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Dangerous Beauties

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Imagine that you are looking at instances of the following: a farm stream, a stand of sunflowers along a highway, the famous statues on Easter Island, a trailer court, a wild orchid, a farm field with contour planting, a burnt out forest, a lush forest, a swamp, a young deer, a suburban residential street, a Main Street in a small town, purple loose strife growing in a wetland. Which do you think you would be likely to describe as beautiful? And now consider all of the things we have to say about beauty in ordinary, everyday discourse.

- Beauty is as beauty does.
- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.
- Beauty is skin deep.
- Smoke makes beauty.
- Cold coffee makes beauty.
- You can neither eat beauty nor make flannel out of it.
- Eyes can never see the heart’s beauty.
- Beauty is its own excuse for being.
- Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold.
- A thing of beauty is a joy forever.
- Beauty is truth, truth beauty.
Which is it? These competing claims incline one to agree with Arthur Symons who wrote that, "The whole mystery of beauty can never be comprehended by the crowd." I must make clear at the outset that I shall not answer the question, "What is beauty?" definitively in this paper. What I intend to discuss are some of the ramifications of the fact that we seem to be pulled in so many directions, sometimes completely opposite ones. On the one hand it seems obvious that it is possible for someone to be a handsome scoundrel. But then, reminded perhaps of Dorian Gray, we tend to agree with those who insist that only a good soul is truly beautiful. The title of my paper, "Dangerous Beauties," undoubtedly puts you in mind of seductive temptresses who comb their lovely shining, full-bodied locks that shimmer with L'Oréal's latest shades manufactured for those who claim they "deserve it"—where what many of us think they deserve is a lecture on the meaning of life. What I shall say does have implications for such issues, but the beauties that I intend to discuss are those beauties of nature that make it difficult to establish and reinforce sustainable environmental policies. I shall argue that many sound ecological practices have a chance of success only if we follow what I call sound aesthetic practices. Indeed, at the end of the day, the two cannot, I think, be separated.

I do not intend to say which of the many ways in which we use 'beauty' is correct, or to argue for language reform. 'Beauty' will continue to be used in all of the different, even contradictory, ways that our various slogans express. Instead I want to make a different case: If we want to produce and maintain sustainable landscapes, we must work to connect aesthetic preferences to what is ecologically sound. We must work against what I shall call "dangerous beauties." This is difficult work and itself has dangers—one may become oppressive or elitist, for example. But it must be done, albeit carefully. And the task definitely demands contextualization.

Immanuel Kant left a legacy in which aesthetic experiences and judgments were, as I shall describe it, "de-contextualized." Although he himself distinguished between pure and dependent beauty, it is his views concerning pure beauty that have had the greatest influence. His predecessors had left him a philosophical legacy in which failure to arrive at agreement about the nature of beauty generated tremendous skepticism about establishing a foundation that would allow for rational aesthetic disputation. Kant saw the problem this way: How can one, with rational consistency, believe both that judgements about the beautiful are subjective and at the same time that they are universally true?

When I say, "Single malt highland Scotch is delicious," I am perfectly aware of the fact that I am saying only something about myself and, perhaps about other people who, like me, respond to this brew with pleasure. But Kant observed, correctly I believe, that aesthetic judgments are not like these judgments of taste. When I remark that a rose is beautiful or a waterfall awesome or a loon's call haunting, I realize, of course, that I am reporting on my own response. But I also feel in these cases that somehow I am doing more than making an autobiographical remark: I feel that I am saying something true.
about the rose or the waterfall or the cry of the loon. But how can I have it both ways? How can I at one and the same time say something about my own personal pleasure or pain and yet make a general claim about the world?

Kant’s proposed solution was extremely clever—but if true, necessitated the irreparable separation of judgments of beauty from their context. Briefly this was his answer: It is true that aesthetic judgments are completely subjective: they refer only to the subject making the judgment. “This rose is beautiful” means, in a very real sense, “I take pleasure in the rose.” But—and here’s the clever part—unlike judgments about the taste of whiskey, judgments about beauty are disinterested—they do not depend upon anything special about me. It doesn’t matter than I am a woman or a philosopher or a Democrat or the sort of person that finds peatiness agreeable or pro-choice or Minnesotan. It seems completely natural for my husband to say, “Your preference for Scotch is simply a matter of your own taste—I find it disgusting.” But I would be very confused if he were to say, “Your finding roses beautiful is just a matter of your own taste—I find them disgusting.” Kant attributed this to the fact that saying that roses are beautiful, like all aesthetic judgments, carries with it the belief that human beings as human beings—that is, putting aside all idiosyncratic tastes, beliefs, and values—respond similarly in some cases. If I use the term ‘beauty’ correctly, then saying, “That rose is beautiful” says something about how I respond as a human being per se and hence says something about how others, responding also as human beings per se, ought to respond. If aesthetic judgments do not in any way refer to something special about me, then anyone simply in virtue of his or her humanity should react similarly. They ought, in fact, to respond with pleasure, just as I do.

Now notice that reconciling individuality and universality in this way demands that we consider human beings per se. Nothing special about them can be relevant. In particular, nothing special about their backgrounds or the particular context of the judgement can matter. Aesthetic judgments are reports of apprehension of form alone, as Kant put it. I respond to the shape, the color, the scent, the feel, the pattern of parts, etc. and I don’t need to know anything. I don’t have to know what kind of flower it is or even whether it is a flower at all, and not, for example, a vegetable. I certainly don’t need to know where it grows, whether it is poisonous or not, how much it costs at the florist shop, what it has symbolized in Christian legends, whether, like the tulip, it created economic and political havoc as efforts to produce a particular shade of pink were made—all I have to do is respond immediately with pleasure or pain. If I respond with pleasure, it’s beautiful and that’s all there is to it.

In the last century, formalist critics (so called because like Kant they argued that apprehension of mere form alone is sufficient for aesthetic response) continued the de-contextualization of beauty. Among the most influential in literary criticism were the so-called New Critics who especially decried discussions of authorial biography or psychology. They insisted that Freudian criticism, for instance, led attention away from works to often prurient interest in their creators. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley dubbed consideration of
the extra-linguistic aims of authors “the intentional fallacy.” “[D]esign or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art,” they argued.¹ Instead one must attend to the intrinsic, immediately perceivable properties of works. In the visual arts, the criticism of such writers as Clive Bell and Roger Fry exerted equally strong influence. “To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and color and a knowledge of three-dimensional space,” wrote Bell.²

Such decontextualizing had several consequences, one of which was the decentralizing of the very notion of ‘beauty’ itself. For instance, Leo Tolstoy concluded that if beauty simply amounted to arrangements of shapes or colors or patterns of sound and images and the immediate pleasures to which these may give rise, it could not possibly account for the value of art. Art must give us more than the sort of joy derivable from lollipops or tiddly-winks. It must, that is, relate to real life issues; but a decontextualized beauty cannot do that. It was for this reason that Tolstoy looked away from beauty and toward other sources of value in his theory of art.³

Although the formalists exerted great influence, they were never alone in the marketplace of ideas. People continued to talk about art and literature in terms of the ideas expressed, in terms of what artworks had to tell us about the world and the human condition. In his recent book, God, A Biography, Jack Miles discusses what he characterizes as the battle between critics and scholars. The former believe, he says, “in character.” Hamlet, for instance, has a life beyond the speeches he makes. It makes sense to such readers to speculate about the causes of Hamlet’s emotional upheaval, for example. Scholars, on the only hand, insist that one should not go beyond what can be pointed to in a work. Miles observes that this debate has also been found in biblical study; he himself is definitely one who cares about character—who delights in what might be thought of as the ultimate literary speculation: what kind of guy is God? And the fact that his book has been so popular speaks to the fact that many people care about features of literature that go well beyond what is immediately presented in the words of the Old Testament. Similarly although both the decontextualization and decentralization of beauty marked much twentieth century aesthetics, many people have continued to care about the ways art connects to the world. But, as the opening slogans of this paper indicate, they also continued to be pulled in several directions in their thoughts and attitudes toward it. We believe that there are standards of beauty but we also believe that one person’s preferences are as good as any other’s. And our confusions are even deeper than this. We are torn between thinking that our aesthetic responses are independent of what we know (I don’t care what species that

flower belongs to—it’s just beautiful) but at the same time we feel that our responses are dependent upon what we know. (I didn’t realize how beautiful Beethoven’s Quartets are until I had a class in music appreciation.)

The formalist/contextualist debate in art theory has its analog in theories of natural beauty. On the one hand, some people insist that we take aesthetic pleasure in nature unaided (or unimpeded) by any knowledge. Others argue that knowledge is required for or is at least a contributing factor in natural appreciation. I shall argue that the latter is the approach demanded for sound, sustainable, environmental planning.

For over thirty years now there has been a law that requires consideration of aesthetic values in decisions affecting the landscape. The National Environment Policy Act of 1969 explicitly requires that as part of environmental impact studies aesthetic amenities be referred to. Investigators who attempt to meet this requirement have not often turned to philosophers for help. This is not surprising since many philosophical aestheticians have insisted that evaluating specific sites is not their task—and practical planners probably have feared that philosophers would ask more questions than they would answer. Unfortunately the studies that have been undertaken often contribute to practices that further entrench dangerous beauties. Many studies are based upon inventories of properties that the investigators believe figure centrally in people’s landscape preferences. One specialist, R. Burton Litton, begins by assuming that aesthetic value is equivalent to visual value, and chooses four criteria for inventoring landscape sites: vividness, intactness, encroachment, and uniqueness. Other planners have sought formulas that they hope will make assessments objective. For example, topographic texture has been defined as the ratio of number of trees to number of kinds of trees. Or scores are given to vividness, intactness, and unity; these are then added together, divided by three and then divided again by a uniqueness score. But we are not told why, for instance, equal weight should be given to vividness, intactness, and unity.

In one study Adirondack campers were interviewed and the following features were identified as having a positive effect on what people found visually appealing: the perimeter of immediate vegetation, the perimeter of non-immediate non-vegetation, the perimeter of distant vegetation multiplied by the area of water, the area of intermediate vegetation multiplied by the area of distant non-vegetation, and the area of intermediate vegetation multiplied by the area of water. Quite different from factors such as vividness or unity, such studies still tend to ignore how beauty may be contextualized. Even if were able to establish a quantitative basis for describing agreement, we are not thereby assured of having hit upon an explanation for that agreement and thus are not assured of having given due regard to aesthetic amenities and not to some other interest. And even if we could be sure that it is aesthetic preferences that have been captured, we would still not know whether these preferences are likely to be connected with practices that are sustainable and regenerative.

Such studies exhibit what I call the quantitative fallacy, the confusion of objectivity with quantifiability. Investigators feel driven to produce an assess-

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ment with a numeric score or ranking. The fallacy is not that numbers or ratios are used in a way that gives an appearance of mathematical certainty (although this indeed is a weakness of many studies). Rather the fallacy consists in assuming that objectivity can be achieved only quantitatively; that qualitative objectivity is impossible. But objectivity is not a matter of reducing things to numeric formulas; it is a matter of grounding one’s claims in evidence in such a way that interpersonal agreement or disagreement between rational individuals is meaningful. Furthermore, such studies typically lack any kind of theoretical foundation and ignore problems of sustainability. Instead, they rely solely on people’s conventional notions of what is beautiful—and, I shall argue, these are often dangerous.

One of my favorite kinds of studies uses what is called “visitor employed photography.” Visitors to scenic areas are given instamatic cameras and are instructed to take pictures of, say, ten spots along a trail or river that they think are beautiful. The investigators then see what kind of agreement they get. In a study of the St. Croix river in Wisconsin, they claimed that a consensus emerged, one that enabled them to identify “perceptually exciting nodes.”

The more sensory and landscape diversity there was at any one spot, the more likely it was to be photographed. For example, an area that contained a bed of yellow wildflowers, a dead snag, and an abundance of birdlife was more likely to be photographed than an area with a dead snag alone.4

My hunch is that most people would also photograph areas of purple loose strife, a flower I’ll say more about later. But management to protect this “beauty” would, as I’ll explain shortly, be misguided.

I admit that I find this sort of study appealing. I like the idea of asking ordinary people to take pictures of things they like as they travel through a given area. But the problems are legion. How representative is the sample? How much can photos from the same spot differ from one another and yet yield the same “node?” When do we know that a given photographer has taken the task seriously? In the study along the St. Croix, most people thought human structures detracted from the beauty of the surroundings. But think about photos taken along the Rhine River. They are filled with structures, mostly castles, of course. Would a castle along the St. Croix add or detract from the scenery? What, if anything, would the answer to this question tell us about rivers or people or beauty? For the purposes of this paper the most serious problem is how the results of such a study would contribute to design and management that would result in healthy environments, and it is not clear to me that they would contribute much at all. Not only are we faced with divergent tastes (some people like billboards, believing they make the roadway more interesting, while

others think they spoil the trip; some people like a nicely mown verge, others prefer a wild look; some people want hiking areas untouched, others insist on ready access to flush toilets), but we are faced with deciding who should be asked in the first place. Should experts have a greater voice than non-experts? Is there even such a thing as an expert when it comes to judging whether a roadside is ugly or not? But most importantly for this discussion, interviews are often conducted out of any meaningful context. Once we decide that the goal is to create sustainable landscapes, even quantified reports of what people prefer fail to address the question of whether this is what we want people to prefer.

Our attitudes and beliefs about which things in the environment are beautiful develop and are shaped in the same ways that our attitudes and beliefs in other areas are developed and shaped. Much learning takes place via paradigms or prototypes. Although brain science is still in its infancy more and more is being discovered about how and why this happens. Neurons are connected to other neurons in the brain by axons; the stronger and more numerous these connections, the faster our responses. The more networks there are, the easier it is for more neurons to become attached. Exercise (e.g. lessons involving drills) contributes both to creating connections between neurons and to speeding up their firing. In everyday experience, prototypes can be thought of as established networks. But these basic models or patterns are revised and refined (and sometimes rejected) as we are confronted with experiences that challenge them. Still, in many cases, our earliest paradigms stick with us. For example, if I ask you to draw a bird, chances are that you will draw something that looks more like a robin than a vulture or penguin. Of course we know that many (probably most birds) don’t look much like what we’ve drawn. But this image remains with us and continues to be used as we store and refer to information in memory. Images like this also appear in dictionaries alongside definitions—definitions themselves being in many ways prototypical. In ethical deliberation we also utilize prototypes—Do not kill, Do not steal, etc. Most of us know that these are crude rules of thumb, but they serve a purpose and retain a hold. And we have of course, prototypical beauties. These vary, of course, across cultures. In technological societies, our aesthetic prototypes are heavily influenced by our histories, as are the prototypes of all societies. They are also influenced, for example, by what has been called the “carpentered world”—experiences that affect the very way we perceive our surroundings. R.L. Gregory describes this influence as follows.

Western societies provide environments replete with rectangular objects; these objects, when projected on the retina, are represented by nonrectangular images. For people living in carpentered worlds, the tendency to interpret obtuse and acute angles in retinal images as deriving from rectangular objects is likely to be so perversely reinforced that it becomes automatic and unconscious relatively early in life. For those living where manmade structures are a small portion of the visual environment and where such structures
are constructed without benefit of carpenters’ tools … straight lines and precise right angles are a rarity. As a result, the inference habit of interpreting acute and obtuse angles as right angles extended in space would not be learned, at least not as well.³

Prototypes are not quickly nor easily abandoned. Usually this is not a problem. But when prototypes become stereotypes they begin to become dangerous. In science they stifle progress, in human relations they impede kind and respectful treatment of one another. In aesthetics, they can work against adoption of practices that contribute to a healthy environment. By dangerous beauties I refer first to landscapes that are, as we might put it, deceptively beautiful. Second, and the two often go together, are those landscapes that can be produced and maintained only by engaging in activities that undermine sound ecological practices. For examples, let us return to the kinds of sites I asked you to imagine at the outset.

1. Suppose a farm stream sparkling in the sun is located on a dairy farm and is badly polluted with run-off from the pastures. Most people report that when they first look at such a stream they imagine wading in it or having a cool drink from it. Needless to say, their reactions change when they learn that the stream is full of cow excrement. Too often landscape designers have acted as cosmeticians—making that which is not beautiful underneath appear beautiful on the surface. This need not be dangerous—but it often is, particularly when powerful corporations cover up ecologically threatening practices with conventionally pretty landscapes. Still—you might object—a stream can be beautiful even if it is polluted. More about that later.

2. J. B. Jackson⁴ has pointed out that human intervention has not only depleted species, it has served to enhance the growth and spread of some. For example, sunflowers flourish in soil that has been impoverished by other plants. Some people find sunflowers growing in poor soil touchingly beautiful—rather like the flower in the crannied wall—fighting to glorify an otherwise brutal landscape.

3. Most individuals are awed by the enormous statues that grace the coastline of Easter Island. But in order to place them near the sea, the Islanders had to cut down trees so that they could roll enormous boulders from the interior of the island to the coast. In the sixteenth century, a flourishing culture existed, but by the eighteenth century it had been reduced to a mere subsistence level because of the deforestation that resulted. Like looking at Pyramids or Mayan Temples while being told that their being built took the lives of many slaves, discovering the price of these Easter Island landmarks may decrease one’s aesthetic enjoyment.

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4. Most people, on the other hand, don't like the looks of trailer courts. Yet some writers have pointed out—again J.B. Jackson for example—that in many ways they dramatically symbolize American values: efficiency, mobility, self-reliance, individual self-expression, and non-conformity. 7 Does reflection on Jackson's analysis change the way we see these habitats?

5. Imagine again a wild orchid. Does it matter whether you know what kind of orchid it is, know the genus and species to which it belongs? Would its beauty for you be enhanced by such knowledge?

6. Most farmers, and probably most non-farmers, consider contour planting very attractive. This method of farming was established as a popular conservation practice early in the 20th century. But it has become associated with unsustainable use of weed killers and fertilizers and huge machinery which enhance an appearance of stewardship but in fact hide the destruction of land that has too often been the consequence of increased productivity. Neatness is a primary aesthetic preference for rural dwellers (and urban dwellers too, of course) but it is not necessarily next to godliness.

7. There is no question that to many burnt forests look desolate and depressing. But what we see as charred ruins may very well be a stage in the cycle of forest renewal. Few people have the ability to understand this process, let alone imagine what this area may look like in a hundred or more years.

8. Most find a lush forest more beautiful than a burnt out forest. Should we have the economic means we would probably like to build a house in the lush scenery. This is exactly what more and more people are doing. Huge trophy houses increasingly dot mountainsides. Tourists want to picnic under a tree that has lots of leaves, not spread their blankets on roughened, charred ground. Both kinds of preferences have led to expensive fire fighting practices. Expensive not just economically, but environmentally. Some seeds germinate only when temperatures reach very high levels. Forest fires are required for the sustaining of a variety of species. Putting these fires out is often a mistake. But—does this make the burnt out landscape more attractive than the lush forest for you?

9. When I grew up we still called a swamp a swamp. Stories told us about the slime monsters that inhabited them. Increasingly we are learning that wetlands (for this is the politically correct way to describe such marshy areas today) are invaluable means of filtering ground water. More and more people are coming to see them as beautiful, I think. I'll say more about why this is true in a bit.

10. If swamps and their monsters were our demons, Bambi was our hero. Almost every American (and non-American, for that matter, since Bambi has had such international success—was in fact originally a children's book written by an Austrian) finds it impossible to look at young deer without feeling all warm and fuzzy. But this attitude, coupled with the fact that most states' natural resources departments manage for sufficient deer population to satisfy

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hunters, has led to an overpopulation of deer to such an extent that in many areas they have become vermin. They destroy trees and the fact that they prefer forest edge means that there is less interior forest space of the sort needed to support the life of many other species—certain songbirds, for instance. Still—it's hard not to find "Bambi" beautiful, isn't it?

11. Along suburban streets one finds many unhealthy, but conventionally or vernacularly beautiful elements: neatly clipped lawns, sidewalks, curbs, etc. More about this later.

12. Small town Main Streets often suffer "beautification." But too often attempts to beautify fail. Relying on trite ideas of urban beautification, planners produce large expanses of mown turf that cannot be maintained without abundant use of fertilizer and often scarce water, and when city budgets are pinched, since aesthetic concerns are usually the first to go, things become as ugly if not uglier than they were before.

13. The glorious flower of purple loose strife enlivens otherwise dull marshy areas. But at a price. Introduced from Europe, it now thrives in midwestern wetlands—is so successful that it is driving out other plant species and hence the waterfowl that rely on them for habitat. Indeed, what I call "the purple loose strife problem" has become my shorthand for the problem of dangerous beauties.

As long as we continue to experience purple loose strife and deer as beautiful it will be harder to get rid of them even where we know that they threaten ecosystems. I readily confess that in spite of the fact that I have been talking for several years now about what I call the "purple loose strife problem"—I continue to respond with delight whenever I see purple loose strife. Even after I have caught myself up, reminded myself, that its presence signals the disappearance of waterfowl I still find it impossible not to be pleased. Were I to do as Clive Bell advocated, rely on nothing but my sense of color, form, and three-dimensional space, I would not care a whit about what is happening to other species. But I do care. And I do have ecologist friends who insist that they find purple loose strife ugly—so I hold out some hope for myself. But I have not gotten there yet. Fortunately there are some nuts that are not quite so hard to crack.

Let me introduce a strategy by asking you to consider your own experiences with courses in the arts. Here I'll mention art history, but courses in theory, history, or performance in any of the other arts are equally applicable. Paintings that sometimes leave us more or less cold when instructors first display slides of them begin to become rather like old friends as our exposure to them increases. If we are lucky enough to see them in real life—to come across the real thing in a European museum, for example—the joys of recognition are enormous. Of course many works of art achieve celebrity status and fans flock to see them out of a kind of sense of tourist obligation. If all one knows is that something is famous, one must see it—the Mona Lisa or Nightwatch, for instance.
But people who have studied such works have a different and fuller experience. As one learns more about these works from guides or guidebooks, one begins to see more and often to have a more and more positive response.

I would like to propose a theory of beauty that accounts for this phenomenon. It shares some of the Kantian or formalist intuitions, but not others. Typically formalist theories of beauty have emphasized something like the following:

X is beautiful if and only if attention to the intrinsic properties of X yields pleasurable responses in someone who is viewing X. (I believe that other aesthetic terms can be substituted for beauty—pretty, harmonious, graceful—but I shall stick to ‘beauty’ since it is the most general of the positive aesthetic terms.) One of the things that formalists got right was the fact that one must attend to the intrinsic properties of an object or an event if one wants to have an aesthetic experience of it. What they got wrong was thinking that one must attend exclusively to these properties—clear one’s mind of everything else, as it were. Formalist critics were so afraid that we would become distracted—start thinking about Shakespeare’s or Leonardo da Vinci’s sex life and stop thinking about Hamlet or Mona Lisa, for instance—that they declared such reflection “fallacious.”

I shall say more about this mistake shortly, but first a word about what I mean by ‘intrinsic’: for this is a key concept in formalist theories and well as in my own theory. We all insist that aesthetic experiences focus upon intrinsic properties of objects and events. My theory of the intrinsic is unusual, for it is an epistemological rather than a metaphysical interpretation.8

P is an intrinsic property of O if and only if determining whether or not O is P requires that one attend for oneself to O.

My test for a feature’s being an intrinsic property is simple: do you have to perceive something yourself in order to know whether that thing has that property? If you do have to look, listen, taste, smell or feel for yourself in order to know whether or not an object has a property, it is intrinsic. Examples of intrinsic vs. extrinsic will help.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTRINSIC</th>
<th>EXTRINSIC</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is red</td>
<td>Was created with Crayolas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks Chinese</td>
<td>Was made in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds like it was written by Bach</td>
<td>Was written by Bach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expresses the frenzy of war</td>
<td>Was composed during World War I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks cheap</td>
<td>Cost less than $10</td>
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Is chaotic
Smells citrusy
Sounds sweet
Is delicately shaped

Caused a riot
Is rare
Was made by a songbird that only lives in large, dense forests
Requires moist soil to mature

What matters for this distinction is whether direct perception is necessary: if it is, a property is intrinsic. It may not be sufficient. And, as we shall see, this is very important for the kind of beauty that I believe we should try to produce and maintain if we are to avoid dangerous ecological practices. Some of the things we see, we see only after we have enough knowledge to know what to look or listen for. This is, to return to the art history example, what happens when we take classes or read guidebooks or listen to tour guides. What we are told acts as a kind of pointer; our attention is directed at intrinsic properties that we often would not have seen if we had not been given certain bits of information. Of course we have to look for ourselves—but looking for ourselves is often simply not enough. What we do not perceive cannot be the occasion of an aesthetic experience.

This interpretation of 'intrinsic' leads to a theory of what makes something aesthetically relevant.⁹

A statement (or pointing gesture) is aesthetically relevant if and only if it draws attention (perception, reflection) to an aesthetic property.

Since people's attention can be affected by almost anything, nothing can be ruled out a priori. It is not the particular kind or piece of information that matters; it is wholly a matter of the experience that the information brings about. Richard Wollheim has argued that if a viewer sees more of the expressive or representational content when given information of any sort whatsoever, then the information is relevant¹⁰. I prefer to speak not just in terms of expressive or representational content, but of intrinsic features generally. Upon learning how oil paint "works"—why some oils can be used but not others (linseed oil works for painting because it dries, lemon oil works for preserving furniture, but not for painting, because it does not dry) and how the translucence of oil contributes to the glow of a depicted lantern—I begin actually to see more, and to enjoy it more as well. Whatever directs attention to intrinsic properties aesthetically valued is aesthetically relevant. It is, I think, as simple as that at the end of the day. The formalist's mistake was thinking that external information inevitably interferes with aesthetic experience. Of course it might. But the real danger is not that external information will distract us; the real danger is that


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lack of adequate external information may preclude one's having a rich aesthetic experience at all.

I do not deny that sometimes the word 'beautiful' is used to describe things that we find immediately pleasing—that is, to which one responds positively in the absence of much or even any knowledge. But there is another sense of the term which is different, even contradictory, but is nonetheless just as common. In addition to the sense of the term 'beauty' that refers to the immediate pleasures of perceptual experiences, there is this other sense:

X is beautiful if and only if attention to intrinsic properties of X yields pleasurable sensory experiences in an informed observer who is observing X.

Obviously there will be degrees or levels of informedness. A musicologist will have a greater chance of experiencing the wide range of beauties provided by Beethoven's symphonies than a less informed listener. This by no means precludes a certain level of pleasure in non-experts, it simply recognizes the fact that familiarity does not only nor always breed contempt; it often breeds increased admiration. I have been told by Schoenberg experts that there is much that is beautiful in his works and I have no reason to believe that they are not telling me the truth. They simply must hear something that I do not yet, and perhaps never will, hear. In George Eliot's novel Middlemarch, Dorothea says to her uncle,

You know, uncle, I will never see the beauty of those pictures which you say are so much praised. They are in a language I do not understand. I suppose there is some relation between pictures and nature which I am too ignorant to feel—just as you see what a Greek sentence stands for which means nothing to me.11

Each art form has its own language—and one is not born knowing how to understand let alone communicate to others in it. The landscape also has a language which when read produces a fuller appreciation of what it has to offer aesthetically.

But is reference to external information necessary? Even granting that such information may sometimes be relevant, may we not nonetheless do without it? Theorists and critics have often worried that certain bits of information will cause us to act as if we are wearing distorting lenses when we approach artworks. They have also worried that too much information keeps us from having genuine, heartfelt responses. A friend of mine has told me that he does not want to know what Jane Austen's relationship with her sisters was or how servants were treated in nineteenth century British society. He wants to be left in peace to enjoy her novels. We hear similar remarks from concert goers who fear that reading program notes will actually get in the way of their listening to the musicians.

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Similarly, people often say that they want to be allowed to have unencumbered experiences of nature. My friend, the philosopher Ronald Moore, relates a story about a teen-age date when he took a girl for a walk in the forest. "All she wanted to do was to tell me the names of wildflowers," he complains. Now questions about what it was that Ron wanted to do aside, he questions whether too much naming can get in the way of communing aesthetically with the wilderness. My answer is that something gets in the way if it prevents one's responding with pleasure to what one perceives; but naming does not necessarily have this effect. Consider again a wild orchid. Suppose it is a rare wildflower found in some mossy swamps with large populations of old white cedar trees—but not even in all such swamps. Perhaps it requires a special combination of soil microorganisms and waterfowl. I suggest that knowing that you have come across a very rare calypso bulbosa on a hike through a Wisconsin forest may heighten your sensory and reflective pleasures. And knowing that you have a chance, slim as it may be, of seeing one will make you look closer and harder. It may increase your chances of seeing another member of the species—many of which are quite tiny. Often just knowing where we are—naming the site, as it were—increases the amount of pleasure that one takes in a place. Put simply, the more you know, the more you see, and the more you feel. The less you know, the greater the chance that you will not see or feel what's there to be seen and felt.

But the danger is not restricted to the probability of missing what objects and events have to offer us in the way of aesthetic delight. There is another danger: lack of knowledge may prevent us from seeing that what is conventionally regarded as beautiful undermines what I have elsewhere called "healthy beauty"—pleasures generated by sensing and reflecting on intrinsic properties that contribute to sustainable ecosystems. Not only can knowledge heighten our perceptions and reflections, it can also prevent us from acting in ways that harm the environment, may prevent us, that is, from enjoying only dangerous beauties. 'Dangerous beauty' may be defined this way:

Y is dangerously beautiful if and only if attention paid to intrinsic properties of an object or event yields pleasurable sensory experiences in the observer and these experiences make it likely that the observer will engage in harmful practices.

Although there are many examples of dangerously beautiful things (for example, models the adoration of whom lead to the anorexic practices of teen-agers or bungy jumping or the songs of the Sirens) I am, of course, here concerned with things in the landscape that are dangerously beautiful—examples of which we have already encountered: expanses of mown turf, purple loose strife, "Bambi's," increased forest edge. When I know what it is up to, I begin to see that too much purple loose strife probably means too few waterfowl, or that increased forest edge and hence more deer may be coupled with an absence of the singing of birds. Associated with dangerous beauty, of course, is safe ugliness. Non-till farming is less attractive to many people—looks messier, more ragged. Burnt out forests do not have the appeal that lush forests have, though
they may be required in order for the germination of certain species of seeds (those which germinate only when temperatures are very high).

There are at least two primary consequences of the realization that one is in the presence of a dangerous beauty. First one may continue to see these systems as conventionally beautiful but not engage in unhealthy practices. That is, I may continue to thrill at the sight of purple loose strife. Still, if I know what harm it is capable of, I will not stop the teams trying to get rid of it, let alone plant it in my own garden. A few years ago I was spending the summer on the Oregon coast and found purple loose strife for sale in the local nursery. I bought some for my patio—I now realize I did a really bad thing, and I promise never to do it again. Instead of supporting departments of natural resources that regularly stock forests with deer, I will do what I can to prevent such acts when they require cutting that eliminates the inner forest area required by certain songbirds. I will not insist that all fires be put out immediately in forests where high-temperature germinating seeds have not had a chance to take hold for several years. Much as I would like my very own trophy house in the Colorado mountains so that I can enjoy the scenery, I won't build or buy such a house if I know what the environmental cost is.

But it is not only possible to change one's behavior. It is, at least in some cases, actually possible to change one's preferences—for pleasurable sensations to become painful, and vice versa. As I said earlier, I have ecologist friends who report that they have a truly negative response to purple loose strife—have come to see it as actually ugly. Joan Nassauer has done extremely interesting research with respect to the preferences of suburban dwellers for lawns and gardens. Using the technique of computer imaging she has used a photograph of a typical Midwestern suburban street scene and has altered its landscape. "Alternatives" present the same street scene with increasing amounts of native vegetation. When asked which of the scenes they prefer, most persons who live in such suburbs initially opt for the first—for the one with which they are most familiar, one which also, not coincidentally, exhibits the cultural values of most suburbanites: not just a desire for material possessions that exemplify economic status but a preference for landscapes that exemplify both aesthetic and ethical values: well-cared for green and weedless lawns, neat curbed-lined streets, unobstructed views of the street and the homes of neighbors as well as the gardens in which one's own children will be playing. Nassauer then points out that several of the practices demanded by such preferences are environmentally unfriendly. Curb-lined streets, for instance, permit more rapid runoff of rainwater; thus the fertilizers and weed-killers used to keep the lawns so green and weedless find their way more quickly into the sewage system and ultimately into a water supply that becomes more and more difficult to purify for human consumption. Large expanses of what landscape architects (often contemptuously) refer to as "mown turf" cannot be maintained without the use of one of the most polluting devices yet invented—the small gasoline engine. Exotic plants often require even more fertilizer or excess amounts of water. And so on. Nassauer points out that substituting more unmown areas for some areas of mown turf and more indigenous plants requires less care in addition to
being more environmentally friendly. She has found out that in the groups
with which she works, many individuals gradually begin to change their aes-
thetic preferences—they revise their prototypes of what counts as beautiful. As
they learn more about sound ecological practices, they actually begin to see
their own yards as less attractive. They begin to see the beauty in using more
non-exotic vegetation. While most still do not go so far as to opt for the third
alternative, the second alternative does begin to become the favorite. They
begin to prefer alternatives that show increasing amounts of unmown turf and
indigenous trees and flowers.\(^\text{12}\)

Nassauer has also discovered that signs explaining ecological practices being
followed make a difference to individuals' modes of perception.\(^\text{13}\) A sign that
explains how and why land is being left "undrained" to re-create a wetland will
change one's interpretation of the site from swamp to marsh or, better yet, to a
water meadow. People even begin to see swamps as tourist sites if the right visu-
al indicators are present—boardwalks, for instance. A few summers ago, the
Minneapolis Park Board decided to decrease the amount of mowing they were
doing along the shores of several of the city lakes. The population rebelled.
Accustomed to neatly clipped expanses of green lawn, they saw only messiness.
One mother even complained that her children were getting lost in the high
weeds. After a concerted effort at educating the public about the value of less
mowing (less air pollution) and a greater variety of plant species (better
drainage and more birds), people gradually accepted and then came actually to
enjoy the subtle coloration, the variety of textures, the softened contours.
Where earlier landscape design practices are still followed, people who are now
"in the know" begin to view them as boring.

A necessary first step in attempting to change preferences for the danger-
ously beautiful to preferences for the healthily beautiful is an understanding of
the fact that our preferences come with a history. In his ground-breaking work,
_The Making of the English Landscape_, W.G. Hoskins opens with the question of
how the following differences (differences that have analogs across the globe)
can be explained.

> Why the hedgebanks and lanes of Devon should be so totally dif-
ferent from those of the Midlands, why there are so many ruined
churches in Norfolk or so many lost villages in Lincolnshire, or
what history lies behind the winding ditches of the Somerset marsh-
lands, the remote granite farmsteads of Cornwall, and the lonely
pastures of upland Northamptonshire.\(^\text{14}\)

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Part of the explanation is agricultural, as Nan Fairbrother writes.

In Britain the small fields of the Celtic farmers became large open fields of the Anglo-Saxons: with enclosure these were divided up by hedges and rows of trees which are now disappearing again, and the agricultural landscape is returning to a more open appearance.15

But another part of the explanation rests in realizing how great an affect designers and planners have had—and how their work has shaped what we expect and thus come to prefer in both rural and urban scenes.

Even before the Environmental Policy Act inspired planners to try to quantify aesthetic preferences, landscape architects tried to discover and articulate laws describing and governing what people find pleasing. In 1772 Thomas Whately urged the utilization of water because it is so capital a feature, that it is always regretted when it is missing. It is the most interesting object in the landscape, and the happiest circumstance in a retired recess, captivates the eye at a distance: invites approach, and is delightful when near.16

A belief in this "law" has had disastrous consequences in more recent times in the southwestern United States, where scarce water resources are used for fountains, swimming pools, and artificial lakes. But an increasing number of inhabitants in this region have come to see their danger, and have slowly begun also to perceive them as less attractive—almost as grotesque, in fact.

In designing and maintaining sustainable landscapes due attention must be given, as the formalists insisted, to the intrinsic properties valued by viewers. But we must also attend to the fact that these values develop within communities. Aesthetic values can, I have tried to show, prove to be as dangerous as can other cultural values—economic or political values that oppress, for example. Only by attending fully to contextualized beauties, as well as to those beauties that delight us without much thought about science or ethics, will we develop policies and practices that yield sustainable and beautiful landscapes.

The bad news is that aesthetic preferences change slowly. But this may be the good news as well, for as Aldo Leopold said, "If you don't know, go slow." Our understanding of the intricate workings and interactions of biosystems remains in its infancy. We are fairly certain that purple loose strife is a hazard in midwestern wetlands. But it may turn out that preferences for purple loose strife, like enjoyment of bungy jumping, have some survival value. Destroying purple loose strife wherever we find it or making bungy jumping illegal may be a mistake. As always, common sense is called for as we develop laws and guidelines. But it is dangerous to trust without question conventional, de-contextualized aesthetic preferences that seem to entrench what best knowledge indicates lead to dangerous practices.

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16Quoted in Fairbrother, Op. Cit. p. 79.