

ALLEN CARLSON: CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS OF NATURE AND THE REQUIREMENTS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

HANDOUT OF PRESENTATION QUOTATIONS (FOR DISCUSSION)

“What kinds of country we consider to be exceptionally beautiful makes a huge difference when we come to decide which places to save, which to restore or enhance, and which to allocate to other uses.

Therefore, a sound natural aesthetics is crucial to sound conservation policy and land management.”

--J. Baird Callicott, “The Land Aesthetic” (1992)

“In eighteenth-century theory, the boundaries between aesthetic categories are relatively clear and stable...beautiful forms tend to be small, smooth but subtly varied, delicate, ‘fair’ in color;...sublime forms, by contrast, are powerful, vast, intense, terrifying, and ‘definitionless,’... The picturesque is typically in the middle ground between the sublime and the beautiful...complex and eccentric, varied and irregular, rich and forceful, vibrant with energy.”

--John Conron, *American Picturesque* (2000)

“The term ‘picturesque’ literally means ‘picture-like’ and indicates a mode of appreciation by which the natural world is divided into artistic scenes. Such scenes aim in subject matter or in composition at ideals dictated by the arts, especially poetry and landscape painting. Thus... the picturesque dressed [nature] in a new set of subjective and romantic images: a rugged cliff with a ruined castle, a deep valley with an arched bridge, barren outcropping with a crofter’s cottage.”

--Allen Carlson, “Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature” (1998)

“The taste for country displays the same diversity in aesthetic competence among individuals as the taste for opera, or oils. There are those who are willing to be herded in droves through ‘scenic’ places; who find mountains grand if they be proper mountains with waterfalls, cliffs, and lakes. To such the Kansas plains are tedious.”

--Aldo Leopold, *Round River* (1953)

“One of the main reasons that we have set aside certain natural areas as natural, state, and country parks is because they are considered beautiful. In the conservation and resource management arena, historically, natural aesthetic has, indeed, been much more important than environmental ethics. Many more of our conservation and management decisions have been motivated by aesthetic rather than ethical values, by beauty instead of duty.”

--J. Baird Callicott, “The Land Aesthetic” (1992)

“...the picturesque...simply confirmed our anthropocentrism by suggesting that nature exists to please as well as to serve us. Our ethics, if that word can be used to describe our attitudes and behavior toward the environment, have lagged behind our aesthetics. It is an unfortunate lapse which allows us to abuse our local environments and venerate the Alps and the Rockies.”

--Ronald Rees, “The Taste for Mountain Scenery” (1975)

“The picturesque...approach to nature has...encouraged us to look for and appreciate primarily the *scenically* interesting and beautiful parts of our 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.”

--Yuriko Saito, “The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature” (1998)

“We continue to admire and preserve primarily ‘landscapes,’ ‘scenery,’ and ‘views’ according to essentially eighteenth century standards of taste inherited from Glipin, Price, and their contemporaries. Our tastes in natural beauty...remain fixed on visual and formal properties....The prevailing natural aesthetic, therefore, is not autonomous: it does not flow naturally from nature itself; it is not directly oriented to nature on nature’s own terms....It is superficial and narcissistic. In a word, it is trivial.”
 --J. Baird Callicott, “The Land Aesthetic” (1992)

“To justify protecting nature as it is and not merely as it is for us,...a natural aesthetic must forswear the anthropocentric limits that...define and dominate our aesthetic response.... How [is] such a non-anthropocentric aesthetic...possible...I propose that only acentric environmentalism takes into account nature as a whole; if we wish to adopt an acentric environmentalism, we require a corresponding acentric natural aesthetic to ground it....In acentric positions, the value expressed...cannot reflect the point of view of the recipient.”
 --Stan Godlovitch, “Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics” (1994)

“Aesthetic appreciation of nature, at the level of forests and landscapes, requires embodied participation, immersion, and struggle. We initially may think of forests as scenery to be looked upon. That is a mistake. A forest is entered, not viewed. It is doubtful that one can experience a forest from a roadside pullover, any more than on television....You do not really engage a forest until you are well within it....In the forest itself, there is no scenery.”
 --Holmes Rolston, “Aesthetic Experience in Forests” (1998)

“The link...between aesthetic judgment and ethical obligation fails unless there are objective grounds--grounds that rational, sensitive people can accept--for thinking that something has value. If beauty in nature...is merely in the eyes of the beholder, than no general moral obligation arises out of aesthetic judgment. A judgement of value that is merely personal and subjective gives us no way of arguing that everyone ought to learn to appreciate something, or at least to regard it as worthy of preservation.”
 --Janna Thompson, “Aesthetics and Value of Nature” (1995)

“The boundlessness of the natural world does not just surround us; it assimilates us. Not only are we unable to sense absolute limits in nature; we cannot distance the natural world from ourselves.... Perceiving environments 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...the aesthetic mark of all such times is...total engagement, a sensory immersion in the natural world.”
 --Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics of Environment* (1992)

“Suppose the outline of a...cloud resembles that of a basket of washing, and we amuse ourselves in dwelling upon this resemblance. Suppose that on another occasion we...try instead to realize the inner turbulence of the cloud, the winds sweeping up within and around it, determining its structure and visible form. Should we not...say that this latter experience was less superficial...than the other, that it is truer to nature?...If there can be a passage, in art, from easy beauty to difficult and more serious beauty, there can also be such passage in aesthetic contemplation of nature.”
 --Ronald Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty” (1966)

“If to appropriately aesthetically appreciate art we must have knowledge of art forms, classifications of works, and artistic traditions, then to appropriately aesthetically appreciate nature we must have knowledge of different natural environments and of the different systems and elements within those environments. As the knowledge provided by art critics and art historians equips us to aesthetically appreciate art, that provided by naturalists, ecologists, geologists, and natural historians equip us to aesthetically appreciate nature.”
 --Allen Carlson, “Aesthetic Appreciation and the Natural Environment” (1998)

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J. Baird Callicott, "The Land Aesthetic," in Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence, Second Edition, eds. R.G. Botzler and S.J. Armstrong (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998) reprinted from Renewable Resources Journal 10 (1992): 12-17

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