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**A CRITICAL REFLECTION
ON ARNOLD BERLEANT'S IDEAS
ON ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS**

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Abstract

Berleant's participation in my research program back in 2008 inspired his turn towards ecological aesthetics, which features four components in an order of environment, aesthetics, ecology, and experience. The special order has given rise to an "ecological environmental aesthetics", which may be viewed as a restructuring of his established "environmental aesthetics" through an ecological prism. In contrast, my own eco-aesthetics may be defined as "aesthetics based on ecology," whose distinctively three components follow the order of ecology, aesthetics, and environment. The underlying logic for the difference lies in two different philosophical positions, i.e., phenomenology and ecological realism. Hence this article may shed some light on the unresolved problem of the relationship between environmental aesthetics and ecological aesthetics by juxtaposing and comparing these two approaches.

Keywords

Environmental Aesthetics; Ecological Aesthetics; Phenomenology; Ecological Realism.

1. Introduction

Arnold Berleant enjoys a broad recognition for his pathbreaking work in environmental aesthetics, a relatively new sub-field of philosophical aesthetics in which many practitioners take him as a representative figure of the so-called "non-cognitive views" in comparison with the "cognitive views" represented by Allen Carlson et al.¹ During the past two decades, Berleant (and Carlson as well) has been keeping in close touch with his Chinese counterparts and meanwhile playing a promotive role in the development of the emerging eco-aesthetics or ecological aesthetics there. His theoretical exchanges with and impact on Chinese eco-aesthetics have been succinctly summarized and commented upon in a latest article by Cheng Xiangzhan.²

But simply taking Berleant as an environmental aesthetician leaves much to be desired. With a more nuanced exploration into his involvement with Chinese eco-aesthetics, this article has revealed on his part a gradual but steady progression from an environmental approach to an ecological approach to aesthetics. The pivotal point is his participation upon the invitation of Cheng Xiangzhan into the latter's research program "Ecological Aesthetics in the West: Theory and Praxis" (funded by Chinese National Social Science Foundation, No. 08BZW013) in 2008.³ His contribution to that program has been embodied by a chapter in the co-authored *Ecological Aesthetics and Ecological Assessment and Planning* in 2013 - "An Ecological Understanding of Environment and Ideas for an Ecological Aesthetics".⁴

To illustrate the thesis abovementioned, this article will firstly reveal a long overlooked theoretical development on the part of Arnold Berleant from environmental aesthetics to ecological aesthetics. Then we will take a critical reflection on his stances concerning ecological aesthetics from the prism of Chinese eco-aesthetics developed in the past decade and best characterized as an aesthetics based on ecological realism. In the concluding part, we will return to the seemingly insoluble question - the relationship between environmental and ecological aesthetics, hoping to shed some light on a possible answer.

2. From Environmental Aesthetics to Eco-environmental Aesthetics

Ronald W. Hepburn's seminal article "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty" has set the agenda for the development of environmental aesthetics ever since 1966.⁵ This fact explains why many have dubbed him as "the father of environmental aesthetics."⁶ To put it into perspective, however, Hepburn's article is mainly concerned with what he called the "natural beauty". Therefore, the discipline as initiated by him might best be named as "aesthetics of nature" instead of the "aesthetics of environment". The difference between "nature" and "environment", however scholastic as it may first appear, shall never be dismissed as irrelevant because "environmental aesthetics" as a differentiating academic term was first proposed by Arnold Berleant in his essay in 1972, which legitimately inaugurated such a special field.⁷

Following his 1972 essay, Berleant has published a series of writings on "environmental aesthetics" (not natural aesthetics), such as *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (University Press of Kansas, 1997) and *Aesthetics and Environment, Theme and Variations on Art and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). As can be seen, the keyword "environment" has threaded all these publications. It is against this theoretical background that Berleant has formulated his ecological approach to environmental aesthetics, i.e., seeing environmental aesthetics from an ecological prism. He has named this approach an "ecological environmental aesthetics".⁸

At the core of this approach lies the essential idea of taking environment as an all-inclusive context within which humans and nature (including natural forces, organisms, and inorganic objects) are wholly interdependent. Such an interdependence can be found both in urban and natural environments. Berleant reassessed such discrete concepts as "aesthetics", "environment", "ecology", and "experience" and found two ways to relate them to one another: one is logical and the other experiential. He claims that the aesthetic experience of environment goes all the way towards the largest perceptual context, i.e., the ecology. The implications of this approach may be considered for cultural sensibility, urban ecology, aesthetic engagement, and for translating ecology into experience. He concludes by recognizing that the aesthetic experience of environment is the perceptual counterpart of ecology.

Such a theoretical stance is best exemplified in “An Ecological Understanding of Environment and Ideas for an Ecological Aesthetics.”⁹ In that essay, Berleant observed that the 1990s witnessed an ever-increasing popularity of environmental aesthetics among Chinese aestheticians, a phenomenon much in synchronization with the globalization of predominantly western academics. Despite the fact that varied cultures, traditions and living styles have conditioned the way people experience their living place, the environment, and ultimately the ecology, and that the environmental aestheticians have disclosed crucial nuances in the hermeneutics of many key concepts, Berleant still holds onto the idea that, through meaningful discussion and clarification, we may not only gain more common ground but also engage in promising collaborations. In this spirit, he proposes four key words about environmental aesthetics, with the first being “environment” which is viewed as an “all-inclusive context”. And he further reckons that “the ecological concept” of an all-inclusive, interdependent environmental system has its parallel in experience in aesthetic engagement. In a word, *environment* is taken as the foundational and leading idea of his inquiry.

Then how can the environment relate to aesthetics to get “environmental aesthetics”? Berleant proposes that, out of a wide variety of concerns, people may take an *aesthetic* interest in environment which is fundamental in human-environment relationship because our sensory engagement with the environment precedes and underlies every other interest, and sensory perception lies at the heart of the meaning of aesthetics. Berleant proposes a return to the original Baumgartenian definition of aesthetics as “the science of sensibility” studying the experience of sensory perception. The catchword of Berleant’s stance on environmental aesthetics is “aesthetic engagement” which, in his own words, can be understood as the experiential analogue of ecology since both are holistic, contextual, and all-inclusive. Although Berleant fully understands that “ecology” started as a biological theory highlighting the interdependence of organisms in so-called ecosystems and that social science and humanities have been largely indebted to natural science in their adoption of many ecological concepts, he still argues that ecological concerns are of little importance in the writings of Western environmental aestheticians. In contrast, ecology figures prominently in the discourse of what he called “environmental aesthetics by Chinese researchers”. In a word, Berleant tries to depict an orderly progression of the leading ideas of environmental aesthetics - environment, aesthetics, ecology, and experience. This logical order gives rise to a special environmental aesthetics with a strong tint of ecology, or to put it simply, an ecological aesthetics. In this sense, Berleant’s “ecological aesthetics” is actually “ecological environmental aesthetics”.

3. A Critical Reflection from the Perspective of Ecological Realism

After the publication of their co-authored book *Ecological Aesthetics and Ecological Assessment and Planning* in 2013, Berleant and Cheng kept reflecting on the key ideas of ecological aesthetics. They frequently exchanged their ideas via emails, which gave form to a series of publications. Among

them, the first is Berleant's "Some Questions for Ecological Aesthetics," which considers the appropriateness of the uses to which ecology has been put in some recent discussions of architectural and environmental aesthetics. With the focus of linking ecology with aesthetics, Berleant develops a critique of Cheng's ecological aesthetics and summarizes it as "ecological cognitivism". He believes that Cheng is guided by ecological and ethical values rather than by aesthetic ones. "Indeed, it seems that by emphasizing biodiversity and ecosystem health as principles of ecological value, Cheng has entirely overlooked the aesthetic."¹⁰

As a response to Berleant's critique, Cheng in his essay "Ecological Aesthetics: The Legal Connection between Ecology and Aesthetics" asserts that ecological aesthetics does not overlook aesthetic issues as Berleant has criticized, because it defines its research object as "ecological aesthetic appreciation." Ecological aesthetics is an organic combination of two different disciplines - ecology and aesthetics. And its legitimacy is based on six ways of connecting the two.¹¹ Aiming at Berleant's series of critique of Kant's aesthetics, Cheng's paper "Some Critical Reflections on Berleantian Critique of Kantian Aesthetics from the Perspective of Eco-aesthetics" declares that Berleant's criticism of Kant's core idea of disinterestedness is a misunderstanding, and his conception of environment is not fundamentally sound. The future of eco-aesthetics is to take ecosystem rather than environment as a new aesthetic paradigm.¹² Given the fact that most of the literature on Chinese ecological aesthetics has been published in Chinese, Cheng tries to make it accessible to English-reading scholars in the West by offering an overview.¹³ These writings have prompted Cheng in one of his 2019 articles to bring up "ecological realism,"¹⁴ which may function as a philosophical perspective to give a critical response to Berleant's critiques on ecological aesthetics.

Ecological realism is defined as a philosophical position trying to understand the reality through the model of ecology. This brief working definition includes at least three key points: 1. There exists an objective and real reality which can be described by ecology as a branch of science; 2. Key terms in ecology such as environment should be understood in its scientific sense; 3. The principles discovered by ecology such as the interactions between organisms and their environments should be viewed as universal ones and can be applied to the explanation of aesthetic phenomenon. Based on the working definition of ecological realism, the following section will take a critical reflection on Berleant's ideas on ecological aesthetics.

Firstly, the starting point of ecological aesthetics is not environment, but ecology. Somewhat restrained by his environmental aesthetics, Berleant puts environment on top of his agenda and views it as the foundational and leading idea of his inquiry. However, from the perspective of ecological aesthetics, ecology should be at the top.

Secondly, aesthetics has intrinsic connections with ecology. The theoretical clue is contained in the definition of ecology itself. Scientifically speaking, "the science of ecology studies interactions between individual organisms and their environments, including interactions with both conspecifics and

members of other species.”¹⁵ There are three keywords in the definition of ecology, which are interactions, organisms and environments. Biologically speaking, human beings are organisms and keep interacting with their environments. The interactions fall into various types such as economic, political, practical, and aesthetic ones. The aesthetic interaction can be viewed as the subject matter of aesthetics.

Thirdly, in its everyday sense, the environment is the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates. In ecology, environment means the air, water, minerals, organisms, and all other external factors surrounding and affecting a given organism at any time. So, environment is the synonyms for surroundings. However, based on his philosophical position of phenomenology, Berleant always rejects the everyday and scientific sense of the environment. He even views real and objective environment as “experienced environment.” It is not possible for us to discuss the differences between realism and phenomenology here. However, we can take a very brief look at the following two issues raised by Rodney K. B. Parker: (i) whether the “real” world exists independent from the mind, and (ii) is it reasonable to see Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology as a denial of the existence of mind-independent reality.¹⁶ With these two issues in mind, it is easier to have a better understanding of the philosophical base of Berleant’s works and their academic consequences. Scientifically, an ecological understanding of environment is ecosystem (a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment), not what Berleant calls “an all-inclusive context.”

4. Conclusion: The Unresolved Problem - The Relationship between Environmental Aesthetics and Ecological Aesthetics

Allen Carlson ever observed that over the last few decades, a renewed interest in the philosophical study of the aesthetic appreciation of nature has developed into the field of “environmental aesthetics.” More recently, a related area of philosophical study has arisen primarily in China, which is typically called “ecological aesthetics” or, as it is also labeled, “Eco-aesthetics.” Carlson addresses the question of the relationship between Eastern eco-aesthetics and Western environmental aesthetics by considering the role given to ecological knowledge in aesthetic appreciation of environments.¹⁷

In contrast, based on his position of phenomenology and insisting on “the primacy of perception,”¹⁸ Berleant as always rejects what he criticized as “aesthetic cognitivism,” which emphasizes the role of ecological knowledge in aesthetic appreciation. The crucial point here is the differences and connections between knowing and perceiving. With his re-shaping the issues of the relationships between conceptual understanding (ecological aesthetics) and perceptual experience (environmental aesthetics), Berleant insists that “the former must be seen in the light of the latter.”¹⁹

Ecological realism takes as its premise the existence of mind-independent reality, which has been constantly “put into brackets” by the practitioners of phenomenology. As a technique, more fundamental than that of abstraction and the examination of essences, *epochē* serves to highlight

consciousness itself. However, we must realize that *epochē* is not denial. So, to some extent, phenomenology might be viewed as a kind of “speculative realism,”²⁰ which is exactly the spirit of ecological realism. Ecological aesthetics is a new type of aesthetics based on ecological realism, taking ecology as the model of understanding reality, investigating humans’ aesthetic interaction with various environments (with artworks too being viewed as items within the environment). So, both its spirit and essence are ecological, not environmental.

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- ¹ See Allen Carlson, “Environmental Aesthetics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/environmental-aesthetics/>
- ² See Xiangzhan Cheng, “Arnold Berleant’s Environmental Aesthetics and Chinese Ecological Aesthetics,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 9 (2021). <https://contempaesthetics.org/2021/01/05/arnold-berleants-environmental-aesthetics-and-chinese-ecological-aesthetics/>.
- ³ The other two members are Paul Gobster, Research Social Scientist with the U.S. Forest Service’s Northern Research Station in Chicago; and Xinhao Wang, a professor of Planning and Co-Director of the Joint Center of Geographic Information Systems and Spatial Analysis at the University of Cincinnati, USA.
- ⁴ See Arnold Berleant, “An Understanding of Environment and Ideas for an Ecological Aesthetics,” in Xiangzhan Cheng, Arnold Berleant, Paul Gobster and Xinhao Wang, eds., *Ecological Aesthetics and Ecological Assessment and Planning* (Zhengzhou: Henan People’s Press, 2014), 54-72. See also, Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays* (Surrey: Ashgate 2012), chapter 11 “Ideas for an Ecological Aesthetics,” 117-130.
- ⁵ R. W. Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty,” in B. Williams and A. Montefiore, eds., *British Analytical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 285-310.
- ⁶ Emily Brady, “Ronald W. Hepburn: In Memoriam,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 2009, 49(3): 199-202.
- ⁷ Arnold Berleant, “Environmental Aesthetics,” *Cakes and Ale*, IV, 8 (January 13, 1972), 3.
- ⁸ Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays*, Surrey: Ashgate 2012, 130.
- ⁹ See Arnold Berleant, “An Understanding of Environment and Ideas for an Ecological Aesthetics”. See also, Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts*, 117-130.
- ¹⁰ Arnold Berleant, “Some Questions for Ecological Aesthetics,” *Environmental Philosophy* 13 (1):123-135 (2016).
- ¹¹ Xiangzhan Cheng, “Ecological Aesthetics: The Legal Connection between Ecology and Aesthetics—A Response to Mr. Berleant,” *Exploration and Contention*, No. 12 (2016): 52-57.
- ¹² Xiangzhan Cheng, “Some Critical Reflections on Berleantian Critique of Kantian Aesthetics from the Perspective of Eco-aesthetics,” *ESPEs*, vol. 6, issue 2, December 2017. <http://www.casopisespes.sk/>.
- ¹³ Xiangzhan Cheng, “Ecological Civilization and Ecological Aesthetics in China: An Overview”, in Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach and Madalina Diacon, eds., *Environmental Ethics: Cross-cultural Explorations* (Freiburg: Alber, 2019), 209-219.
- ¹⁴ Xiangzhan Cheng, “Eight Positions of Ecological Aesthetics and Their Integration Based on Ecological Realism,” *Social Science Journal*, Vol. 1 (2019): 186-194.
- ¹⁵ Sahotra Sarkar and Alkistis Elliott-Graves, “Ecology,” in Z. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/ecology/>.
- ¹⁶ See R.K.B. Parker, “The Idealism-Realism Debate and the Great Phenomenological Schism,” In: R.K.B. Parker, ed., *The Idealism-Realism Debate Among Edmund Husserl’s Early Followers and Critics. Contributions to Phenomenology* (In Cooperation with The Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology), vol 112 (Cham: Springer). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-62159-9_1
- ¹⁷ Allen Carlson, “The Relationship between Eastern Ecoaesthetics and Western Environmental Aesthetics,” *Philosophy East and West* 67 (1) (2017): 117-139.
- ¹⁸ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. by William Cobb, ed. by James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
- ¹⁹ Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics beyond the Arts: New and Recent Essays* (Surrey: Ashgate 2012), 129.
- ²⁰ See Peter Gratton, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).