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The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Environmental Aesthetics (Spring, 1998), pp. 101-111

Published by: [Blackwell Publishing](#) on behalf of [The American Society for Aesthetics](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/432249>

Accessed: 29/02/2012 12:41

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The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature

I. ADVOCATES FOR THE SCENICALLY CHALLENGED PARTS OF NATURE

Revolution in the aesthetics of nature often takes place when people start appreciating the parts of nature formerly regarded as aesthetically negative. One such example is the change in the aesthetics of mountains which occurred during the early eighteenth century. We are witnessing another revolution in this country which started a century ago. Its primary purpose is to overcome the pictorial appreciation of the natural environment, a legacy left by the picturesque aesthetics established during the latter half of the eighteenth century. The picturesque emphasis on vision as the vehicle for appreciating the natural environment has led us to regard nature as a series of scenes consisting of two-dimensional designs. This approach to nature has also encouraged us to look for and appreciate primarily the *scenically* interesting and beautiful parts of our natural environment. As a result, those environments devoid of effective pictorial composition, excitement, or amusement (that is, those not worthy of being represented in a picture) are considered lacking in aesthetic values.¹

Consider, for example, John Muir's experience of encountering two artists on Mt. Ritter in the High Sierras. Muir complains that they were satisfied only with a few scenic spots affording spectacular, startling views. However, other parts that attracted Muir, such as the autumn colors of the surrounding meadows and bogs, were "sadly disappointing" to the artists because they did not make "effective pictures."²

Half a century later, Aldo Leopold echoes Muir's complaint. "Concerned for the most part with show pieces," Leopold claims, we are "willing to be herded through 'scenic' places" and "find mountains grand if they be proper mountains with waterfalls, cliffs, and lakes." Because we expect to be entertained by the

grand, amusing, and spectacular parts of nature (such as in national parks), we find the Kansas plains "tedious" and the prairies of Iowa and southern Wisconsin boring. Against such a common tendency, Leopold reminds us that "in country, as in people, a plain exterior often conceals hidden riches," and urges us to develop the aesthetic sensitivity to penetrate the "plain" exterior to reach the hidden riches.³

The same sentiment is expressed by a contemporary painter, Alan Gussow. While not objecting to the popular appreciation of the "crown jewels" in the National Park system, he calls for "the cultivation of an ability to see beauty in more modest, less aggressive settings," such as tidal wetlands and wildlife habitats. According to Gussow, their beauty is primarily based upon health and sustainability and is more subtle, less visible, than the grandiose splendor of the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, or Mt. Rainier.⁴

Holmes Rolston III, a contemporary writer on environmental ethics, reiterates this concern for the common inclination to depreciate the scenically challenged parts of nature. In defending the positive aesthetic value of a rotten carcass of an elk full of maggots (not our typical example of scenic beauty), he advises against our tendency to look for pretty objects and picturesque scenes fit for a postcard. "At the beginning," Rolston claims, "we search for something pretty or colorful, for scenic beauty, for the picturesque. Landscapes regularly provide that, but when they do not, we *must not* think that they have no aesthetic properties."⁵

In his recent writings on nature aesthetics, Allen Carlson also challenges the pictorial approach to nature. According to Carlson, considering nature as a series of landscape paintings is inappropriate, simply because that is not what

nature is. This landscape model for appreciating nature “requires us to view the environment as if it were a static representation which is essentially ‘two dimensional.’ It requires the reduction of the environment to a scene or view.” Experiencing nature as a static, representational, two-dimensional scene, however, “unduly limits our appreciation ..., it also misleads it.”⁶ Carlson claims that with a proper approach (to be specified later), even pictorially challenged natural objects would appear aesthetically positive, confirmed by the change of people’s attitudes regarding mountains, jungles, insects, and reptiles.⁷

II. WHY ADVOCATE POSITIVE AESTHETIC VALUE FOR THE SCENICALLY CHALLENGED?

The writers cited above are in agreement in criticizing the pictorial appreciation of nature and share a general concern over the scenically challenged aspects of nature. But why is it important to overcome our tendency toward scenic appreciation? Because such a mode of appreciation neglects the scenically challenged, and our experience of those pictorially enjoyable objects may be limited or misguided? But that is begging the question. Why can we not just enjoy what appeals to us and forget about the boring landscapes and the dead animals with a putrid smell and maggots crawling all over them? As Carlson himself points out (though he does not accept), “we can, of course, approach nature as we sometimes approach art, that is, we can simply *enjoy* its forms and colors or *enjoy* perceiving it however we may happen to.”⁸ Why not then relax and just enjoy similar things in nature?

Carlson’s own response is, for the most part, based upon a cognitive argument. He claims that “*if* we are to make aesthetic judgments which are likely to be *true*,” that is, judgments which avoid both “aesthetic omissions and aesthetic deception,”⁹ we must interpret and appreciate the natural object in its correct scientific category, rather than as pictorial design. Rolston at times also invokes this type of cognitive reasoning: “To try to understand the beauty of wildness with a resource model or with pictorial criteria is inevitably to *misunderstand* it,” making these experiences examples of “dreadful category mistakes.”¹⁰

However, this argument alone will not show how and why this cognitive consideration should

outweigh other considerations, such as maximum enjoyment, amusement, and entertainment accompanying the (inappropriate) aesthetic appreciation. In the case of art, the most enjoyable experience may not always correspond to the most correct appreciation rooted in the appropriate art-historical knowledge. Appreciating a representational painting as a nonrepresentational design may make the experience more pleasant by simply avoiding the sometimes long, arduous task of determining its symbolic content and allusions. Furthermore, an incorrect interpretation may render the otherwise “grating, cliché-ridden, pedestrian” object “exciting, ingenious,” hence a “masterpiece.”¹¹ Or, reading a literary work with “deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution” may “fill the most placid works with adventure.”¹²

Similarly, one could argue that an incorrect interpretation may render our aesthetic experience of the natural object more enjoyable. The longevity and popularity of the pictorial appreciation may indicate the attractiveness of its (presumably improper) approach, most likely because very little work is demanded of us. Furthermore, an ordinary oak tree in front of my house may look much more exciting, amusing, and interesting when viewed as a maple tree. It is true that the qualities of novelty and uniqueness, when applied to my oak tree as a maple tree, are “mistaken” and “incorrect.” However, in the absence of other constraints, these cognitive concerns *by themselves* do not overcome the challenge of entertainment seekers who pursue any way (no matter how misguided or incorrect) of getting their aesthetic kicks, so to speak.

I think that what is needed for advocating the appropriate appreciation is a moral consideration. Let us first examine the reason why it is inappropriate to experience a work of art incorrectly, even when doing so would provide the utmost enjoyment and entertainment. Our refusal to experience an art object on its own terms, that is, within its own historical and cultural context as well as by reference to the artist’s intention, indicates our unwillingness to put aside (at least to a certain extent) our own agenda, whether it be an ethnocentric or a present-minded perspective or the pursuit for easy pleasure and entertainment. As John Dewey reminds us, the moral function of art is “to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the

eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, [and] perfect the power to perceive." Art invites us to visit an often unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable world created by the artist, encouraging us to "enter ... into other forms of relationship and participation than our own."¹³ Granted, our journey may prove to be disappointing and our willingness not adequately rewarded because of the poor quality of the artwork. However, such a possibility should not discourage us from approaching each art object with due respect, to give it a chance.

Similarly, in the case of nature, our effort at understanding its origin, structure, and function correctly indicates our willingness to recognize its own reality quite apart from us and to suspend our exclusive pursuit for entertainment in nature. Instead of imposing our own standard of aesthetic value (such as pictorial coherence), we are willing to acknowledge and appreciate the diverse ways in which nature speaks, though some may not be clearly comprehensible at first.

While Rolston, like Carlson, does invoke the cognitive argument, he also argues for the moral importance of the correct appreciation of nature. To demand that nature please us pictorially is to treat it "as though it were material to be harvested for a picture postcard." But "environmental ethics stretches out from our individualistic, self-centered perspectives into a consideration of systemic beauty." As a result, "we *ought not* to tour Glacier National Park interested only in a view," thinking "as though the parts of nature that cannot serve us ought at least to please us."¹⁴ The ultimate reason for aesthetically appreciating the scenically challenged is the moral importance of overcoming our perception of nature as (visual) resources to be used for our enjoyment.

Leopold is even more specific and explicit about the moral reason for advocating the aesthetic appreciation of the underappreciated parts of nature. He worries that "American conservation is ... still concerned for the most part with *show pieces*" and that "we have not yet learned to think in terms of small cogs and wheels." These parts are often unscenic, like the flora and fauna of a prairie, but necessary for sustaining the working of the natural environment. But the knowledge concerning these cogs and wheels must be supplemented by "a refined taste in natural objects." Such a refined taste presupposes perception informed by relevant scientific

facts, not merely what meets the untutored eye, because "much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen."¹⁵ With such a perception, Leopold hopes that we will come to have an aesthetic appreciation of these unscenic parts, providing a step toward developing an ecologically responsible attitude toward nature.

I do not think we should give an overly moralistic account of appropriately appreciating nature by indiscriminately condemning the pictorial appreciation of it. Nature appreciation, just like art appreciation, must begin somewhere, as acknowledged by Leopold himself: "our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty."¹⁶ I take the moral dimension of nature appreciation described in this section to indicate the direction for guiding our education in nature aesthetics.

III. HOW TO APPRECIATE THE SCENICALLY CHALLENGED

The previous discussion addresses the "why" of the aesthetics of the scenically challenged. I would now like to inquire about "how" we can account for the positive aesthetic value of the pictorially unsatisfactory parts of nature.

Let us first consider the remedy offered by Rolston to cure our pictorial appreciation of nature. According to him, the presumed negative aesthetic value of the dead elk with maggots stems from isolating these objects from a larger context.

Every item *must* be seen not in framed isolation but framed by its environment, and this frame in turn becomes part of the bigger pictures we *have to* appreciate—not a "frame" but a dramatic play.¹⁷

We should view a natural object or phenomenon in its own larger context, whether spatial or temporal, so that we understand the role it plays in the drama of the life cycle or in the sustenance of an ecosystem. In short, "one *should* thrill over ecosystems, at the production of which Nature seldom fails." One consequence of this view is that "nature's landscapes *almost without fail* have an essential beauty."¹⁸

I find several problems with this proposal, however. First, the emphasis on a larger frame of the whole ecosystem (in which a carcass and maggots take part) makes unclear what exactly

the aesthetic object is. Is it the entire ecosystem or an individual object (like the carcass)? If this seemingly ugly part is “only a still shot in an ongoing motion picture,” a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, or a player in the drama of “a dynamic evolutionary ecosystem,”¹⁹ is not the aesthetic object the *entire* motion picture, the jigsaw puzzle, or the ecosystem, but *not* the carcass and maggots? If so, even if we agree that the whole is aesthetically positive, it does not follow that the beauty of the whole implies the beauty of its parts.

One could respond that, indeed, the aesthetic object in nature is not individual pieces but always the whole ecosystem constituted by individual pieces. However, this response creates further problems. First, if, as Rolston claims (and other scientists seem to agree), the particular ecosystem that contains the elk carcass and maggots “in turn becomes part of the bigger picture we have to appreciate,” then the ultimate object of appreciation is not even a local environment surrounding these objects but rather a global environment.²⁰ Then, if we ought to appreciate nature as a large frame, this position leads to a counterintuitive consequence that the only legitimate object for our aesthetic experience of nature is the global ecosphere.

Second, even if we agree that there is beauty in an ecosystem (due to its harmony, unity, and interdependence of parts) it is a highly conceptual one, experienced by most of us through verbal descriptions or a diagram. Unless we are field ecologists observing its many members and their behavior for a long period of time, such beauty is beyond our ordinary perceptual experience. On the other hand, a rotten carcass and maggots *are* easily accessible to our perception. By stressing the aesthetic value of the whole ecosystem, the actual perceptual experience of the individual object seems to become unimportant. In fact, if the beauty of an ecosystem determines the beauty of each of its members, the positive aesthetic value of each of its members is predetermined, rendering our actual experience of their colors, shapes, smells, textures, and movements irrelevant.

But we must stress that the *aesthetic* value of the elk with maggots is not simply our conceptual understanding of its role in the ecosystem, but *the way in which* its various sensory qualities illustrate or express their important role. The drama of life, struggle, and the transience of ex-

istence must be *presented* in the visual composition, as well as in the smell and texture of the decaying animal carcass and the movements of maggots. Our conceptual understanding of the working of the whole ecosystem triggered by our perception of the carcass and maggots has to be brought back to these individual objects at hand.

In this sense, I agree with Carlson’s account of how scientific reference illuminates nature in terms of the story it tells about it. The importance of scientific knowledge in the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature has been repeatedly stressed in Carlson’s writings. According to him, just as proper appreciation of art must begin with the correct art-historical understanding of the object, the appropriate appreciation of nature must also be based upon correct information regarding it. This information must be supplied by nature itself, irrespective of our own associations, because “nature is natural—not our creation,” implying that “we can discover things about them which are independent of any involvement by us in their creation.”²¹ Scientific knowledge about a natural object’s own structure, history, and function will facilitate the most correct and rewarding appreciation by suggesting the best approach to each of the diverse environments. Furthermore, each scientific story “illuminates nature as ordered—either by making its order visible and intelligible or by imposing an order on it.”²²

Specifically, we *see and feel* the drama of the life cycle in the motionless elk carcass (in contrast to its dignified movement we have witnessed or can imagine) exuding the texture and smell of decay, along with the incessant movements of maggots as if to symbolize the unglamorous, yet crucial work crew behind the scene. With Muir, we admire *the way in which* “nature’s poems [are] carved on tables of stones” of Mt. Ritter, and we enjoy “reading the records she has carved on the rocks.”²³ And, as Leopold describes, the aesthetic value of cranes is embodied in their call, capturable only “with the slow unraveling of earthly history,” symbolizing “a paleontological patent of nobility.”²⁴ Training in “nature study,” in particular evolution and ecology, will “promote perception,” not simply of the sensuous surface of nature, but the way in which its origins, functions, and mechanisms are disclosed and manifested externally. Though “invisible and incomprehensible” at

first, the appropriate scientific knowledge brings “a change in the mental eye,” enabling us to decipher and appreciate the “marsh-land chorus,” “the song of a river,” “the speech of hills,” which is “a vast pulsing harmony—its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and the centuries,” and “the incredible intricacies of the plant and animal community—the intrinsic beauty of the organism called America.”²⁵

What is important in all these descriptions of nature appreciation is that (1) these appreciations are anchored in the scientific understanding of the objects’ origin, history, and function, but (2) such scientific understanding is incorporated *insofar as* it illuminates the sensuous surface of the immediate object. I believe that the *aesthetic* appreciation has to begin and end with the sensuous, though the sensuous can be, and often is, modified or adjusted by the conceptual. Leopold reflects upon the primacy of the sensuous in his nature appreciation thus: “my earliest impressions of wildlife and its pursuit retain a vivid sharpness of form, color, and atmosphere that half a century of professional wildlife experience has failed to obliterate or to improve upon.”²⁶

If we consider the aesthetic appreciation of nature as appreciating the *way in which* nature tells its own story through its sensuous qualities, we can account for the asymmetry between art and nature in terms of their aesthetic values. When we experience a work of art, even if we heed Dewey’s advice and make an effort to meet the object on its own terms, the object may not reward us for our effort and willingness in the following two ways. First, if for the moment we construe art as a storyteller, it may disappoint us because the story it tells, no matter how brilliantly narrated, may simply be too repulsive and abhorrent. For example, it would be difficult to have a pure aesthetic appreciation of a work of art which celebrates the Third Reich or which glorifies rape and child abuse.²⁷

Conversely, even if we do not have any objection to the story told by an art object, it may be related to us so ineffectively that we may not find any aesthetic value in the object. We criticize those objects as poor, or failed, works of art. Thus, with respect to art, there are ways in which aesthetic values are considered lacking,

even with our utmost effort to supply the necessary framework and context.

However, the above considerations do not apply to our aesthetic appreciation of nature, making it plausible that every part of nature is aesthetically positive. Because nature is amoral, it would not make sense to consider some of its stories (about its origin, structure, and ecological function) to be morally objectionable or unacceptable.²⁸ Moreover, I cannot think of any stories of nature which are uninteresting or trivial. As Leopold rhetorically states, “the weeds in a city lot convey the same lesson as the redwoods.”²⁹ The account of how maggots are constructed to break down animal meat for food and how their role is vital to the functioning of the entire ecosystem is as fascinating as how the Grand Canyon has been formed over the millennia. No matter how seemingly insignificant, uninteresting, or repulsive at first sight, natural history and ecological sciences reveal the marvelous works of every part of nature.

Furthermore, while there may be different degrees of nature’s skill in storytelling, none of its parts are mute. Simply by virtue of exhibiting various perceptual features, they all bear witness to their own origin, structure, and function, which we articulate verbally in our scientific accounts. Indeed, scientific discourse exists because of nature’s observable characteristics. In this sense, I agree with Carlson’s observation:

All of nature necessarily reveals the natural order. Although it may be easier to perceive and understand in some cases more than in others, it is yet present in every case and can be appreciated once our awareness and understanding of the forces which produce it and the story which illuminates it are adequately developed. In this sense all nature is equally appreciable.³⁰

Perhaps I can restate this passage as follows: every part of nature is aesthetically positive for its storytelling power. In our aesthetic appreciation, we are backtracking the scientific story to the sensuous, as it were, because the sensuous is what suggests the scientific account in the first place.

IV. IS EVERYTHING IN NATURE AESTHETICALLY APPRECIABLE?

However, is all of nature really aesthetically appreciable? Let us reflect upon our everyday ex-

perience. One might say that even if we try to bring ourselves to listen to nature's stories, some things in nature are so repulsive, annoying, or unattractive that we cannot bring ourselves to appreciate the positive aesthetic value of their storytelling. Fleas, flies, cockroaches, and mosquitoes, no matter how interesting their anatomical structures and ecological roles may be, are simply pesky—only an entomologist will be able to take an objective stand toward them. Bats, snakes, slugs, worms, centipedes, and spiders simply give us the creeps and cause us to shudder. Dandelions, crabgrass, and “weeds” are eyesores. Our negative reaction to these things outweighs their positive aesthetic value of embodying their interesting life story.

Several responses can be given to this objection. One is to point out that some of our negative responses may be due to not experiencing the object in its own environment. We condemn dandelions and other “weeds” when they appear on our meticulously maintained lawn or golf course.³¹ They may not necessarily be depreciated when they appear on a wild meadow. Similarly, I may deplore a snake when it slithers across my basement floor, but my reaction will probably be less negative if it glides across the forest floor—it is integral to my experience of the woods.

Furthermore, part of our negative reaction to these things may be due to some sort of cultural conditioning. Snakes symbolize evil in the West. Bats, being black and nocturnal, are also associated with darkness and evil. The definition of what counts as a “weed” also seems to be culturally and historically relative.³² Young children are generally fascinated with slimy creatures and creepy crawlers. Only later do they develop a squeamish attitude toward them. It seems possible that some of our negative responses toward these things can be overcome with unlearning or distancing ourselves from these associations and cultural suppositions. Something like the scientific, objective standpoint may help free us from whatever is impeding our appreciation of the positive aesthetic value of these objects.³³

One might also point out that this notion of distancing can help us overcome some of our negative reaction based upon our practical concerns. For example, we feel negatively toward many of these pesky creatures because they

sometimes cause health hazards. Bats may carry rabies, flies and mosquitoes various diseases, and some snakes and spiders are poisonous. We also fear for our safety when we are confronted by other creatures with overpowering might and/or huge size, such as sharks, lions, and bears. However, if we can bracket our concern for our safety, we can attain enough composure to observe and appreciate the aesthetic value of these dangerous creatures. Such distancing is often made possible by insertion of a physical barrier between us and them: a glass window, moat, or metal bars. It can also be achieved by making them into specimens. Part of the attraction of a setting like a zoo or an aquarium is to be able to come face to face with those dangerous creatures with a safe distance, both physically and psychologically, which is not possible if we encounter them in the wild.

However, while affording us sufficient space to allow our aesthetic appreciation to take place, such distancing exacts a hefty price. For one, our experience will miss some of the object's sensory qualities (such as an animal's movements, if it is confined or made into a specimen). In addition, we are depriving it of its own surroundings, which are essential in determining its aesthetic qualities. As Carlson points out, a natural object has an integral relationship to its own environment, unlike many artworks for which “neither the environment of their creation nor the environment of their display are aesthetically relevant.”³⁴ The same sound expressing the majestic dignity of a lion's roar heard in the wild may be transformed into a pitiful cry when heard from a lion in captivity.³⁵

However, by far the most costly price we pay for artificializing nature in these museum-like settings is that it predisposes us to be a distant spectator instead of an active participant in nature appreciation. Our attempt to exorcise nature's threatening aspect through making it an object of contemplation deprives us of experiencing how nature affects our entire being directly. Here I am relying on the view developed by Arnold Berleant, which characterizes aesthetic experience as engagement rather than distancing. According to Berleant, contemplating a natural object with a distanced and disinterested attitude would lead us to isolate and frame a natural object apart from its impact on us. But this compromises our aesthetic experience of nature,

he argues, because “much, perhaps most, of our appreciative experience of nature exceeds the limits of a contemplative object and refuses to be constrained within discrete boundaries.”³⁶ Specifically, the feeling of awe in the face of our own powerlessness and fragility cannot be captured by our attempt to objectify, contain, and control nature. But, being a direct effect of our encounter and engagement with the object, such a feeling should be integral to our appreciation of a dangerous natural object. In short, distancing presents a dilemma: some distancing is necessary for making our aesthetic appreciation of dangerous objects in nature possible, but too much distancing will deprive us of the opportunity to have a fully engaging aesthetic appreciation of them.³⁷

This paradox becomes even more acute with respect to so-called natural disasters of massive scale and power, such as a hurricane, earthquake, tornado, avalanche, tidal wave, volcanic eruption, flood, and the like. Though I cannot judge a priori, the imminent and dramatic manner in which these phenomena encompass and threaten our existence makes it extremely difficult and challenging to aesthetically appreciate their sublimity. How many of us can have an aesthetic appreciation if we are actually in the midst of a tornado or facing the flow of lava approaching us?³⁸

Several suggestions can be made to enable the aesthetic appreciation even of these natural calamities, but I remain doubtful as to their success and desirability. The first strategy is to induce psychical distancing by viewing a natural disaster from afar (such as through binoculars or from an airplane). We can also experience the thrill and awesome sublimity of this nature’s drama by watching it on television or on a movie screen.

However, the aesthetic price we pay by such distancing is even more clear here than in the case of dangerous animals. Appreciating the view of a tornado or volcanic eruption is different from appreciating these phenomena from within. As Berleant reminds us, “perceiving environment from within, as it were, looking not *at* it but being *in* it, nature ... is transformed into a realm in which we live as participants, not observers.”³⁹ The view of a mountain, as a part of a landscape, is experienced primarily visually, while its appreciation from inside would en-

velop and affect our entire body. Similarly, the vicarious experience of a natural disaster through distant viewing will leave us relatively untouched: we remain spectators of this natural drama. The actual experience of natural calamities, however, affects our whole being through the unnerving shaking of the ground, the shower of volcanic rocks and ashes raining on us, or the roar and vibration of the wall of moving snow. Furthermore, the painful awareness of our vulnerability and fragility, experienced immediately by our being situated in the midst of these natural events, is essential in our aesthetic experience of them (*if* we can manage to have such an aesthetic experience, that is).⁴⁰

At this point, one may propose another way in which these natural disasters are to be appreciated aesthetically. It has to do with a conceptual maneuver on our part to recognize and transcend the anthropocentrism implied in the fear we experience with these phenomena. Consider, for example, the following point made by Jean-Paul Sartre (although he is not making an aesthetic claim here):

Man is the only being by whom a destruction can be accomplished. A geological plication, a storm do not destroy—at least they do not destroy *directly*; they merely modify the distribution of masses of beings. There is no *less* after the storm than before.⁴¹

That is, the effects of these natural disasters are in themselves neutral. The negative reaction we hold toward them is wholly dependent upon our all-too-human perspective. Nature itself works in a way that is totally indifferent to human requirements.

This trans-human perspective is also shared by Satish Kumar, who explains the Indian world view:

If something is natural, then it is beautiful. In India, even a thorn, or a worm, even an earthquake is sacred, because something is happening where the earth is maintaining itself, correcting itself, balancing itself.⁴²

An earthquake is simply the earth’s way of indicating the collision, tear, or push and shove of its plates. A volcanic eruption illustrates the way in which hot magma squeezes upward through a fissure in the earth’s crust. Other me-

teorological phenomena also have explainable causes, making them comprehensible. In the large global scheme of things, they become the necessary parts of the earth's functioning. Just as a seemingly ugly object such as an animal carcass gets aesthetically justified by reference to a larger frame, these natural devastations become justified because they have their own place in the larger frame.

However, I find problems in locating natural disasters within this trans-human perspective. On the one hand, adopting the trans-human perspective and justifying the aesthetic value of so-called natural disasters from such a viewpoint is vested with an all-too-human interest. This claim may sound paradoxical because the conceptual maneuver under consideration denies our own well-being to be the primary concern. However, it can be argued that this strategy reflects an underlying assumption that every aspect of nature, even those threatening and overwhelming parts, is within our conceptual capture and grasp. Berleant's critique of the Kantian sublime helps illuminate the present issue. The source of pleasure in our experience of the sublime, both the overwhelming and endangering aspects of nature, according to Kant, is our recognition of the ultimate supremacy of our conceptual capacities. Here, Berleant points out, "the convenient Cartesianism of the Western tradition comes to the rescue, saving us from the terror of overwhelming magnitude and might in nature by the purposive order of thought." But, he continues, "that ploy is ... no longer available," because "nature will not stay within its prescribed limits but breaks out to engulf us"; that is, "we can no longer ... contain the natural world within the constructions of the mind."⁴³ Though initially appearing to be a total abandonment of the human-oriented perspective, the Indian view explained and embraced by Kumar can thus be interpreted as an effort to contain and grasp these natural events within a human conceptual scheme.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which this conceptual maneuver is too alienated from human sensibilities. Recall our discussion in section III. In it we emphasized the primacy of the perceptual qualities of a dead elk in our aesthetic experience while recognizing the relevance and necessity of referring those qualities to a larger frame (ecosystem). The possibility of

this integration of the conceptual and the perceptual presupposes that the carcass's story is told in a manner which induces sufficient composure on our part to be able to listen to it.

In the case of natural disasters which overpower and overwhelm us, however, though the earth is speaking to us about its working through its movement and meteorological phenomena, the story may be told too dramatically and powerfully for us to listen, comprehend, and appreciate. *Theoretically* we should be able to appreciate the way in which these natural phenomena express the earth's workings by transcending our worldly worry about their effects on us. But I am not sure whether it is psychologically possible to adopt such a thoroughgoing nonanthropocentric standpoint while we are in the midst of actual experience. After all, we are dealing with *our* aesthetic experience, which is supported by *our own* unique set of sensory apparatus, propensity, limitation, and concerns. We are *not* concerned with a possible aesthetic experience of a super-human being who can have a global and extremely long-range overview in which to place various natural disasters and whose attitude toward its own existence differs from ours.⁴⁴

Furthermore, this aesthetic appreciation of a natural disaster without regard to its impact on humans, even if possible, conflicts with moral concerns, if my claim in section II is correct (that the requirement of appropriately appreciating nature is ultimately based upon moral considerations). That is, if I *ought to* find a positive aesthetic value in these natural phenomena which are harmful to my existence by adopting this super-human viewpoint, this implies that I bracket the calamitous effects which they have not only upon myself but also upon others: death, injury, and damage to their possessions. We do not make a negative moral judgment on natural disasters themselves because they are not created by a moral agent, unlike the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima. However, the same moral considerations that question the appropriateness of our aesthetic appreciation of the mushroom cloud, I believe, are also applicable to the possible aesthetic experience of natural disasters which cause people to suffer.

One could question whether there is any difference between the suffering and death of an elk and the suffering and death of people who

are victims of some natural disaster. If the former can be a source of aesthetic appreciation when referred to a larger context, why not the latter? Are we guilty of what Peter Singer would call “speciesism” by treating human suffering different from animals’ suffering simply because of the difference in the species membership?⁴⁵

I believe in a way we are. Whether desirable or undesirable, wise or unwise, our human-oriented moral sentiments do dictate that we not derive pleasure (including aesthetic pleasure) from other humans’ misery, even if it is caused by nature taking its course. Satish Kumar claims, regarding an earthquake, that “there might be some pain, some suffering, some difficulties for human beings, but if you look at the earth as a whole, all natural phenomena have their place.”⁴⁶ I would have to claim the contrary: although all natural phenomena have their place, their potential aesthetic value is held in check or is overriden by our moral concern for the pain, suffering, and difficulties that these phenomena cause for human beings.

In conclusion, then, I take exception to the claim that everything in nature is aesthetically appreciable. Some phenomena in nature overwhelm us with their endangering aspects, making it very difficult, if not impossible, for us to have enough distance, physical and/or conceptual, to listen to and aesthetically appreciate their story. Furthermore, even if we are able to do so, I question the moral appropriateness of doing so. As long as we are talking about *our* aesthetic experience based upon *our* all-too-human sentiments, capacities, limitations, and concerns (moral concerns in particular), not everything in nature can or should be appreciated aesthetically.⁴⁷

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1. The typical picturesque remedy for these pictorially inferior landscapes was to “improve” them through redesign, either in the imagination or in the actual sketches and drawings.

2. John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, originally published in 1894, included in *The American Landscape: A Critical Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, ed. John Conron (New

York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 255. A good analysis of this episode can be found in Philip G. Terrie’s “John Muir on Mount Ritter: A New Wilderness Aesthetic,” included in *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, eds. Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993).

3. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966). The reference to show pieces comes from p. 193, proper mountains, p. 179, the Kansas plains, p. 180, prairies, p. 193, and hidden riches, p. 180. A good discussion of Leopold’s land aesthetics can be found in J. Baird Callicott’s “The Land Aesthetic,” *Orion Nature Quarterly* 3 (Summer 1984): 16–22.

4. Alan Gussow, “Beauty in the Landscape: An Ecological Viewpoint,” included in *Landscape in America*, ed. George F. Thompson (University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 230–231.

5. Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Temple University Press, 1988), p. 342, emphasis added.

6. Allen Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37 (1979): 271.

7. Allen Carlson, “Nature and Positive Aesthetics,” *Environmental Ethics* 6 (Spring 1984): 33.

8. Allen Carlson, “Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1981): 25. I shall argue below, however, that such a mode of art appreciation can also be regarded as inappropriate for moral reasons.

9. Carlson, *ibid.*, p. 25, emphasis added, and p. 23. Carlson hints at, but does not develop, the moral importance for appreciating nature on its own terms “if our appreciation is to be at a deeper level,” by noting that doing so “is important not only for aesthetic but also for moral and ecological reasons.” (The first passage comes from “Aesthetic Judgment,” p. 25, emphasis added, and the second from “Appreciation,” p. 274.)

10. Rolston, p. 243, emphasis added.

11. Kendall L. Walton, “Categories of Art,” *The Philosophical Review* 79 (1970), reprinted in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, 3rd ed., ed. Joseph Margolis (Temple University Press, 1987), pp. 71–72.

12. Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in *Labyrinths*, eds. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions Books, 1964), p. 44.

13. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), pp. 325 and 333.

14. Rolston: the reference to a postcard comes from p. 243, environmental ethic, p. 241, and Glacier National Park, p. 243, emphasis added.

15. Leopold: the references to cogs and wheels, prairie flora and fauna, and refined taste come from pp. 193–194, perception, p. 290, emphasis added, and damage, p. 197.

16. Leopold, p. 102.

17. Rolston, p. 239, emphasis added.

18. Rolston, pp. 243–244, emphasis added. The reason Rolston qualifies the last statement with “almost without fail” is that he is ambivalent about the aesthetic value of massive natural disasters with destructive power. I will examine this issue in the last section. See note 42.

While ecosystem and evolution are fairly recent terms, it is interesting to note that the idea of justifying the aesthetic

value of a piece of nature (normally considered aesthetically negative) by reference to the unity of the whole of nature is not entirely new. Such a claim was frequently made by noted aestheticians and philosophers of the eighteenth century, who essentially gave an aesthetic version of the design argument. See John Dennis's discussion of this in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker (Johns Hopkins Press, 1939), I, p. 202; Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury, "The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody. Being a Recital of Certain Conversation on Natural and Moral Subjects" (1709), in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 4th ed. (n.p., 1725), pp. 287–378; George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1979), pp. 53–54; David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, included in *Classics of Western Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Cahn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), part II, p. 709; and Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), reprinted in *Philosophical Works* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), p. 500.

19. Rolston: The references to a motion picture and a jigsaw puzzle come from p. 239, and evolutionary ecosystem, p. 241.

20. For example, David W. Ehrenfeld views the whole earth as a large ecosystem, coining the term "ecosphere." It is defined as "the largest possible eco-system: namely, the sum total of life on earth, together with the global environment and the earth's total resources." *Biological Conservation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 205.

21. Carlson, "Appreciation," p. 273.

22. Carlson, "Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature," in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, eds. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 221.

23. Muir, pp. 263–264.

24. Leopold, pp. 102–103.

25. Leopold: the reference to nature study and promotion of perception comes from p. 290, invisibility, incomprehensibility, and a change in the mental eye, p. 291, marsh-land chorus, p. 171, the song of a river, the speech of hills, and a vast pulsing harmony, p. 158, and America, p. 291. Leopold claims that Daniel Boone, who Leopold gives as an example of someone who lacks the necessary knowledge, "saw only the surface of things" and was unable to fully appreciate the intricate and intrinsic beauty of America (p. 291).

26. Leopold, p. 128.

27. The same can be said of nonart artifacts and man-made environment. No matter how perfectly designed to fulfill a function, we feel compelled not to have an aesthetic appreciation of a contraption solely designed to torture human beings, such as described in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*. Similarly, what better expression of desperation and dire poverty than a ghetto with burned-out buildings, broken windows, boarded-up houses, litter-strewn sidewalks loitered by drug addicts and dealers, and vacant lots with overgrown weeds? However, marveling at and deriving an aesthetic satisfaction from such an eloquent expression of despair seem morally unacceptable.

28. I realize that it is highly controversial whether nature is amoral, but for the purpose of the present discussion I am glossing over this issue. However, in this regard, I find John Stuart Mill's *Nature* (originally published in 1873) to be interesting. In this essay Mill argues against the honorific use

of the notion of nature by pointing out, among other things, how nature must be considered a mass murderer by causing all kinds of destructive phenomena.

29. Leopold, p. 292.

30. Carlson, "Appreciating Art," pp. 220–221.

31. The green, velvety, smooth, and "weeds-free" lawn, a quintessential American symbol of domesticity and affluence, has come under criticism lately because of its reliance on environmentally harmful herbicides and pesticides, as well as its insensitivity to indigenous plants and local climate. See, for example, *Redesigning the American Lawn: A Search for Environmental Harmony*, by F. Herbert Bormann, Diana Balmori, and Gordon T. Geballe (Yale University Press, 1993).

32. This culturally and historically determined concept of "weeds" is discussed by Victor Papanek in his *The Green Imperative: Natural Design for the Real World* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), p. 190. See also Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

33. In addition, gaining knowledge about these creatures definitely helps us develop a more positive attitude toward them. For example, I gained a lot from reading *Nature's Outcasts: A New Look at Living Things We Love to Hate* by Des Kennedy (Pownal, Vermont: Storey Communications, 1993).

34. Carlson, "Appreciation," p. 269. For these reasons and the concern for animal welfare, more recent zoos are made without the explicit barrier (such as metal bars) that tends to make us spectators and animals spectacles, or cages and confined spaces, replacing them with more open space designed to closely resemble the animals' original habitat.

35. Writing in the late eighteenth century, Archibald Alison illustrates the relationship between the natural object's aesthetic quality and its environment of display: "The scream of the Eagle is simply disagreeable, when the bird is either tamed or confined: it is Sublime only, when it is heard amid Rocks and Desarts, and when it is expressive to us of Liberty, and Independence, and savage Majesty. ... The call of a Goat ... among rocks, is strikingly beautiful, as expressing wildness and independence. In a farm-yard, or in a common inclosure, it is very far from being so." *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (Dublin, 1790), pp. 147–148.

36. Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Temple University Press, 1992), p. 166.

37. I am emphasizing here the problem of too much distancing in our aesthetic appreciation of the sublime. But the traditional accounts of the sublime in general seem to emphasize the importance of attaining enough distance. For example, while Edmund Burke regards fear of danger as constitutive of the sublime, he notes that "when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible" or "they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us." But only "at certain distances ... they are delightful"; that is, "they are delightful when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances." Similarly, Immanuel Kant claims that the sublime is "the more attractive, the more fearful it is, *provided only that we are in security*"; that is, in our appreciation of the sublime, "we must regard ourselves safe." Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 36–37, and 47). Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard

(New York: Hafner Press, 1974), §28, p. 100, emphasis added, and p. 101.

38. Edward Bullough would remind us that psychical distancing is possible when we are on a ship surrounded by a thick fog which signals danger. But I think there is a difference between the fog at sea and the other natural disasters I am considering: the degree of dynamism and speed involved in the phenomenon's endangering aspect. See Edward Bullough, "Psychical Distance as a Factor in Art and Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology* 5 (1912).

39. Berleant, p. 170.

40. In this regard, I agree with Berleant when he points out: "one cannot distance oneself from such events; in fact, part of the aesthetic power of such occasions lies in our very vulnerability. Survival and safety clearly supersede the aesthetic dimension when actual danger threatens, but our personal involvement adds to the perceptual intensity of such situations." Berleant, p. 170.

41. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1975), p. 39.

42. From the interview between Satish Kumar and Suzi Gablik, in Suzi Gablik, *Conversations Before the End of*

Time (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), pp. 139–140. Rolston is somewhat hesitant about incorporating these natural disasters in his appreciation of the ecosystem, because some of them are "so massive and rare that ecosystems have no adaptations to them." Hence, he leaves these phenomena as "anomalies challenging the general paradigm that nature's landscapes almost without fail have an essential beauty." Rolston, pp. 242–243.

43. Berleant, p. 168.

44. I would have to acknowledge here the possibility of us adopting this super-human viewpoint. Most likely it would have to be accompanied by a religious view which, for example, regards life on this earth to be an illusion and which believes in the transmigration of a soul, such as elucidated in *Bhagavad-Gita*.

45. The notion of speciesism is developed by Peter Singer in *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review, 1975).

46. Kumar, in Gablik, p. 139–140.

47. I would like to thank the editors, Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, for their helpful comments and suggestions on the initial version of this paper.