'Beauty, Landscape, Nature': A Conference Report

On 16–17 October 2007, an interdisciplinary conference entitled ‘Beauty, Landscape, Nature’ (funded from Grant GA ČR No. 408/06/0950 and Research Project MŠMT No. 0021620824) was held at the Institute of Philosophy, the Academy of Sciences, Prague. Its main focus was an exploration of the aesthetic significance of nature, a largely neglected topic in philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century, but one in which there has been new interest in the last four decades. The conference aimed to present the subject from different angles in three basic panels: (1) Biology and Aesthetics; (2) Beauty in Art and Beauty in Nature; (3) Philosophy and the Aesthetics of Nature. These sections reflect three fields of human endeavour in which one can begin to consider natural beauty – namely, science, art, and philosophical aesthetics. I will briefly discuss the main issues revealed by the contributions in each section.

It might not be obvious to some what the natural sciences could contribute to the discussion of the beauty of nature. The aim of science is usually identified with finding neutral facts about nature, facts that are true anytime and everywhere. Beauty, on the other hand, is a kind of value. If we define value with Jan Mukařovský as a ‘potentiality of a given thing to serve as means to a specific aim; we must also admit, ‘it is natural that determining the aim and leading to it depends on [the will of] the subject, and that in each act of valuation, a moment of subjectivity is involved’.\(^1\) The considerations of value must therefore take account of the context of value judgements, of the ‘when’, ‘where’, and ‘how’ of the subject’s relation to his or her environment. The contributions of the first panel of the conference that considered the relations of biology to aesthetics demonstrated that questions of aesthetic value have always played a part in biological investigations. Based on the contributions, we can outline two different ways that such a mixture of biology and aesthetics has taken place.

One way was presented by Karel Chobot in his discussion of the ‘animal aesthetic’ of the German zoologist Karl August Möbius (1825–1908), in a paper entitled ‘Karl Möbius’s Aesthetics of Insects’. Möbius’s aesthetics was based on the assumption that the beauty of animals is accessible to anyone with ‘the ability to see them in the right way’. This ability is in turn based on knowledge, with its paradigm in science (biology). In this assumption Möbius anticipates the highly influential contemporary theory of Allen Carlson, the ‘cognitive model of environmental aesthetics’, but it also shares its difficulties. From this perspective, the aesthetic value falls fully under a cognitive value, and the aesthetic attitude is just a special case of the scientific attitude. The aesthetic experience would then not be creative in its own right; it would only be an application of pre-constituted scientific schemes, and the aesthetic judgement would be a judgement of pleasure or displeasure guided more or less by scientific knowledge. Aesthetic judgements without the support of scientific knowledge would simply be false. This model therefore involves the highly contentious assumption that aesthetic judgement has the same structure as scientific judgement. This assumption then leads either to promoting one universal aesthetic norm (in Möbius’s case) or to obstacles in defining an aesthetic field (in Carlson’s case). What is at stake, then, is the existence and dynamics of an aesthetic field itself. These questions organically lead to aesthetic and philosophical considerations, and are considered at length in the third, philosophical-aesthetic section (discussed below) of the conference, especially in Vlastimil Zátka’s analysis of Kant’s

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\(^1\) Mukařovský, Jan (1966). ‘Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty.’ In *Studie z estetiky* (pp. 17–54). Prague: Odeon, p. 27.

A second merging of aesthetic themes and scientific investigation is exemplified by biological theories that include an aesthetic (or proto-aesthetic) factor as an inseparable component of animal behaviour. Karel Stibral argues in ‘Biology and Aesthetics’ that Charles Darwin’s theory of sexual selection is based on an assumption that a sense of beauty plays a role in the animal realm. This theory helped Darwin to explain how it is possible that some animals have features, ornaments, and behaviours inexplicable solely in terms of natural selection, for example the antlers of deer, the plumage of peacocks, and the bowers of bowerbirds. A similar integration of an aesthetic value into a biological theory is also central to Stanislav Komárek’s discussion of the biology of Adolf Portmann (1897–1982), ‘Adolf Portmann and His Legacy: The Future of Biological Aesthetics’; and Marco Stella’s consideration of the ethological investigations of Konrad Lorenz (1903–1989), ‘On Degeneration and Domestication: The Origin of Ethology as Science’. These papers also raise important questions: Is the human aesthetic experience of the same kind as that of animals? What are the main reasons for that difference, if any? Is it a qualitative or quantitative difference? As the contributors have shown, a dialogue between aesthetics and biology is not only possible, but also thought-provoking for both sides. Such a dialogue presupposes, however, that aesthetics and biology are taken as distinct fields of study, rather than as the one determined by the other.

The contributions of the second panel concentrated on relations of the various arts (architecture, painting, literature, and music) to the beauties of nature. The general theme shared by the contributions was the tension between nature conceived as extra-cultural and culture seen as re-shaping nature for its own purposes. At the intersection of the natural and cultural, a special area emerges – the landscape. Landscape has been traditionally interpreted by means of two opposite poetic visions. On the one hand, we find the image of a landscape as the place of our retirement from urban life and its alienation, as the place where one reclaims one’s autonomy, a view introduced by Olga Lomová’s interpretation of the poem ‘Rhapsody on Mountain Dwelling’ by the Chinese poet Xie Lingyun (385–433) (‘Ailing, I Abandoned the Office, Let Loose My Natural Character’). On the other hand, we encounter a vision of a completely artificial area divested of all irregularities and natural coarseness, illustrated by Jan Staněk’s ‘Aesthetics and Ethics of Dreams about Artificial Landscapes’, an interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Domain of Arnhem’ (1850) and Charles Baudelaire’s ‘Anywhere out of the world’ (1862) and their dreams of ideally artificial landscapes. It is also significant, as Staněk points out, that this ideal of the artificial landscape turns out to be a non-human landscape of death possible only in the special temporality and spatiality of literature. These two examples of literary treatments of landscape also reflect two typical historical ways of relating art to nature. The first considers the beauty of nature as a model for the beauty of the arts (the imitation theory of art); the second confers beauty on nature on the condition that it is viewed as if it were an artwork (and thus in a sense denaturalized).

Is there any way we could treat the aesthetic value of nature and the aesthetic value of art as two separate and irreducible spheres of aesthetic value in one aesthetic field? Looking for an answer to this question constitutes the main theme of the third, philosophical-aesthetic panel of the conference. This could be said in particular of ‘The Place of Natural Aesthetic in the Aesthetics of Jan Mukařovský’, Ondřej Dadejík’s reconstruction of the main themes of Mukařovský’s aesthetic theory set against the background of the main questions of the aesthetics of nature. We could say that the leading theme of the third, philosophical-aesthetic panel was the search for a definition
of the aesthetic field, which would consider its specificity and independence from other fields of study (especially scientific research). At the same time, virtually all the contributors stressed that this field is not constituted solely by the sphere of artworks and that within it one has also to take into account the area of an aesthetic assessment of nature, which is not derivable from the experience of artworks. The panel put the problems discussed in the other two panels into more general language, making the crucial questions underlying the conference topics stand out even more. The proceedings of the conference will be published in the near future.

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