

The return of the aesthetic experience of nature – historical and present conceptions

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Introduction

This paper considers the aesthetic experience of nature by presenting two perspectives on this category of aesthetic experience – a historical as well as a current perspective. As the title indicates, the term ‘return’ indicates that the aesthetic experience of nature has been absent from the agenda of aesthetic theory. What I refer to is the historical fact that nature has been considered an unworthy subject in the field of modern aesthetics. To put it briefly, this attitude can be explained with reference to a feeling of human superiority towards nature, a feeling which finds such different expressions as Hegel’s devaluation of nature due to its imperfection of ideal meaning¹ and the symbolist devaluation of nature as an inappropriate medium for expressing a radicalized and emancipated human subjectivity.²

It is my assumption that these historical notes on the destiny of aesthetic nature can help us comprehend the fact that the aesthetic experience of nature is sporadically represented on the agenda of modern aesthetics. I think it is appropriate to say that there is a certain theoretical uneasiness in regard to this subject. I believe that part of this uneasiness may be elicited by the metaphysical connotations which seem to cling to concepts like ‘the beauty of nature’ and ‘the sublime nature’ whereas another part may be caused by the fact that aesthetic nature for long, was – and perhaps still is – considered to be an ideologically infected phenomenon and a phenomenon expressive of mass cultural, aesthetically bad and banal taste.

However, in the past two decades there has been a tendency to question these reasons to exclude nature and bring it back on the aesthetic agenda again. To put it straight and simple I find this tendency positive as it expresses a required self reflection in the field of aesthetics, a self reflection which could be formulated in the question: if most people do find pleasure in their experience of nature, then how can it be that this kind of experience has been left out in the cold by most aesthetic theorists?

In order to introduce my subject properly, and in order to elaborate a basis for a discussion of the return of the aesthetic experience of nature – I will start by considering two exceptions to the just mentioned negative attitude towards the aesthetic experience of nature in modern aesthetic theory: Theodor W. Adorno’s text ‘Das Naturschöne’ and Joachim Ritter’s essay ‘Landschaft’ and I will make a brief comparison of these texts as they reflect some historically essential features implied in the aesthetic ex-

1 Hegel argues in *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*: “das Naturschöne [...] erscheint in diesem Sinne nur als ein Reflex des dem Geiste angehörigen Schönen, als eine unvollkommene, unvollständige Weise, eine Weise die ihrer Substanz nach im Geiste selber enthalten ist.” (G.W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970, p. 15.)

2 Oscar Wilde exemplifies this in the notorious statement that “life imitates art, that life in fact is the mirror and art the reality.” (Quoted from *Die Trennung von Natur und Geist. Zur Auflösung der Einheit von Natur und Geist*, Hg. Bubner/Gladigow/Haug. München: Fink, 1990, p. 240.)

perience of nature. However, in spite of the fact that Adorno and Ritter both consider important aspects of this category of experience, I find their way of elaborating the experience of aesthetic nature disputable. In the end of this presentation I will therefore connect this critique of Ritter and Adorno with Martin Seel's reconsideration of the aesthetic experience of nature in his work *Eine Ästhetik der Natur*.³

Ritter's 'Landschaft'

In the essay 'Landschaft'⁴ Joachim Ritter confronts the critical, anti-metaphysical approach towards nature with some historical considerations on the aesthetic landscape experience. His argument for reconsidering the aesthetic experience of nature is as follows: the aesthetic sense of nature as landscape is a sense of nature *in toto* which renders a mythical residue of modernity visible, a residue that, without this specific sensibility, would have been invisible to us. In the subjective ability to admire and appreciate landscape aesthetically we are – says Ritter – confronted with a phenomenon that compensates the objectification of nature that follows from the present rationalized world view. It is Ritter's argument, that there exists a historical connection between the modern aesthetic experience of landscape and the classical intuitive experience which the Greeks called *theoria tou kosmou*. The main thesis of Ritter's essay is thus, that the aesthetic relationship to nature as landscape compensates the historical loss of the classical contemplation of cosmological nature. In this way Ritter's interpretation of the aesthetic experience of landscape serves the function to affirm the modern order of society.

Adorno's 'Das Naturschöne'

In the notorious passage 'Das Naturschöne' in *Ästhetische Theorie*⁵ Theodor W. Adorno emphasises another aspect of the aesthetic experience of nature: "like the experience of art", Adorno states, "the aesthetic experience of nature, is a pictorial experience." What Adorno does here, is to connect the art experience with the experience of aesthetic nature through our imaginative capacity. As such he judges nature an important aesthetic phenomenon but unlike Ritter's affirmative interpretation of aesthetic landscape, Adorno sees this kind of aesthetic experience as a fragile and in principle ineffable phenomenon. Like Ritter Adorno sees a mythical residue in modern society, but contrary to Ritter Adorno

3 Martin Seel, *Eine Ästhetik der Natur*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991.

4 Joachim Ritter, *Subjektivität – sechs Aufsätze*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974.

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970.

defends the viewpoint, that this myth demonstrates the human domination of nature inherent in modern society. In Adorno's subtle interpretation the imaginative potential in the experience of 'the beauty of nature' is preserved and expressed in the mimetic language of the advanced work of art. Adorno argues that this is the only possible way to speak of aesthetic nature, if we wish to escape the pervasive ideological infection of this concept and phenomenon.

Besides providing us with a historical perspective I have made this brief exposition of Ritter and Adorno in order to point out what I find to be negative aspects as well as what I see as positive aspects in regard to a discussion of contemporary aesthetic experience of nature. Starting with the critical aspect I think the alternative with which we are presented – aesthetic experience of nature either as a genuine positive testimony of the reasonable character of modern society or as an ineffable residue witnessing the absolute, unreasonable character of the same society – is untenable. In this regard both Adorno and Ritter are caught up in a questionable comprehension of the rationality which underlies our ability to appreciate nature aesthetically.

Both Ritter and Adorno elaborate the aesthetic experience of nature in a too narrow way. From a pragmatic point of view, the questionable feature of both theories deal with the question of what kind of phenomena is actually contained in the concept 'aesthetic nature'. To start with Ritter the information on this point must be said to be rather limited. When it comes to concrete examples aesthetic nature is natural sceneries in the Alps, it is the view from Mont Ventoux as Petrarca saw it in dawning Renaissance and it is the Mont St. Victoire as it was seen and painted by Paul Cézanne at the end of the 19th-century: We hear about the Bieler Sea as it was experienced by Rousseau in the second part of the eighteenth century, and Ritter refers to the romantic settings which Carl Gustav Carus wrote about in *Neun Briefe über Landschaftsmalerei* and the free and unspoiled nature which Schiller praises in his poem *Das Spaziergang*. In spite of Ritter's intention to define aesthetic nature in a formal way which can virtually embrace all kinds of contemporary aesthetic experiences of nature, it is common to all these examples of aesthetic nature to be either *rural* or *un-cultivated* nature. It is the kind of nature which is opposed to the city culture and the civilised social forms of control and compulsion which is an inherent part of this culture, but most important it is an aesthetic nature which could be experienced in an early state of modern

capitalist Europe. The question is however, if this rural, wild and unspoiled nature to which Ritter's conception of landscape refers, is the kind of landscape which is present in most contemporary experiences of aesthetic nature? And the question is, moreover, if the aesthetically experienced landscape which Ritter refers to has vanished as most of the so-called un-spoiled nature possessing aesthetic qualities has been worked on by culture, absorbed by the growing landscape of suburbs or colonised by the massive expansion of the tourist industry? As a matter of fact it seems as though the aesthetic nature which Ritter's essay considers, carries on a rather exclusive notion of nature, a nature which is perhaps too narrow and exclusive in regard to covering the more banal and common aesthetic experiences of nature that we make: what about the natural landscape as it is part of the urban culture? What about that kind of aesthetic nature which cannot be subsumed under the category 'unspoiled nature'? In his essay Ritter excludes indirectly those kinds of aesthetic nature while at the same time assuming that the aesthetic experience of nature contained in the landscape category is immediately accessible to everyone.

Whereas the exclusiveness of Ritter's conception of aesthetic nature is unintended, Adorno's conception of aesthetic nature is deliberately exclusive. As mentioned Adorno saw the authentic potential in the experience of 'the beauty of nature' as rescued in the mimetic expression of the advanced art work. In this conception the experience of the beauty of nature is simultaneously a sublime experience, an experience in which the work of art 'opens its eyes' towards the spectator and for a moment destabilises his subjective control. The kind of aesthetic experience which is subject to Adorno's interest, is a rather mystical experience. It is a subjective shock which simultaneously – Adorno says with an allusion to Stendhal – is a *promesse de bonheur*. The experience of the beauty of nature elicits a negative pleasure, which cannot be communicated as the rationality inherent in its communication would destroy its frail and elusive character.

I do not deny the evident historical connection between aesthetics and metaphysics, and I do not deny the possibility of making the kind of experiences of which Adorno says that I am not allowed to speak. However, what I want to emphasise here, is that the speculative terms in which Adorno conceives of aesthetic nature makes his theory very ill suited in regard to contemporary aesthetic experiences of nature and, not least, the happiness inherent in Adorno's conception of aesthetic experience does not

correspond very well to the happiness and pleasure which is actually elicited in the contemporary aesthetic experience of nature.

Martin Seel – the aesthetic experience of the lifeworld

I will end this critique of Ritter and Adorno by considering what I see as their most fundamental common feature. This feature consists in the emphasis on the connection between the aesthetic experience of nature and the decline of an all-embracing metaphysical nature. A common description of the historical process leading to the metaphysical decline could be, that the metaphysical world view in the course of this development has been dissolved into the human 'life world' (*Lebenswelt*). Now, if there is a preliminary conclusion to this critique of Ritter and Adorno it must be, that they do not draw the right consequence of the metaphysical decline which their theories consider. The common problem in both theories is, that their way of conceiving the aesthetic experience of nature, suffers tremendously from being distanced from the actual aesthetic experiences inherent in this life world. In spite of this critique I think it is important to maintain a connection to the tradition which Adorno and Ritter represent. The question is whether it is possible to utilise some of the insights and concepts elaborated by Ritter and Adorno, and apply them to the contemporary life world as we actually experience it? As the reader might have guessed, I think it is. The basis for the elaboration of this possibility I find in Martin Seel's *Eine Ästhetik der Natur* which considers some of the traditional concepts applied by Ritter and Adorno in a critical-constructive way.

Martin Seel presents a differentiated concept of nature, a concept which defines nature as 'life world'. The aesthetic nature of our life world is still defined in opposition to the instrumental view of nature applied by science and technology. However, this does not imply that we need to maintain the distinction between the man-made and that which is not man-made, between first nature and second nature which underlies the way we apply these concepts in the discourse of everyday language. Now, according to this conception of aesthetic nature as it occurs in the horizon of our 'life worlds' Seel makes three analytical categories in order to capture the characteristic features of the contemporary aesthetic experience of nature:

The first category is contemplation, a mode of experience which considers nature as a simple play of phenomenal appearances. The contemplative perception of nature is basically of a

disinterested character. This kind of experience is in principle able to dwell upon all kinds of objects, and it is not guided by any attempt to overcome the variety and the contingency of the perceived aesthetic phenomena. Basically this contemplative experience of nature is contemplation of *theoria* without any underlying 'theory'. The contemplative perception is not guided by any idea, any interpretation or any understanding of the perceived phenomenon. The contemplative aesthetic experience of nature thus distinguishes itself basically from Ritter's interpretation of the aesthetic landscape experience as a modern counterpart to classical contemplation. Aesthetic experience of nature as contemplation which consists of the simple play of phenomenal appearances. The contemplative perception of nature is basically of a disinterested character. This kind of experience is in principle able to dwell upon all kinds of objects, and it is not guided by any attempt to overcome the variety and the contingency of the perceived aesthetic phenomena. Basically this contemplative experience of nature is contemplation of *theoria* without any underlying 'theory'. The contemplative perception is not guided by any idea, any interpretation or any understanding of the perceived. The contemplative aesthetic experience of nature thus distinguishes itself basically from Ritter's interpretation of the aesthetic landscape experience as a modern counterpart to classical contemplation.

Seel's second analytical differentiation of aesthetic nature is *correspondence*, which captures an experience of nature as it presents the conditions for a desirable form of life. Contrary to the contemplative mode of perception the corresponding perception is dependent upon a successful interplay between the form of the physical surroundings and the emotional state in which the perceiving subject is situated. In the corresponding perception it seems, as if nature 'speaks' to us. That which it seems to say is, that exactly in this place nature seems to be created to support our purposes in life. This mode of aesthetic experience sees nature 'as if' it was an artifact.

Finally it is possible to experience nature aesthetically due to our *imaginative* capability. In the imaginative perception we perceive 'the beauty of nature' as a 'semblance' of 'the beauty of art'. This dimension in the perception of 'the beauty of nature' witnesses an intimate relationship between the history of art and the history of the ability to find aesthetic pleasure in nature. It is this dimension which Adorno has in mind when he speaks of the common pictorial dimension in the aesthetic experience of

nature and the experience of art. In the imaginative perception of 'beauty of nature', nature speaks the language of art: nature here improvises in accordance with our aesthetic fantasies and 'attitudes' which we project upon it.

As I see it, the theoretical benefit of defining 'the beauty of nature' as part of our 'life world' is, that it constitutes the aesthetic subject field in a sense which allows us to reflect upon the immediate phenomena to which we are confronted in everyday life. There isn't – as in Adorno's aesthetic criticism – a well-defined limit between on the one hand aesthetic phenomena carrying an exclusive and fragile potential of authentic aesthetic experiences, and a vast field of phenomena generally deprived of any genuine aesthetic quality on the other hand; and the aesthetic realm isn't – as in Ritter's theory – elaborated upon an unspoken but exclusive comprehension of aesthetic nature.

While connecting the concept of nature to the life world concept, it becomes possible to dissolve the traditional dichotomisation between what is rural and what is urban, the dichotomy between traditional landscape and cityscape, between rural unspoiled scenery and civilised environment, grand nature and small-scale cultural landscape. And – most important – in regard to exploring the borderlines of aesthetics, it seems fruitful to take the aesthetic nature into analytical consideration as it clearly demonstrates how untenable it is to reserve the term 'aesthetic' to a specific class of objects. In this sense the return of nature in the realm of aesthetic theory illustrates, that the task of defining aesthetic qualities has become a lot more open and ambiguous.