Whose goodness? Ethics and aesthetics in landscapes of dissensus

Maria Hellström Reimer
Malmö University
School of Arts and Communication
SE-205 06 Malmö, Sweden
Maria.hellstrom.reimer@mah.se
Tel 0046 40 665 7147
Fax 0046 40 665 7360

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Maria Hellström Reimer is a professor in design in theory and practice at Malmö University. She is also the director of studies at the Swedish Faculty for Design Research at the Royal College of Technology, Stockholm and a member of the Swedish Research Council's Committee for Artistic Research. Central to her research is the critical engagement with interpretative and evaluating practices in the landscape field, including the scrutinization of the material, social and aesthetic conditions for the design of artefactual environments.
Abstract
Is there a logical relationship between ethics and aesthetics? Or perhaps even a natural link between practical reasoning, ‘common sense’ and the sphere of sensuous judgment? Propelled by an increasing environmental engagement and landscape awareness, these and similar philosophical questions again incur interest, motivating commentators to talk about ‘an ethical turn’. However, it is a ‘turn’ that gives rise to supplementary questions concerning the role of aesthetics and the conditions for creativity, contestation and change. Revisiting earlier ethico-aesthetic turns and twists, from modernist anti-aesthetics to contemporary neo- and onto-aesthetics, the essay aims to historicize the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, including the effect on landscape in these polemics. Ultimately, the ethico-aesthetic conjuncture constitutes the structural paradox of a ‘modernity’, which simultaneously expands horizontally and elevates vertically, consensually interlocking assumptions of commonality, subjectivity and reality. The critical alternative, it is argued, is to consider the aesthetic as a political site, where the distribution of the sensuous is a dissensual matter of (landscape) concern.

Keywords: aesthetics, anti-aesthetics, ethics, politics, consensus, dissensus
Introduction
Historically, the relationship between logics, ethics and aesthetics has been a ‘hot topic’ and a continuous source of polemics. In the debate, the notion of ‘landscape’ has played a significant role; an ‘enlightened’ metaphor and figure of secular thought with the capability of accommodating and settling the fundamental human faculties of pure reason, practical reason and judgments of value [1]. As cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove has argued, the simple suffix –*scape*, ‘posits the presence of a unifying principle’, which enables us to consider disparate spatial experiences as an ‘undivided whole’ (Cosgrove 1984: 13). Even so, while landscape has constituted an integrative framework through which to encounter and understand the world, it has also covered over what is, in the end, an historical and critical mismatch between sense, society and sensibility. Therefore, rather than allowing the notion of landscape to continuously conceal what from an ontological perspective is ‘mined land’, we should perhaps instead turn the tables and reconsider the ideologically charged configuration of reason and emotion, of commonalities and subjectivities, of ethics and aesthetics, from which the landscape has been derived.

One way of conducting such a scrutiny of configurations is through a critical historiographical survey. The issue of such a survey is not simply, as architectural theorist Mark Jarzombek has pointed out, to map out how the theories and concepts have emerged as historical projects, but also how they might be framed philosophically (Jarzombek 1999: 197). As for the understanding of ‘landscape’, the issue at stake is not simply the uncovering of its historical formation, but also how to philosophically stage or articulate such uncovering in a current situation, with landscape again surfacing as a ‘modern’ projection, paradoxically advancing, yet at the same time vertically layering and delimiting, both commonality and freedom. In the following, the focus is therefore first and foremost on this awkward intersection of ethics and aesthetics, highlighted through a number of strategic examples.

Anti-aesthetic waves
From a broader perspective, ‘modernity’ can be seen as the utopian attempt to settle, once and for all, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, between the reasonable and the desirable. At the same time, ‘modernism’ refers to a movement that also comprises a forceful and spatially articulated critique. A significant example is in this respect the pamphlet *acceptera* – a modernist manifesto co-authored in 1931 by a group of young Swedish architects and critics, among them Gunnar Asplund, Gregor Paulsson and Uno Åhrén [2]. The pamphlet was a polemical response to the criticism voiced in the media against the Stockholm Exhibition of the previous year, an expo in which the authors had played a leading role.

Their aim was to defend the ideas that were rapidly spreading throughout Europe, those of a *functional* rather than a *representative* relationship between everyday needs and architectural form. What should be accepted was the ordinary landscape characterized by plain and simple relationships between life functions and artefacts, a landscape that also provided the logical and ethical underpinning for aesthetic practice. Starting off with the claim, ‘It is difficult to be objective,’ the pamphlet problematized the spatial relationship between reason and social reproduction. Discussing patterns of marriage and households in history, the main claim was that it is ‘social adaptability’ (Asplund et al. 1931: 8) rather than some ultimate ideal that gives to a certain spatial form its legitimacy. This argument was further underpinned through a reference to landscape, more specifically the spatial division of Europe into an A- and a B-geography. What should be accepted were the progressive forces of the bustling industrial landscape leaving the self-contained and inert rural periphery far behind. (Fig. 1.)

In relation to these changes, the task of the architect/designer was to embrace the spatial dynamics of human life and to generate forms in accordance with this dynamism. As a consequence, the single and ideal architectural object expanded into a functional environment, the governing principle of which was to address the diverse needs of ordinary citizens. Unaffected by conservative
scaremongering, people would let go of the old-fashioned procedures and antiquated forms and instead willingly welcome the new and convenient modalities. A telling illustration reinforced the argument: liberated from the affected and theatrical manners of a past era, people would now be able to move freely and spontaneously according to the pace of the time. This would eventually erase some deeply recognized values, such as beauty. But according to the acceptera group, beauty can be reached in many ways: ‘The beautiful is not bound to a certain scheme. It depends on the mode in which a matter is being dealt with.’ (Asplund et al. 1931: 103) What’s important is the ‘working form’ of practical life and not the passive enhancement of an ideal (Asplund et al. 1931: 103) [3]. ‘That is why we now are tempted to say: down with beauty; let us talk less of beauty for a while.’ (Asplund et al. 1931: 141) [4] (Fig. 2.)

The acceptera programme presented a clear-cut anti-aesthetics. Within its framework, beauty was considered superfluous, unnecessary. In this respect, the pamphlet proposed the same ban on the decorative as that advocated by the early functionalists – but while the anti-aesthetics of Adolf Loos had been inspired by evolutionism and a strict logic of fitness, acceptera proposed a softer and more popular version. If Loos had been ‘preaching to the aristocrat’, or to the man for whom ‘freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength’ (Loos 1908/1971: 24), acceptera addressed a broader segment of society, including emancipated women. What was significant for acceptera was the attempt to reconsider architecture and design in terms of social accountability. It was not enough, as Loos had suggested, for the designer to simply purify and unleash his aesthetic sensibility in order to legitimize change. No – the new professionals of form should also take into account the complexity of the contemporary landscape and the consequences of the design action as organizational intervention.

In its ambition to situate building in a broader, societal landscape, acceptera presented what could be described as ‘an ethical turn’ – but it was a turn that also revealed modernity’s contradictions. As Swedish philosopher Sven-Olov Wallenstein has pointed out, the manifesto projected ‘an image of neutrality’, that would ‘overcome inherited conflicts’ (Wallenstein 2010: 189). While rejecting absolute aesthetic values, the manifesto instead insisted on a ‘working objectivity’ infusing mundane and common everyday life. If aesthetic harmony previously had been the binding element, it was now the cultural landscape of human, social praxis that would provide meaning naturally and continually.

In the decade to follow, totalitarian forces would appropriate and fuse the functionalist ethos into essentialist aesthetics celebrating the crowd, the human body and the homeland. When, after the Second World War, the time had come to process these distortions, the possibility of a neutral and natural relationship between ethics and aesthetics had to be re-assessed once again. While the notion of everyday life developed in opposition to aesthetic idealism, it had also resulted in aesthetically articulated scaffoldings, now ethically motivated only by dubiously defined human needs. However, seen from the perspective of an emerging environmental consciousness, the human focus had brought about blindness to the wider complex of biological life. Disputing modernist homo mensura aesthetics, the idea that ‘man is the measure of all things’ [5], spatial professionals like Ian McHarg and Christopher Alexander started to articulate a science-oriented, evidence-based and ‘natural’ aesthetics. While Alexander regarded this as a general systemic problem concerning the ‘fitness’ of forms in relation to heterogeneous and conflicting ‘real world contexts’ (Alexander, 1964: 19 and 21), McHarg emphasised the complete subordination of human adaptation to the recurrent processes of biosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere and lithosphere. For McHarg, design should embrace natural and cyclic flexibility, which in terms of aesthetics translates into an organically unfolding fitness that had to be uncovered (McHarg 1969/1971: 46). Yet, despite a ‘deep’ natural grounding, such fitness did not lack ethical underpinning [6]; on the contrary, the ecological thinking that inspired McHarg originated in a strong belief in what was conceived of as a comprehensible, ‘intercellular altruism’ (McHarg 1964: 5), a co-existence that in ecological terms is referred to as symbiosis. (Fig. 3.)

While McHarg’s organic altruism disputed bourgeois aesthetics, it grew out of a fundamentally...
ahistorical understanding of real world contexts as cyclic spheres. Although processual in character, it presented a formalism not very different from that of the ‘working form’. An alternative turn thus gained momentum; a critical turn towards the historically situated Other in historically configured margins. A discursive ramification rather than a turn, this shift was comprehensively summarized in the 1983 anthology The Anti-Aesthetic [7], a seminal collection of texts by Hal Foster, Jürgen Habermas and Rosalind Krauss among others. The object of dispute remained the same: the hegemony of ‘Western representation(s)’, now extended to embrace the dominance of ‘modern “supreme fictions”’ (Foster 1983: xv). But the context of reference had changed; rather than common everyday life or the natural environment, attention was now directed towards ‘difference’, as Foster expresses it ‘of others without opposition, of heterogeneity without hierarchy’ (Foster 1983: xv). The anti-aesthetic sting was directed towards ‘the hidden link’ between functionalist universalism and a ubiquitous capitalism, a symbiosis which had resulted in precisely that which it had claimed to prevent: total aestheticization of the everyday landscape through stereotyping mass-customization or, to use Kenneth Frampton’s frequently cited words in the anthology, ‘the victory of universal civilization over locally inflected culture’ (Frampton 1983: 17).

If earlier anti-aesthetics had evolved as an opening up of bourgeois interiors towards bustling urbanity and swarming nature, late modern anti-aesthetics developed as an acknowledgement of a fundamental diversity reflected through ‘the discourse of Others’ (Owens 1983: 57-82), through the decentred spaces of feminists, ethnic minorities, drug addicts or political refugees, thus actualizing the permanent crisis inherent to any projection of aesthetic ideals. The question was whether ‘categories afforded by the aesthetic [were] still valid?’ (Foster 1983: xv)

Not surprisingly, this questioning of aesthetic fundaments from a political point of view soon evoked reactions in the form of a new ‘celebratory use of the term beauty’ (Hinderliter et al. 2009: 3-4; italics in original). When, in the early nineties, American art theorist Dave Hickey formulated his Ruskin-inspired neo-aesthetics, the aim was to attack the ‘political correctness’ of postmodern anti-aesthetics. Echoing Ruskin’s critique of modernism, Hickey subscribed to his moralizing agenda (Hickey 1993) [8]. Although beauty is thought to spring from an instinctive sensibility, it is still directed towards that which is ‘attractive to our moral nature in its purity and perfection’ (Ruskin 1843-60/1998: 200).

Characteristic of the new aestheticisms is the adding of a convincing ‘ethical tone’ (Hinderliter et al. 2009: 4). While defining beauty as ‘the single direct route from the image to the individual’ (italics in the original), Hickey swiftly links the aesthetic ‘effect’ to the true and the good (Hickey 1993: 20). In a similar manner, Arthur Danto argues that as an inherent reflection of a genetically defined human nature, ‘beauty might claim the same ontological weight as virtue’ (Danto 2003: 28). As such, although ahistorical, beauty also contains political potential as a value accessible for all. To this, Elaine Scarry adds that while spontaneously producing a ‘lateral regard’, a look from the side, beauty makes us ‘willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us’ (Scarry 1999: xx). Enticing in us an impulse of attraction, beauty also evokes a craving to care. The inherent message is that beauty is a metaphysical force and a sensuously defined order, an ethically charged principle that is also valid on an environmental or landscape scale. Aesthetic experience, claims environmental aesthetician Arnold Berleant, provides us with a non-mediated ‘model of mutuality and support’ (Berleant 2005: 36) – a McHargian idea that is now recurrently resurfacing in recent landscape discourse. Different from commodified forms, ‘landscape beauty’ presents a holistic attractiveness, a kind of herbal remedy, restoring our mental connections to the biophysical world (Meyer 2008: 17, Hellström Reimer 2010: 35).

From outposts of consensus to landscapes of dissensus

Within this scenario of shifts and turns, the ambiguity of aesthetics may seem greater than ever. Aesthetic preference has to a large extent become the combustible fuel of human interaction – as aesthetic theorist Wolfgang Welsch expressed it: ‘disfigur[ing] the world instead of perfecting [it]’ (Welsch 1995/1997) – continuing to motivate ‘anti-aesthetic’ attempts to rethink the role of the
sensuous as for the conceptualization of such entities as commonality, subjectivity and reality. Rather than a complete abjuration of aesthetics, Welsch has suggested a situated ‘undoing’ of the aesthetic, including its often hidden and unclear relation to ethics. While claiming autonomy, aesthetics often appears as a socially normative ‘aesthet/hics’ (Welsch 1997:60). With this neologism, Welsch seeks to call attention to an unspoken ethical twist, and more specifically to its spatial effects. In relation to the expanded field of aesthetic experience, the ethical twist constitutes ‘an elevatory imperative’, a vertical disciplining of the encounter with the world, and an emphasis on virtues and high values. Unpredictable and unruly, the free play of the senses is in this way subtly re-attached to the idealist conception of spiritual elevation.

Actualizing inscribed and invisible dependencies, Welsch’s aesthet/hics involved a general questioning of the ethical alignment associated with the institution of Fine Art and the readiness in aesthetic discourse to accept this elevatory or edifying structuring without further reflection. It was also formulated during a period when new technologies, new media and new virtual landscapes were opening up new aesthetic experiences beyond those already framed. Confronted with the abundances of cyberspace, the ethical twist had a deterrent effect, alienating us from all that, which might be too sensible, too strong, too emotional, or too engaging, preventing aesthetics from expanding ‘beyond itself […] into the full extent of aethesis’ (Welsch 1995/97).

Welsch’s aesthetic critique should be understood in relation to the cybernetic expansion of the 1990s and successive attempts by the establishment to circumscribe its transformative effects. An effect not only of digitalization, but also of the geopolitical changes following the collapse of the Iron Curtain, this period shows a tendency towards the ethical. While Welsch would describe the aesthet/hics as the clinging to a divine vertical, the critique presented by Hal Foster described a different ethico-aesthetical configuration. In The Return of the Real Foster called attention to what he saw as a horizontal move towards the ethnographic or cartographic: ‘one selects a site, enters its culture and learns its language, conceives and presents a project, only to move to the next site, where the cycle is repeated’ (Foster 1996: 202). Although a necessary and critical move away from ‘the disciplinary criterion of quality’ (Foster 1996: xi) towards a culturally specific interest, this horizontal expansion also entailed a problematic resignation from a vertically manifested and potentially influential expertise. As ethical aesthetics expands toward ever-new elsewheres, ‘reactionary know-nothings can seize the public forum’ (Foster 1996: xii), only to condemn its openness. (Fig. 4)

One of the recent voices problematizing the ethical turn of aesthetics belongs to French philosopher Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, aesthetics is first and foremost the sphere that conditions the situated and historical configuration of social space. As such, aesthetics may function either as an institutional structure for spiritual elevation or as a field for negation, but in either case aesthetics operates on an ontological level as the principle for the spatial ordering and social dealing with ‘the sensible’ – in Rancière’s context understood as that which concerns the senses and which is played out on a shared and material level (Rancière 2009).

Rancière’s starting point is aesthetics as regime, as an inter-subjective yet disciplinary framework, regulating the relationships between subjects and surroundings. Against this view of aesthetics as a ‘tribunal’ of disinterested judgments that cannot be questioned (Rajchman 2003), Rancière plays out an understanding of aesthetics as the polemical expansion of sensibilities through which human interference is manifested. This double meaning, both institutional and interventional, has also given rise to the orientational confusion of current aesthetics, on the one hand the vertical place-holder of Fine Art and on the other the horizontal challenging of sense, self and society.

Against this background of aesthetic ambiguity, Rancière wants us to attentively recognize aesthetics as a composite field of action concerned with the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière 2004). Aesthetics involves the creative and negotiable allocation of matter and sensations, identities and meanings in space, a mode of distributive and participative action also frequently referred to as ‘politics’ (Rancière 2010: 27). What should be noted is the critique of ethics that follows from this view. Many rejoice about the return of ethics, says Rancière, yet ethics today more often obscures the very space where morality used to be played out. Rather than calling attention to the situatedness
of judgments, says Rancière, the turn to ethics dissolves the site specificity of aesthetic practice, obscuring ‘that which formed the very core of “old morality”: the distinction between fact and law, between what is and what ought to be’ (Rancière 2010: 184). In his *Ten Theses on Politics* Rancière develops this argument through the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘police’. The essence of the ‘police’ (as manifested in and through the *polis*, the urban landscape), claims Rancière, is the controlled distribution of the sensible as a way to avoid leeway, gaps or supplements. The essence of politics, however, is ‘the break with the ”normal” distribution of positions’ and the continuous manifestation of a rejected or vanishing diversity (Rancière 2010: 27-44). For Rancière, politics is always aesthetic in this basic sense, as an actualization of different ways of sharing the sensible. (Fig. 5)

In an article on ‘The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics’, Rancière exemplifies his thesis with reference to the ordinary landscape of a small town in which the ethical regime and spaces for negotiation often remain hidden from the foreigner, covered over by a picturesque aesthetic regime [9]. What Rancière wants to emphasize is the disrespectful patronizing that sometimes motivates the development of an ethically twisted aesthetics, a condescension eliminating the spatial tension expressed by the very word ‘morals’ – a plural term that implies the concurrence in one and the same landscape of ‘different forms of morality and of rights’ (Rancière 2010: 188). This elimination of tension in the name of ethics has also been given its own name – and that is ‘consensus’. Today, ‘consensus’ may simply refer to the necessary agreements over interests in or resources of landscapes, or perhaps even, as in the ‘Scandinavian model’ of *acceptera*, to a style of administration that prioritizes conflict resolution, with reference either to the ‘functional’ or the ‘natural’. Yet, properly understood, consensus defines an ethical mode of structuring a space that, as Rancière expresses it, ‘evacuates the political core constituting it, which is *dissensus*’ (Rancière 2010: 188, italics in the original).

Landscapes are certainly shared sensibilities, aesthetic expanses upon which subjectivities, commonalities and realities may be played out. What we need to accept, however, is that such expanses, such landscapes constitute neither given absolutes nor particularly good or beneficial modes of distributing sensibilities. Instead, if there is a presumed ‘goodness’ inherent in landscapes, it is not there to be accepted without further questions but to be undone, disclosed, contested. Only in this way can the invention of landscape attain its aesthetic and political status as a matter of common concern, ‘always ambiguous, precarious, litigious’ (Rancière 2010: 202).
References:


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Notes:
[1] Any discussion of logics, ethics and aesthetics has to consider the Kantian Critiques and the extent to which they have influenced the development of modern philosophy. In his three Critiques the Critique of Pure Reason (1781, 1787), the Critique of Practical Reason (1788), and the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790), the radical idea is that of human autonomy. According to Kant, autonomous human reason is the source of knowledge, morality and beliefs, all of which are mutually consistent, as they rest upon the same transcendental foundation. See Rohlf (2010).
[5] The so called homo mensura clause ‘Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not.’ is ascribed to Protagoras, Greek pre-Socratic philosopher, and like many thought fragments from Antiquity it is a phrase that is open for interpretation. For a discussion, see Rosengren (2012).
[6] McHarg’s thinking was unmistakably inspired by early non-anthropocentric or misanthropic philosophy, the aim of which was a more deep-reaching or radical understanding of the interdependence characterizing the eco-system as a whole; ideas antedating the ‘deep ecology’ later formulated by Arne Naess (see Naess 1974).
[8] For a broader discussion on John Ruskin’s relationship to modernity, see Toni Cerutti’s analysis of what could be seen as a ‘Ruskinian’ approach to modern life (Cerutti 2000).
[9] The landscape in question is that of Lars von Trier’s film Dogville (Denmark/Sweden 2003).
Fig. 1. The cultural situation according to acceptera: Europe divided into A- and B landscapes (From Asplund et.al. (1931) acceptera).

Fig. 2. The common landscape of working form: View of the Stockholm Exhibition, 1930.

Fig. 3. A turn towards ecological fitness: The Landscape Laboratory, Alnarp, Sweden. Photo Kerstin Ergenzinger.


Fig. 5. A re-distribution of the sensible: Monika Gora, Travelling Garden, 2008. Photo Pia Schmidtbauer.

Fig. 6. Dissensual design? Beyond the Construction Site - urban space as a constitutive dimension of social action. KUD Obrat/Obrat Culture and Art Association, Ljubljana (Polonca Lovsin, Apolonija Sustercic, Urska Jurman, Stefan Doepner), 2010-present. Photo Suzana Kajba.