a painting, from the Dutch *landschap*, which became anglicized as *landskip*. However, the root word for both the Dutch and English is the German *Landschaft* which is more directly translated as region, rural jurisdiction, or system of rural spaces (Muir 1999:3). Thus it carries the sense of a vaguely bounded whole that includes the landform and the inhabitants' particular way of organizing and interacting with the landform. (This concept of the landscape as 'lived in' rather than simply as 'viewed' becomes important in understanding contemporary landscape aesthetics.) The rural conception of landscape remains the norm, as evidenced by the coining of other, contrasting 'scapes': cityscape, townscape, streetscape, and even parkscape. A difference exists between the North American application of landscape to unmodified wilderness areas and the European application to what are its various rural countryside forms, thus necessitating the late nineteenth/early twentieth century term 'cultural landscape' (Arntzen and Brady 2008: 9). All that can be established with any certainty is that, like place, landscape is a vague concept and in reality has fuzzy edges. And yet we know what we mean and can spot when the term is being stretched, used metaphorically, or misapplied.

An example

It is easy to call to mind an archetypically pleasing landscape; there will be some cultural variation in the detail, but let us try.

Imagine turning the corner on a path one morning and seeing laid out before us a patchwork of fields rich in various crops or grazing animals and demarcated with hedges, stone walls, or trees. There is a small area of woodland over to one side, rolling hills in the distance and beyond them a craggy mountain peak around which are gathered a few white clouds against a blue sky. In the valley before us, amongst the fields, is a collection of dwellings diverse in shape and size but similar in building material and colours. These cluster along a sparkling river and encircle a small bustling market square. There is birdsong in the fields and a subtle smell of herbs and flowers rises from the vegetation as the sun warms the day. We might stop to take in the view – even take a photograph – in an attempt to capture the moment as there is something appealing about it. We find it pleasing to look at but also want to enter it: to experience it, to be envired by it, and take part in its various affordances.

How can such an experience be brought to you so easily and shared, both in terms of you understanding what is described and me predicting that you would also find it pleasing? Some might want to resist its charm as rural nostalgia or its proximity to twee populist taste and hanker for something more stimulating or fast moving as offered by a cityscape. In landscape terms though, what I have described, if charitably imagined, could never be ugly. (I add the charitable proviso because we might add to the imagining that this is a gated community on the edge of a deprived area, or that the viewer is an eighteenth-century peasant for whom enclosed fields were a political, economic and personal disaster.)

To see why our pleasing landscape is not just a case of personal preference we need to examine some aesthetic theory and even the very notion of aesthetic experience.

Experiences, responses and judgements

Our experiences, our immediate likes and dislikes, and our preferences or snap judgements are obviously related to the aesthetic, but the aesthetic is also about our deeper consideration and refinement of those judgements. To move into the realm of the aesthetic is to begin to question and experiment with those immediate responses. Even our food tastes – perhaps the most immediately judgemental sense – change and develop over time; we try new tastes and textures and come to enjoy the unfamiliar and are able to discern qualities previously unnoticed.

Thus the process of arriving at considered aesthetic judgements of landscapes begins with experience of moving through places, including memory and attendant cognitive elements, but then proceeds also to question it and introduce more complex cognitive processes. For example, we could ask: is it rugged, inviting, austere?; how do its parts relate to each other?; what impact does today's weather have on my experience?; and so on. Only then might we arrive at an evaluative aesthetic judgement guided not by our immediate personal likes and dislikes but by the aesthetic qualities of the landscape itself as they open up to us.

What sets aesthetic experience, response and judgement apart from, for example, moving through a landscape discussing last night's TV or whether the acreage could yield more profit if it were turned over to potatoes, is a particular kind of attention. We have to be wholly there and attend to the qualities of the landscape in a distinctive way. In aesthetic theory a part of that special quality of attention is called disinterestedness, which classically means avoiding the kind of thought processes that might stand in the way of aesthetic, as opposed to other forms of appreciation such as thoughts of ownership, profit, or that it was designed by a close friend. However, extreme forms of disinterestedness, in which any practical interest is forbidden, are not appropriate for landscapes, particularly those that involve practical human engagement (Bourassa 1991:21). For example, the aesthetic pleasure in seeing plump ears of barley is intensified by the cognitive component of imagining them providing sustenance as part of the cycle of the agricultural year. Taken too far this imagining can distract us from the aesthetic qualities of the golden rippling waves and shimmer of rising heat, but it is part of the satisfaction experienced in the scene as one of bounteous fullness.

Aesthetic landscape categories

Part of the cognitive component that I said featured in our initial experience is the historical tradition of landscape appreciation that is our cultural inheritance. In the West our past means that we currently tend to appreciate landscape under three distinct aesthetic categories: the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque.

Beauty as a distinct category (rather than its commonplace usage for anything pleasing) can be thought of as the quality of those things that please due to their regularity, smoothness, tranquillity and unity, as well as a certain smallness of scope. In landscape terms the pastoral equates with the beautiful. A traditional pastoral landscape is one that has close cropped grass, calm water, some variety of plants and trees but nothing abrupt, chaotic or demanding. Historically such landscapes were imagined as inhabited by figures from classical myths or allegory. Parkland created in a pastoral style often included small classical buildings – follies that looked like temples in the distance. The landscapes of William Kent and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown are pastoral in style.

The sublime in landscape is more challenging and appears as a positive aesthetic category in the eighteenth century (Nicolson 1963) The sublime relies on an emotional response to the grandeur of features such as rugged mountains, the tumultuous water of thundering rapids or

huge cascades, vertiginous cliffs and the atmospheric effects of thunder and lightning or swirling fog. The term sublime can also be accurately used for other landscapes that are challenging in terms of human flourishing, for example, deserts or arctic ice floes (Tuan 1993). Sublime landscapes are typically vast and irregular; they create a sense of awe in the person experiencing them. The sublime as an aesthetic response was initially understood as a pleasurable feeling that arose from being close to danger but in a place of safety (Burke 1757). The frisson of danger adds to our pleasure in the landscape experience. If the feeling moves into real danger, then the sublime retreats. For example, we might enjoy the slight disorientation of swirling mist descending when on a mountain path but as the fog thickens, the path is lost, and night descends, real fear takes over. In Kant's 1790 interpretation of the sublime, the pleasure arises from our awe of nature being tempered by the power of our reason to rise above the vastness or power of the sublime landscape or entity (Kant 1952:114). (It could be argued that this move is designed more to fit with the architectonic of Kant's metaphysics than accurately to reflect our actual aesthetic experience, but I leave this to the reader to test for themselves.) For some Romantics the awe felt in such places connects to the power of God as a creator, for others to the power of Nature. With industrialisation came a new dimension to the possibilities of sublime experience. Vast industrial machines of great power and noise could be pleasingly fearful in a similar way.

The picturesque as a specific aesthetic category arises out of a blending of the pastoral and the sublime. It takes the craggy irregularity of the sublime into the smaller more intimate compass of the pastoral. Or, as an early proponent, Gilpin (1984:22), said, it is: 'Beauty lying in the lap of horror'. Distinct elements of the picturesque are its endorsement of variety, intricacy, wildness, and decay (Brook 2008:112). In eighteenth-century park design the picturesque rejected both the order of formal symmetry and the quasi-natural of the designed Brownian pastoral (Price 1842:187). In the picturesque landscape aesthetic pleasure comes from the wildness of such things as overgrown walls, gnarled roots, and rustic paths. The smaller human scale is also reinforced by the inclusion of small scale agriculture (Watelet 2003 [1774]).

These three aesthetic categories inform our contemporary pleasure in landscapes that reflect aspects of any or even combinations of the pastoral, picturesque or sublime; hence my confidence in the example I gave that included elements of all three but was predominantly picturesque. All three categories have also undergone political critiques, largely due to their development out of the preoccupations of an aristocracy. The very real impoverishment that came out of the system of enclosures could cast an ethical shadow on the later visual appeal of a patchwork of fields. Likewise the building of 'picturesque' hovels, to be lived in by suitably rustic peasants, or the building of ruins where none existed in order to create a pleasing prospect are features of what Ruskin would call the 'lower' as opposed to the 'noble' picturesque (Ruskin 2010 [1856]: vol.4, p.7).

All three categories are also regularly criticized for driving a scenic conception of landscape and indeed of nature. However, although trends in landscape painting accompany all three categories these aesthetic sensibilities, particularly the sublime and picturesque were enriched by walking through such landscapes and encouraged ever increasing numbers of people to engage in these embodied experiences of landscape. Given this cultural inheritance I knew my described landscape was assured a positive response from most readers. However, we also have reason to think this response is not merely culturally bound but has deeper roots in human evolution.

Landscape preference as evolutionarily driven

The 'why' of our landscape preferences has been explored by many biologists, aestheticians and psychologists and many theories point to our liking for, or feeling at home in, certain landscapes

as an evolutionary adaptation. For example, in landscape preference studies people of all ages and all cultures seem to prefer those landscape forms that simulate a hospitable landscape for hunter-gathering survival. The 'savannah hypothesis' (Orians 1986) or 'prospect refuge theory' (Appleton 1990) both point to an inbuilt preference for that which would have sustained our primeval ancestors. Thus a landscape form that affords somewhere to hide and look out from is the kind of landscape in which we feel safe. The sublime tests our limits and introduces some excitement, the pastoral feels safe but can be boring and the picturesque strikes a balance between the two. Moreover, current research in human wellbeing also emphasizes the role of nature or at least some living plants in urban environments (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989).

On the evolutionary model it thus seems that we will, at the very least, feel more comfortable with the kinds of structural features that typically pleasing landscapes exhibit (prospect and refuge) and that feature natural materials, particularly living plants. Whether or not this evolutionary picture correctly identifies the deeper roots of our aesthetic responses these responses are well recorded in landscape preference studies (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). However, a common criticism of such studies and the kinds of graded landscape evaluations that they support is that the studies record responses to pictures of landscapes not the more rounded experiences of the landscapes in question (Fenton and Reser 1988). Moreover, even if they were accurate, they would record only what is preferred, not necessarily what, in aesthetic terms, should be preferred (more on this controversial point later).

Landscape as embodied experience

The work of Arnold Berleant is important in making the experiential turn in landscape appreciation through his radical rejection of the scenic conception of landscape. This rejection goes deeper than just the observation that we miss some of the qualities of a landscape if we focus on the visual. He noted that as we move through landscapes, we hear, feel, and smell:

The physical senses play an active part, not as passive channels for receiving data from external stimuli but as an integrated *sensorium*, which equally accepts and shapes sense qualities as part of the matrix of perceptual awareness. This is not just a neural or psychological phenomenon but a direct engagement of the conscious body as part of an environmental complex. It is the experiential locus of environmental aesthetics.

(Berleant 1992:14)

For Berleant, this direct engagement with the landscape is 'not just a visual act but a somatic engagement in the aesthetic field' (1992: 166). The use of the term 'field' indicates a move not just to the senses but to their integration with the landscape itself. As Berleant says elsewhere:

The environment is understood as a field of forces continuous with the organism, a field in which there is a reciprocal action of organism on environment and environment on organism, and in which there is no sharp demarcation between them. Such a pattern may be thought a participatory model of experience.

(Berleant 2005:9)

Thus, for the visitor, the archetypal landscape experience is probably the walk (or possibly the cycle). Here we are at close quarters with the land we move through: we feel the wind, smell the mown hay, are drawn by a curve in the road to take this path rather than that one, and we feel the demands of a steep incline as our muscles respond to the landform. Just as in the art

world we wouldn't normally watch dance without music, so the fact that the landscape speaks to all our senses, and particularly the kinaesthetic sense, means that just to view it would be not only to miss the richness of the landscape experience but also to fail to become part of that aesthetic field.

For those continuously inhabiting a landscape – for whom it is home – this participation can be deeper. For example, those who farm the landscape described earlier will have a very intimate knowledge of particular fields, the landscape through the seasons, and possibly across generations of activity and change. The context of the landscape includes them and their activity in a very real sense of being co-creative of each other. We might think that if their intimate knowledge is entirely practically directed – how to earn a living, or a better living, out of this land – then this would leave no scope for the aesthetic, given the disinterested nature of the aesthetic. However, this would misconstrue both disinterestedness and traditional farming. As hinted earlier, the bounteousness of a productive field can be an aesthetic quality even though it speaks to a use value. A farmer's relationship to their fields is not only more directly connected to its use value but also richer and deeper in other meanings. As Pauline von Bonsdorf carefully sets out, the body of the farmer and the land share more than a use relationship, the interest of the farmer is also the interest of care:

Enjoying the growth of the crops is more than enjoying merely the thought of future income; it is also enjoying the fertility of the land, the good climate that year or even the careful work one has done. None of these goods can be reduced to mere personal benefit: the last belongs to the moral realm and the other two articulate attitudes of the human-nature relationship. ... Aesthetic elements, attention, even aesthetic appreciation can be present in a situation even if it is not totally aesthetic.

(von Bonsdorf 2005: section 5)

Von Bonsdorf also argues that the practical knowledge of the land relies on 'a sensitivity akin to the aesthetic' (*ibid.*, section 3). The kind of fine judgements a farmer must make cannot come entirely from theory or manuals since they involve judgements of qualities that we think of in aesthetic terms (e.g. odour, sound, colour, patterns, vitality, overall feel). The farmer must tune into these qualities in order to know, for example, what to plant, when to harvest, when something is not quite right with an animal and so on. The quality of attention and the levels of discernment are what, in some other realms, we would refer to as connoisseurship.

The model of participatory aesthetics leads us away from aesthetics as concerned with a distanced and wholly disinterested perspective and into something embodied and connected to a realm of meaning and relationships that are part of the lived world. This would seem to prioritize the perceptions of those engaged in that deeper relationship, but there might still be good reason to want to interrogate those lived responses and identify the aesthetic within them.

Who should make aesthetic judgements about landscapes?

The project of aesthetics is, like ethics, axiological – it's a study about values – and is not fully captured with descriptions of what *is* valued; it also attempts to argue about what *should* be valued. Just as the blockbuster film or bestselling novel is not necessarily thought to be the best film or novel by informed appreciators of those forms, the popular landscape form might not be the one that has the strongest aesthetic potential. The qualities revealed by a considered and careful engagement with a landscape could produce rich aesthetic experiences beyond those that an initially appealing landscape can create. As with art criticism this can make landscape

appreciation sound elitist, requiring special faculties beyond those of the normal inhabitants of a place. This is not so, but it would be misguided and wrong to suggest that aesthetic qualities are down to individual subjective judgement without any sense of the need for time and consideration to arrive at them. This is fortunate because landscapes are lived in and are public in the sense of being unavoidable for those who live in, visit, or pass through them. If informed evaluations of their aesthetic quality can be made that do not just amount to individual preferences, then it starts to make sense to introduce aesthetic reasons to defend, promote, and conserve landscapes as a public good because they will reliably offer those aesthetic experiences.

Landscapes are not just practical and cultural resources for humans; they also create ecological and morphological value. A helpful way of grasping where aesthetic value resides is to think of the aesthetic in terms of supervenient qualities that are created out of the way those resources, stories, and objective properties intermingle in a characteristic way in a place. Our capacity to feel those qualities and express them in aesthetic descriptions and judgements requires our subjective reflection on our response to them. However, this subjective element does not mean that such judgements are a 'free for all' and that anyone's response is as valid as anyone else's. Some responses are superficial or idiosyncratic. For example, someone might find open moorland boring because they have never really explored its particular thrilling expansiveness and shifting marriage of land and sky or they might dislike the rich pungency of leaf mulch in an autumn woodland because school bullies once made them eat some. Positive aesthetic value is sensed and appreciated subjectively – it can't be done by a machine – but the qualities appreciated are based on properties of the landform, vegetation, structures, climate and so on and their characteristic way of working together to create a whole. These qualities are open to discussion and debate between subjects and to deeper experiencing with more engagement.

The relationship between aesthetic qualities and the properties that facilitate them is helpfully discussed in a classic paper by Frank Sibley (1959). We can see that to become an informed judge of a landscape requires that one attend to its aesthetic qualities by attending to and tuning into the specifics of a place, not by how it matches up to or falls short of some imagined ideal or other place. We might bring our understanding of historical and cultural developments as well as geological and ecological processes into the evaluation to enrich our understanding and response. However, the aesthetic appreciation and evaluation of a landscape must ultimately be informed by our considered aesthetic response, not solely our scientific or cultural understanding. This means that particular landscapes with great biodiversity or rarity value or historical cultural significance, if they are to be defended, need to be defended for those reasons. These aspects can increase their aesthetic value but do not necessarily do so. Conversely, a landscape feature can have great beauty, for example, a spinney of beech trees, with smooth bark, iridescent green spring leaves and a uniform golden brown carpet of fallen leaves lit here and there by shafts of sunlight breaking through the emerald canopy. All of the properties mentioned come together to create this magical atmosphere in the spinney. However, note that they are also all features that prevent greater biodiversity than could be delivered by other tree species, yet this fact does not impact on their aesthetic quality. Other types of woodland have their own aesthetic qualities and may also provide great biodiversity. One could therefore argue on ecological grounds that beech spinneys should be less numerous, but their aesthetic value is not directly commensurable with an ecological value such as biodiversity.

That said, ecological value can lead us into reconsideration of a previously aesthetically ignored or disparaged landscape type. For example, we might bring knowledge of the long historical development and teeming insect life and plant diversity of a peat bog to bear on our

consideration of the bog's aesthetic qualities. When we look again and consider the peat bog in the light of this knowledge new qualities emerge such that we see and feel about it differently. Indeed, some aestheticians regard such knowledge as essential to arrive at 'correct' aesthetic appreciation of a landscape (Carlson, 2010). However, the role of science, or at least natural history, in arriving at 'correct' aesthetic judgements is controversial in environmental aesthetics (Brady, 2003). Allen Carlson maintains that just as in the art world an understanding of categories of art is important in arriving at correct judgements of aesthetic quality, so in nature an understanding of its categories and processes is important in arriving at correct aesthetic judgements. Although this approach has some merits it does question the legitimacy of the aesthetic experiences of the non-scientifically informed in a way that seems unjust. Moreover, other types of aesthetic experience such as being moved by nature (Carroll 1993) or becoming part of an aesthetic field (Berleant 1992) are left out. Scientific knowledge can enhance our appreciation and press us to experience more, but it can also drive out the aesthetic by introducing other claims on our attention such as the botanist who misses the beauty of dew sparkling moss or the 'twitcher' who doesn't dwell on the intricacy of tessellated duck plumage, due to anxieties about species identification.

For landscape aesthetics, geomorphology, ecology, cultural history, agriculture, silviculture, design, meteorology and so on are all relevant disciplines that feed into our ability to read the landscape, but familiarity and emotional connection can bring a different perceptiveness as can unfamiliarity. People who live in an area can be blind to its aesthetic qualities or they can be deeply aware of and appreciate them in a way that an outsider cannot experience, as with our farmer above. Similarly, experts can be insightful, bringing a wealth of experience and sensitivity to bear on the consideration of landscapes, or they can be blinded by attempts to measure landscape as a scenic resource using pre-set criteria, inventories, indices, uniqueness ratios and so on (Porteous 1996:195).

Many of the attempts in the 1960s and 1970s to objectify and make measurable judgements of aesthetic value were flawed because they put specific, usually art inspired, values in at the beginning so that, for example, mountains were always better than lowlands, thus furnishing the evaluator with a checklist of things good landscapes contain (Linton 1968). This will inevitably prioritize certain types of landscape rather than evaluate landscapes for their quality as the kind of landscape they are. Other methods were less prescriptive in terms of properties but just reiterated positive aesthetic qualities such as unity or variety (Litton 1982). On balance the second approach which amounts to saying 'here are some aesthetic terms you might like to consider while experiencing landscapes' is closer to useful guidance than suggesting that landscapes with big mountains or fast flowing rivers always have the greatest aesthetic value. An attempt to arrive at a landscape character assessment that is alive to aesthetic qualities prevents the potential denigration of some cultural or natural landscapes because they lack prescribed scenic resources.

Aesthetics as always a work in progress

As individuals our aesthetic sensibilities are mutable: they can be enhanced or degraded. We can be open to new aesthetic experiences and explore them before making considered judgements or we can close ourselves off from them. Each new experience of landscape helps us to imagine and explore even familiar landscapes from a fresh perspective.

Aesthetics is also mutable at the social level. Although our evolutionary preferences will always be a background, culturally we can move from older aesthetic ideals to new ones. We have seen this historically with the rise of the sublime as a new aesthetic category in which

rugged landscape forms were felt to hold a new kind of stirring pleasure, which then became a shared cultural norm.

Today the new challenges and debates for cultural landscape aesthetics are often around new technologies and changing land use. I will consider two examples in order to revisit issues from the previous sections and explore how progress is made.

Wind turbines on fell sides, coastlines and open moorland can be presented as desecrating the landform and ruining the aesthetic quality of particular landscapes. Alternatively, by focusing on the aesthetic qualities of the turbines, such as the clean lines, the pristine white, the elegant structure with its slim tower and vast blades, we can try out a different perspective. Perhaps instead of spoiling the landscape they draw its elements together and help to express the character of the place by making the wind more evident and bringing out the majesty of the elements in a wild environment. We can try to experience them in this light and see what happens. This is how aesthetics works: in some places the feeling of desecration remains and in others a new element is introduced that somehow completes and brings an exciting dynamism to the landscape. That said, the aesthetic perception of the traveller passing through the landscape or looking at illustrations in planning documents will be very different from those living in proximity to turbines with their asynchronous strobing of the light and sonic pulsing. Impacts on the aesthetics of our everyday experience can slip into the background, but, like constant traffic noise, they do impact on us in a way that is clearly revealed when they stop. A cognitive element to the wind farm experience is sometimes invoked as an aesthetic component. Here our perception of this as a clean technology that will replace environmentally detrimental means of energy production plays into and enhances our positive aesthetic perception (Saito 2004). As with the bountiful crop example above this quasi-use value could have some place, but note that it depends on our perception of wind energy as clean, efficient, and environmentally friendly. If we later find there are problems such as cradle-to-grave production pollution, impacts on migratory birds, or general inefficiency (Boone 2005), then, logically, our aesthetic perception must change in line with this new information.

Drawing on a second contemporary example I want to show how the aesthetic response can also resist the new from a sense of disquiet that shades into the ethical. In a defence of new agricultural landscapes, Carlson explores their aesthetic qualities:

Here intensity of color and boldness of line combine with scale and scope to produce landscapes of breathtaking formal beauty: great checkerboard squares of green and gold, vast rectangles of infinitesimally different shades of grey ... When viewed from high land or a low flying plane such landscapes match the best of geometrical painting in power and drama.

(Carlson 2002:185–6)

Carlson finds a new kind of beauty in these landscapes by *not* looking for the traditional farmstead with its human scale. He revels in the size and power of the machines that now work this industrial landscape. He regrets in some ways the passing of the small towns that the older farming methods supported but feels that this new agriculture in a global context is here to stay and we can grow to appreciate it. However, an alternative response might be to see the land flattened to provide the uniform blank slate necessary for the vast machinery and automated irrigation systems and not as landscapes at all since they have lost the integration of humans and land that traditional agricultural systems had retained. The impression of human domination of the land rather than a sensitive working with the land can create an ethical/aesthetic dissonance. The absence of animals – now warehoused in intensive feedlots – might add to that sense of

disquiet. The land and animals have become parts of an industrial machine. A gut feeling of resistance to this could be explored and revealed as just a fear of the new, but it could also be an aesthetic response that triggers an ethical questioning. Adding the cognitive element that sees this production method as heavily oil dependent and thus endangered and likely to result in leaving soils incapable of supporting crops by more traditional methods (a new dust bowl) adds to that sense of dislocation. Here agriculture is no longer a human use of the landform that creates aesthetically engaging and satisfying landscapes through a process of accommodation and working with its affordances. Our gut reaction to this new landscape form and the difficulty of rousing any positive aesthetic response is a germinal ethical response. That Carlson needs to shift to an art analogy to find pleasure in the land, as if it were an abstract painting, could in itself suggest that something is wrong since it runs counter to all the work accomplished in environmental aesthetics to shift from the scenic as the only means of appreciating landscape.

Conclusion

Landscape is about wholes and the aesthetic experience of landscapes requires that we consider the place – that vaguely bounded area – as a whole. We might be attracted to detail or particular features but the feeling of the whole is our focus. Our thoughts can reach further to the context of that landscape in history and in the wider environment through many channels of information. Our thoughts can also sift the emotions, responses, impressions, and intuitions that arise in order to arrive at considered aesthetic judgements, which can then be discussed and debated. However, none of this can begin before the experience itself; experience is the bedrock of the aesthetic and without it we just recycle the thoughts of others and never enter the aesthetic field.

Further reading

- Bourassa, S. C. (1991) *The Aesthetics of Landscape* London: Belhaven. (A short and very accessible book on landscape aesthetics. This would be a useful starting point for anyone new to the area.)
- Brady, E. (2003) *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (A detailed examination of environmental aesthetics and particularly useful for its examination of the cognitive vs. non-cognitive debate.)
- Brook, I. (ed.) (2010) 'Environmental Aesthetics', special issue of *Environmental Values* 19:3. (This special issue contains papers by many of the key theorists in the area including Allen Carlson, Ronald Hepburn, Arnold Berleant, and Yuriko Saito. It covers the last 50 years and anticipates new directions.)
- Moore, R. (2008) *Natural Beauty: a theory of aesthetics beyond the arts*, Toronto: Broadview Press. (Useful on the aesthetics of nature and the history of aesthetics, and, like Brady, proposes a combining of the cognitive and non-cognitive approach.)
- Nasar, J. (ed.) (1998) *Environmental Aesthetics: theory, research and applications*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Though becoming rather dated, this is a useful textbook with papers on everything from architectural interiors to natural and rural scenes. It brings together the theories, methods and applications in a single text.)
- Thompson, I. (1999) *Ecology, Community and Delight: sources of value in landscape architecture*, London: Routledge. (A helpful book that brings together landscape with design and ecological concerns.)

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