

POPULAR  

---

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 1 / 2022

**LEARNING FROM AESTHETICS  
OF ENGAGEMENT**

**Emily Brady**

Department of Philosophy, Texas A&M University, USA

# LEARNING FROM AESTHETICS OF ENGAGEMENT

Emily Brady

## Abstract

This article discusses Arnold Berleant's ground-breaking idea of 'aesthetic engagement', used in its broadest sense - that is, the ways in which this philosophical approach has supported forms of 'engaging with' environment. Berleant's philosophy is placed in dialogue with the theory of the 'integrated aesthetic', as developed by Emily Brady, in order to show the influence of his ideas. Brady's approach is inspired by various concepts and ideas within Berleant's thought which aim to dissolve the dualisms that hinder harmonious human-nature relationships, such as 'immersion', and 'aesthetic community'. The article argues for the deep importance of his views in shaping the field of environmental aesthetics, as well as their timely significance; more specifically, his attention to global aesthetic ideas and the promise of his 'descriptive aesthetics' for thinking through intergenerational aesthetics.

## Keywords

Environmental Aesthetics, Arnold Berleant, Engagement, Relationality, Immersion.

So many of us working in the field of aesthetics owe Arnold Berleant a great debt of gratitude for his deeply important contribution to establishing the field of environmental aesthetics as we know it today. He has published many books, edited essential anthologies in the field, and co-founded and co-edited a major journal, *Contemporary Aesthetics*. Through all of these avenues, and more, he has influenced scholars across the world and conveyed his philosophical and phenomenological experiences of living in the landscape, aesthetically-speaking.<sup>1</sup>

I have entitled this short essay "Learning from Aesthetics of Engagement" in order to express how much I have learned from Arnold's philosophy. Here, I do not mean only his ideas about the ground-breaking idea of engagement in aesthetic experience. I intend to capture, also, the broadest sense in which his philosophy encourages ways of being in aesthetic experience that speak to *engaging with*. Those ways of being are, I believe, essential to establishing and supporting harmonious aesthetic-ethical relationships between human and more-than-human worlds.

I would like to touch on a few of the ways in which his ideas have shaped my own work and enabled me to think beyond the subject-object dualism that has been part of the philosophical heritage of aesthetics. My work does not follow Arnold's phenomenological approach, but rather draws on various concepts and ideas which nonetheless speak to breaking down that dualism in so far as it hinders harmonious human-nature relationships. Over the years, I have developed the "integrated

aesthetic” approach which looks to forms of aesthetic experience that are *situated, relational, participatory* and show *intergenerational* awareness.<sup>2</sup>

In aesthetic experiences beyond the arts, we are often positioned in such a way as to take in multisensory aesthetic qualities and multiple environmental changes on various temporal and spatial scales. Aesthetic attention draws us into our environs to exercise multisensory forms of focused perception. The *situated* perspective draws on many of the senses, sometimes in combination and at other time one by one. Such a perspective opens up the possibility for a full, rich experience and one which can disclose values and meanings of semi-natural and natural places. This situated approach fits with and is appropriate to a truly environmental aesthetic experience.

The attention of this situated positioning is shaped by environment or phenomenon, and can range from being directed by general or vague ideas and thoughts to concrete and particular qualities, meanings, things, lives, and processes. Arnold conveys such situated attention in terms of *immersion* when he describes a canoeing trip down the Genesee River:

All of the senses joined in an acute awareness of the perceptual qualities of that environment: sight, smell, hearing, tactility, kinaesthesia, all inseparable in our sensory immersion in the riverine setting. This trip combined several interests – research, the practical demands of guiding the canoe and finding a suitable place to pull out each night, and recognizing animals, birds, and the other things we encountered. But most pervasive and powerful was the aesthetic character of the experience, a character that was always present and dominated all other interests.<sup>3</sup>

When situated attention is sympathetically directed, it is direct and paid to things. Just what we are situated in also captures our attention, draws our attention, and holds our attention. While brief sensory attention can be rich in itself, many kinds of attention have more duration. Sustained forms of attention, often articulated in terms of perceptual absorption, are a familiar feature of aesthetic theories across the history of the field. Here, the aesthetic experience is characterized not as an inactive state of mind or passive taking in. In so far as one’s attention is sympathetic or focused on something for its own sake, it is not merely reactive. The subject is not detached but engaged, active and absorbed, with the body sometimes playing a role, too. As Arnold has put it, “Aesthetic engagement recognizes the primacy of our immediate perceptual experience, experience that is sensory yet colored by the personal and cultural dimensions that enter into all human experience.”<sup>4</sup> This idea of engagement applies not only to natural environments but to all kinds of aesthetic encounters from the garden, to the city, to all kinds of everyday situations.

Conceiving of the aesthetic experience in this way, as situated, immersed, and engaged, opens up all kinds of opportunities for cultivating human-nature *relationships*. We might say that in a ‘thin’ sense, we are placed aesthetically in relation to environment. This is not merely a spatial relation, rather, being placed aesthetically is the basis for all kinds of aesthetic relations that emerge through

multisensory, imaginative, and affective attention. Elsewhere, I have developed a thicker sense of aesthetic relationality by drawing on Alan Holland's concept of "meaningful relations."<sup>5</sup> The value-space of meaningful relations unites evolutionary, ecological, and cultural forms of life: "life cannot be sustained in isolation...meaningful relations are those that enable life-forms to cluster in a way that is productive of further life."<sup>6</sup> Cultural or human relations will involve the aim co-flourishing, situated within a web of relationships populated by ecological, earth, marine, and atmospheric systems, and all kinds of living and non-living things. Arnold's ideas concerning the "aesthetic community" are very helpful for thinking through the ontology of relationality:

Continuity is not absorption or assimilation, nor is it an external relation between separate things. It suggests, instead, connectedness within a whole rather than a link between discrete parts. Much as William James argued when he maintained that relations are not external connections but have an immediacy that is directly present and real to experience, relationships in a fulfilled community are not imposed from without but are inherent in the situation in ways that are concrete and functional. The aesthetic community exemplifies this.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to rationalist or dualistic ontologies, connectedness, mutuality, and reciprocity are features of this fulfilled community. Here, Arnold is not reflecting narrowly upon environmental experience but articulates a concept of aesthetic community that reaches across all of our aesthetic encounters in the world. Still, I think it expresses very well an ecological ontology in a wide sense, if you will. Arnold's inspiration is not the science of ecology or evolutionary biology. Rather, he draws from pragmatism and phenomenology to craft this deeply original idea.

Many kinds of ontologies and cosmologies are relevant to conceptualizing, describing, or prescribing relationships between human and more-than-human. Learning from worldviews grounded in the interconnectedness of beings, community, kinship, gratitude and humility is something that Arnold has encouraged throughout his aesthetic philosophy. Countering dualism and its observational mode, he writes:

I ascribe the observational landscape to the industrialized West because it is the dominant Western mode. But it is not the world of the poet nor is it the world of those peoples who live harmoniously with the earth and with each other. And it is not, I believe, the world we experience most directly, most immediately, and most intimately. Alternative traditions exist and their influence is increasing....Among them are Taoism and its vision of living in harmony with nature, the Native American tradition of a continuity between one's body and the land, and the Aboriginal belief that everything in nature is equally sacred. Although these traditions differ from one another, they share a sense of the fundamental and inviolable continuity of the human being with the natural world and its processes.<sup>8</sup>

Although Arnold sets up a contrast between some aspects of a Western philosophical approach and these other traditions, he does not set up a broader opposition. He suggests that there are many paths to aesthetic engagement, immersion, and relationship, whether through particular ways of being with nature, or through the artistic engagement of the poet.

Being situated or environed speaks to the potential interactions that occur and how such interactions lead to the discovery of aesthetic meanings and values. How might we characterize *participation* in the aesthetic context? One of the ways that I have sought to capture this element of environmental aesthetics is through the participatory engagement that occurs through the use of imagination. A variety of imaginative modes, exploratory, ampliative, metaphorical, revelatory, all show the potential for deeper involvement in aesthetic experiences of nature.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, my approach is strongly influenced by the work of Ronald Hepburn. Interestingly, like Arnold, Hepburn was inspired by philosophers in the phenomenological tradition but also by British Romantic thought. Arnold does not dwell on the power of imagination, perhaps because his interests lean toward modes of bodily engagement with environment. For Hepburn, although the senses are crucial, thought and imagination can elevate experience in such a way as to move the percipient beyond a particular place and time.<sup>10</sup> This “thought component” includes the capacity to freely imagine, create, and improvise within aesthetic experience. Imaginative activity does not draw attention away, rather it is deeply engaged in the aesthetic situation. As imagination and thought become active, aesthetic experience may open out in some instances to wider narratives: artistic, scientific, cosmological, or metaphysical.

Interwoven through aesthetic experience, this activity of imagination grounds a relational rather than dualistic conception of aesthetic experience. Through imagination we engage a sense of ourselves, and how we are being shaped through the experience.

Although many of our aesthetic encounters have a metaphysical aspect to them, for example, when feeling awe in the face of the sublime, Arnold’s ideas show how much the body figures in participatory aesthetics. In contrast to the distancing tendency of an observational approach, Arnold points to several ways in which participation occurs: “Viewing van Ruisdael’s *A Forest Marsh* from a close position, for instance, we look under and past the large, gnarled limbs of the trees, and only then can we discern the figure of a boatman poling his craft through the marsh.”<sup>11</sup> In the environment, paths can be an important way to draw participation:

But what is most striking is the way in which paths as features of the environment, act upon us. Curves are enticing: they tempt the walker forward to see what lies around the bend. Similarly, a climbing path may invite the walker to move upward to reach its height. Then there are intrinsic delights that paths offer: the changing views, the feel of the ground underfoot, the multitude of details along the way.<sup>12</sup>

Like Hepburn, Arnold is also interested in the reflexive nature of participation but he treats this aspect of environmental experience more deeply:

This leads us to a different conception of experiencing environment aesthetically. In this view, the environment is understood as a field of forces continuous with the organism, a field in which there is a reciprocal action of organism on environment and environment on organism, and in which there is no sharp demarcation between them. Such a pattern may be thought of a participatory model of experience.<sup>13</sup>

As in so many of Arnold's philosophical reflections, there is a concrete aim to reconceiving of the human-environment relationship. The context here is crafting a phenomenological aesthetics of environment which will enable co-flourishing. This last quotation is followed by a discussion of environmental design, and how important it is to create harmonious environments or places for both people and nature.

I have only managed to touch upon a few ways in which Arnold's work has shifted attention away from an observational aesthetic approach to one that is characterized by *engaging with*. I have learned so much both explicitly and implicitly, I believe, through reading his work. Recently, I have drawn upon his work in order to reflect on how the field of aesthetics ought to incorporate *intergenerational* thinking. As I mentioned earlier, for a long time Arnold has both encouraged and drawn upon a plurality of worldviews in his philosophy. He has also been a model of drawing usefully upon other disciplines to broaden and deepen his discussions in environmental aesthetics. Such openness is absolutely essential to the field going forward, as we face so many awful environmental problems and have made so little progress in solving them.

More specifically, I have recently drawn upon his conception of "descriptive aesthetics."<sup>14</sup> I first became interested in this idea, more generally, through my research on the sublime. Many 18th century philosophers and critics write about the sublime through rich descriptions of the natural world. Often, these descriptions are interwoven with their conceptual reflections. Arnold's writings in environmental aesthetics incorporate a range of forms of aesthetic description. He has written essays about his own environmental experiences such as we find in "Scenes from a Connecticut landscape: Four Studies in Descriptive Aesthetics," in his groundbreaking book, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (1992). Throughout his work, he draws upon literature and the arts to deepen and enrich his philosophical discussions.

In laying out his idea of descriptive aesthetics, Arnold distinguishes this idea from what he calls 'substantive aesthetics' and 'metaaesthetics.'<sup>15</sup> The first concept refers to the familiar history of philosophical aesthetics and its various theories of the arts, while metaaesthetics covers aesthetic distinctions, concepts, and issues such as the nature of aesthetic qualities. Descriptive aesthetics, by contrast, refers to "accounts of art and aesthetic experience that may be partly narrative, partly phenomenological, partly evocative, and sometimes even revelatory," and it can be found "most often as parts of other kinds of writing – novels, poems, nature writing, criticism, philosophical aesthetics."<sup>16</sup>

All aestheticians, surely, are familiar with the ways in which such accounts feature in our work. But I have found no better conceptual articulation than his. Arnold not only conceptualizes descriptive aesthetics well, but he also walks the talk.

Why is this significant? I have argued elsewhere that such accounts are indispensable tools for capturing aesthetic qualities of our world that have been lost through global warming or which we stand to lose (according to the best models and predictions available about the effects of climate change). Descriptive aesthetics can help us to formulate an environmental aesthetics that is intergenerational by drawing upon a global variety of stories and narratives, arts, forms of knowledge, cosmologies, and so on. Aesthetic theories and practices can thus be developed which are not only concerned with the here and now but, also, take seriously various temporal registers. Descriptive aesthetics can help the field to interpret not only the past but, also, to consider what future aesthetic values, disvalues, and meanings may be in store for future generations. In a climate-changed world, aesthetics will undoubtedly matter, and it is essential that the field works toward an understanding about what the future holds. Essential, because, as Arnold has shown throughout his writings, aesthetics permeates our communities and our relationships with natural and other kinds of environments. His work has been central to shaping the development of environmental aesthetics, and it remains deeply important for understanding the place of aesthetics in the shared futures of all beings on planet earth.

---

<sup>1</sup> I have not yet had the pleasure of experiencing his musical compositions or performances, alas, but I look forward to that opportunity!

<sup>2</sup> Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 60.

<sup>4</sup> Berleant, 2005, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics and Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Alan Holland, "The Value Space of Meaningful Relations," in Emily Brady and Pauline Phemister, ed., *Human-Environment Relations: Transformative Values in Theory and Practice* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 148-149.

<sup>8</sup> Berleant, 2005, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Brady, 2003, 146-172.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Hepburn, *The Reach of the Aesthetic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Berleant, 2005, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Berleant, 2005, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Berleant, 2005, 9.

<sup>14</sup> I discuss descriptive aesthetics in my article, "Global Climate Change and Aesthetics," *Special Issue: Philosophical Aesthetics and the Global Environmental Emergency*, ed. Jukka Mikkonen and Sanna Lehtinen. *Environmental Values*. 31: 1, 27-46, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> Berleant, 1992, 26.