

The Appearance, Disappearance and Reappearance of Nature

As I write people around the world are tentatively emerging from enforced hibernation. Many are seeking to reconnect with the natural world. Crowds of visitors to beaches and national parks have caused huge littering problems (Laville, 2020). Experience of nature beckons, up close and personal, at a time when we are supposed to keep our distance from other people. Of course, nature didn't altogether disappear while we were indoors. Some species, including orcas, cuckoos and peregrine falcons, seem to have thrived whilst our activities were put on hold (Morris, 2020). On the other hand, some of our activities, such as the management of rare meadows, were directed at helping nature to recover from the onslaught (Davies, 2020). Stalling them has meant that some other species, such as dormice, have ceased to appear or reappear, and may ultimately disappear. Disruption of routine experience can bring about a heightened awareness of the complex and ambiguous dynamics of appearance, disappearance and reappearance in nature. The dynamics of appearance in turn shape our sense of the central topics of this volume, the aesthetic appearance of nature and its historical dimensions.

Whenever concern for nature have been articulated it has been informed by 'thick' descriptions of personal experience. Even the most abstract debates about the nature of environmental values are invariably drawn back to such descriptions and it seems reasonable to suggest there is some special link between our concrete experience of nature and environmental values (Brombin, 2019). The articles in this volume explore various aspects of that link. In his analysis of aesthetic and historical values Levi Tenen helps us to gain a clearer understanding these two aspects of our experience and the two types of value associated with them. As Tenen points out, aesthetic and historical values have frequently been considered as connected, if not fundamentally related (pp. 519–520; see also Prior and Brady, 2017). Nevertheless it is important for us to appreciate the difference between these value types. The key difference Tenen identifies and the reason why it matters are in fact fundamentally related. Despite disputes concerning the role of cognition in aesthetic appreciation, all accounts of aesthetic value agree that it depends on sensory experience and the perceptibility of the valued object. This feature, according to Tenen, grounds a specific kind of normative force, since 'an object's aesthetic value provides a reason for people to want to aesthetically appreciate the entity and, therefore, to engage sensorily with it' (p. 528). Historical value, on the other hand, whilst sometimes giving us a reason to sensorily engage with an entity, does not necessarily do so. We do have such a reason when the object bears clear marks of its history and/or when we desire people to be connected to the history embodied in the object (p. 530). That there are cases where neither of

these conditions hold is brought to the fore by Tenen's description of his own personal history: the value of a large boulder on a hiking trail beside which he would frequently rest when hiking with his father while growing up. He values that boulder as part of his personal history, but that does not necessarily give him a reason to want to sensorily engage with it any longer, nor does it give him any reason to think that it would be good if others did so. On the contrary, it may well give him reason to think that it would be good if others did not directly experience it, since frequent visitors might damage the site. That leads us directly to why it matters that we keep aesthetic and historical values distinct. Aesthetic values motivate sensory engagement and appreciation of appearances, and that can lead to the damage and even the disappearance of the entity or place thus valued. Historical values, insofar as they do not motivate sensory engagement, avoid this danger.

The importance of Tenen's argument is clear; we only have to recall the piles of litter left in national parks and on beaches in the days of lockdown and post-lockdown to see the damaging effects of a craving for nature up close and personal. Of course, a true appreciation of the aesthetic value of these places would have produced far more considerate visitors, but nevertheless values that motivate continuous visits by indeterminate numbers risk damage and destruction. Historical values, on the other hand, can lead to critical re-examination of the craving for certain kinds of sensory encounter.¹ Tenen's argument invites further consideration of the relationship between personal and public history. If personal histories ground personal values, is it the case that public histories ground universal values? Do common perceptual abilities really mean that all aesthetic values motivate universal and repeated sensory engagement? It is undeniable that aesthetic values rest on the condition of *perceivability*, but perhaps not entirely clear that this condition motivates universal and repeated perception. One factor that might lead us to deny that it does is the role played by personal histories and public histories in aesthetic appreciation.

David Schwartz makes a powerful case for recognising the key role played by natural history in aesthetic appreciation of nature. Extending Allen Carlson's influential cognitive approach to environmental aesthetics (for further discussion of this approach see Herguedas, 2018), Schwartz argues that there is no need for proponents of that approach to confine themselves to appreciating formal features or functional fitness. Interpretation of meaning can also be an appropriate way of appreciating the aesthetic qualities of nature, even for scientific cognitivism that is in large part motivated by the desire to avoid the common practice of interpolating all too human concerns and meanings into nature. We see meaning in nature on its own terms when we appreciate the intentions of animals as they engage with the world and with one another. The interpretation of animal intentions informed by natural history in the form of

1. Similarly Martin Drenthen has argued that the historical hermeneutics of rewilding leads us to re-examine our sense of cultural identity (Drenthen, 2018).

the science of ethology would then be analogous to the interpretation of artistic intentions informed by art history.

I have a great deal of sympathy with Schwartz's argument. He is undeniably right that we appreciate meaning in animal behaviour and that this is one of the more important ways in which we aesthetically appreciate nature. I have argued myself that the 'expressive-responsive' movement of animals underlies the huge variety of aesthetic qualities that we appreciate them as possessing *qua animals* (Greaves, 2019). I took this line of thought to run contrary to the cognitivist approach, but I cautiously welcome the idea that cognitivism might be extended to encompass at least some aspects of animal meaning-making, in the context of a pluralist environmental aesthetics. In the end any remaining difference between us might come down to what we think about the status of ethology as a science on the one hand, and the meaning that we find in artworks that are supposed to be its analogue on the other. To what extent does understanding of animal behaviour need to come in the form of instruction in ethology? I would say no more than the understanding of human behaviour has to come in the form of training in anthropology. In both cases formal instruction or training are required only in cases where we cannot acquire this understanding in the course living with our fellows, be they human or non-human animals. This thought is supported by the key descriptive example that Schwartz presents, which like Tenen's boulder, comes from his own concrete experience. Whilst hiking in the Appalachian Mountains Schwartz observed a bald eagle that took a sudden dive in the course of its flight, which it turned out was directed to intercept the path of another eagle (p. 547). Schwartz took this to be a territorial dispute, but upon reading an ethological account later that evening he discovered that it was more likely to have been an instance of airborne mating behaviour. It seems questionable whether this new knowledge was scientific in any substantial sense. It was certainly knowledge that Schwartz or anyone else might have gained from further encounters with eagles. To play the role that it does in his reinterpretation of their behaviour it does not need to be linked to any more abstract ecological or evolutionary theory, which Schwartz rightly takes to be a virtue of this kind of understanding, since it overcomes the problem of 'fusing' cognitive understanding and sensory appreciation (p. 546). It seems to me, however, that in most cases there is no such problem, since the understanding of natural history required is of a kind that has never been divorced from perception and life experience, so that on those occasions when some second hand instruction is helpful it is easily reintegrated into perception.

A close reading of Schwartz's description of his encounter with the eagles reveals something else telling about the nature of such encounters and the meaning that we find in the behaviour of animals in the wild. The birds abruptly disappear at the very denouement of the story: 'As luck would have it, just before the moment of interception, the flights paths of both birds took

them behind a crop of trees and out of my view' (p. 547). This apparently incidental moment is in fact very significant. It is an aspect of almost any encounter with animals in the wild that they appear in the midst of things and disappear into the midst of things. The narrative is rarely completely laid out before us and therefore its meaning remains enigmatic. Ethological understanding can help us to guess at the kind of thing that likely took place when the flight paths of the two birds met, but it will never tell us *what actually happened in this particular case*. In the behaviour of wild animals a great deal is suggested and only a fraction of what is suggested is revealed. This fact suggests to me that the best analogy in the philosophy of art for this kind of meaning is not Arthur Danto's cognitive reflexive response to the history of art, nor even Leo Tolstoy's view of art as emotional expression, two possibilities cited by Schwartz (p. 553), but Theodor Adorno's view that art offers us *enigmatic* meaning (Adorno, 2004 [1970]).

It is interesting to note that the key descriptive examples set out by Tenen and Schwartz both take place in context of hiking. Anu Besson's empirically informed reappraisal of environmental aesthetics and the restorative capacity of experiencing our favourite places suggests that 'favourite place' should not be understood simply as geographical location, but as a site that provides us with a specific set of affordances. Besson's study shows that it is not only the general meaning of our surroundings that is shaped by the affordances that it offers, but our sense of what makes those surroundings both beautiful and restorative. Besson asked expatriate Finns to describe their favourite place, what it was about that kind of place that made them feel better and the aesthetic qualities that they most valued in that environment. It was the whole feel of the place that was important, including its affordances for certain kinds of activity, the multisensory perceptual environment and its aesthetic qualities, all of which are bound up with one another. This suggests that studies that focus on restricted sets of features, such as those that prompt responses to pictures, are liable to miss important aspects of our favoured experience of nature. Besson's study also shows that there is a fair amount of variety in the identification of favourite place type, suggesting that attempts to give a biological account of universal features must at least be supplemented by accounts that factor in culture and history. The majority of Besson's participants favoured forest and lake environments like those of their native Finland. History and culture play a role in envisaging a place of rest, recovery and relaxation, as they do in various aspects of our understanding of the nature (Renes, 2018; Tănăsescu and Constantinescu, 2019), even when we are not currently there in person, as in the case of these expatriates. The crucial role that aesthetic appreciation plays in our understanding, lived experience and well-being has been mooted before (Brady, 2006), so it is good to see further studies exploring and confirming these insights. The complex developments of personal taste and psychological health are, however, unlikely to yield completely to social psychology. As

Besson notes, we may prefer different environments in different personal circumstances (p. 572), and since our circumstances are always in flux, cultural and personal narratives, such as Richard Mabey's classic *Nature Cure* (2008) continue to work in tandem with wide ranging empirical studies of this kind to help us understand the intertwining of environmental and psychological health.

Of course, the sensory and practical affordances that a place has to offer are not unchanging either. It is not only human beings who can benefit from the restorative powers of nature, nature can benefit from the restorative practices of human beings. In their study of the Wild Ones Native Landscaping practitioners of the American Midwest Laura Hartman and Kathleen Wooley argue that environmental philosophers have important lessons to learn from these practitioners, just as they may have things to learn from the philosophers. This is a call for environmental praxis, the integration of theory and practice in ecological restoration.² Hartman and Wooley defend the Wild Ones against criticisms of environmental philosophers concerning the tenability of the concept of nature that underlies their practice and the character traits it embodies. The Wild Ones operate with what Hartman and Wooley characterise as an 'easy pragmatism' which, whilst not averse to philosophical reflection, does not insist on conceptual or practical purity and does not allow the perfect to become the enemy of the good (p. 599). Their motivations are complex and multifarious, including a sense of nostalgia that is an important driver of many restoration projects (Howell et al., 2019). The call is perhaps not only for dialogue between theorists and practitioners, but a broad sense of philosophical practice as an attempt to maintain the openness of the learner. A key concept that philosophical reflection draws into the question in this context is that of 'nativeness'. Hartman and Wooley suggest that no strict necessary and sufficient conditions need apply when we take up the attitude of easy pragmatism. Nevertheless, there is likely much to be learnt from native people and their own restoration practices, especially when the cultural imaginary of restoration refers back to pre-colonial times that are a part of the direct cultural history of native people.

Some restoration projects seem to push at the limits of historical experience altogether. Michael Lindquist cites the Pottawattomie Chief Simon Pokagon's poetic elegy to the passenger pigeon (p. 613), but it is very difficult to guess at what he would have made of the prospect of bringing the pigeon back from oblivion. The use of genetic technologies to bring back pre-historic species such as the passenger pigeon or woolly mammoth raises the possibility of the reappearance of extinct species, an idea that still seems futuristic and fantastic to many, even as the technologies themselves rapidly come closer to realisation.³ Will the future of the natural world look like its past in some dramatic

2. For discussion of environmental praxis in the context of biomimicry see (Mathews, 2019).

3. For another example of the surprising difficulties thrown up by technological advances see (Rohwer, 2018) on the duty to cognitively enhance wild animals.

and surprising ways? The desire for a sense of historical continuity in the face of the novel (Desjardins et al., 2019) is both attested to and stretched to the limit by these technological advances. Lindquist argues that we should take time to consider the way things would look after de-extinction, and indeed the effects de-extinction might have on the multi-sensory appearance of species and places.

Aesthetic considerations have been neglected in debates about the moral acceptability of de-extinction projects, but Lindquist makes the case that even if those projects were to prove acceptable in terms of the various moral standards to which we might hold them, we should still consider their aesthetic validity. Lindquist's case involves bringing insights from philosophy of biology regarding the 'species problem' to bear on our aesthetic appreciation of species in their environments. Would our judgements of taste be affected by our understanding of the authenticity of the animals thus (re)created? In the light of some very broad features of our aesthetic appreciation of nature it seems very likely that the perceived naturalness of these creatures would indeed make a difference. To make this case Lindquist deploys a well-established style of aesthetic thought experiment: the consideration of indiscernibles (p. 615). Like Arthur Danto and Ronald Hepburn before him, Lindquist imagines two cases in which the objects of appreciation are sensibly indiscernible (Danto, 1981: 120-3; Hepburn, 1984: 26). Here each case involves the (re) creation of creatures like the woolly mammoth released into a suitable habitat. In the first case these animals are understood to be authentic mammoths, on whatever criteria one thinks relevant for authentic species membership, in the second case the 'mammoths' are inauthentic. The animals in the two cases are not observably distinguishable. Authenticity or inauthenticity would make a difference, Lindquist argues, to the perceived naturalness of these creatures, and that in turn would make a difference to our aesthetic judgements. Once more, it seems, background understanding makes a difference to appearances. But what if our understanding were to remain incomplete, inconsistent or even self-contradictory? In imagined cases of de-extinction that is surely quite likely. The various possible criteria for species membership might all play legitimate, if not entirely harmonious, roles in perceptual understanding. The task of producing a 'multisensory aesthetic impact assessment' for de-extinction projects, however important and necessary, would turn out to be even more difficult and complex than we might at first imagine. Indeed, such assessments always remain aesthetically perplexing in that they require us to judge appearances before anything has appeared, and, in this case, after they have long since disappeared.

The observation that natural phenomena are ephemeral is nothing new. Yet reflection on the dynamics of appearance, disappearance and the potential for reappearance today, in the context of a growing body of work in environmental aesthetics and environmental history, leaves us with a difficult balance to

strike. On the one hand, we must not allow the very fabric of the natural world, the condition of the possibility of natural phenomena, to be further degraded and destroyed. On the other hand, clinging to an unchanging vision of how the natural world should appear would seem to set us against its inherent dynamic, leading to an inappropriate and ultimately unhealthy desire for stasis.

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