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ON THE VALUE OF ART  
AND BEAUTY FOR LIFE**

**Madalina Diaconu**

University of Vienna, Austria

# ENJOYMENT FULFILMENT SURVIVAL: ON THE VALUE OF ART AND BEAUTY FOR LIFE

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## **Abstract**

The discourse on vital values was once highly ambivalent in the history of Western aesthetics. The rationalistic mainstream condemned pleasure yet defended specific aesthetic enjoyment; only rarely was life itself uniquely seen as a source of pleasure. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the focus shifted from pleasure and enjoyment to aesthetic experience, which was regarded as an enclave of everyday life, a process of life, and an extension of real life in the modus of as-if. Arnold Berleant's humanism sets forth this traditional ambivalence: on one hand, he opposes the contemplative subject with the living body and defines environments as inhabited life-worlds; on the other hand, he subordinates biological vitality to the ideal of a fulfilled and humane life. Nevertheless, based upon his statement about "the survival significance of aesthetic sensibility", I claim that the turn of aesthetics from subjective pleasure to environmental survival is imminent in the Anthropocene and that aesthetic theory will have to integrate vital values both with respect to the humans and the ecosystems.

## **Keywords**

Pleasure, Enjoyment, Vitality, Fulfilment, Environment, Berleant.

*One day Dostoevsky threw out the enigmatic remark: 'Beauty will save the world'. What sort of statement is that? For a long time, I considered it mere words. How could that be possible? When in bloodthirsty history did beauty ever save anyone from anything? Ennobled, uplifted, yes – but whom has it saved?*

*Solzhenitsyn<sup>1</sup>*

The first time I had the pleasure to meet Arnold Berleant was in 2003, while visiting a summer school organized by the International Institute for Applied Aesthetics on the shore of a Finnish lake near Lahti. At that time, I was preparing my Habilitation on a phenomenological aesthetics of the "secondary senses" (touch, smell, and taste), having already been persuaded by Wolfgang Iser's and Gernot Böhme's reinterpretation of aesthetics as aisthetics, yet I was missing encouraging feedback: The project was either considered unfeasible because of its breadth or was regarded with indulgence, as a sort of exoticism that had to be put down either to my gender or to my non-Western origin. This also explains why Arnold Berleant's opening lecture at this summer school, in which he argued for a multisensory dimension of aesthetic experience, was like opening the windows of an old library to let fresh air in. This initial feeling of congeniality was enriched in the years to come with respect, gratitude and a deep sense of friendship. If it is true that some writers, artists or philosophers prompt

imitation, while others unveil potential and accelerate self-development, Arnold Berleant undoubtedly belongs to the latter category. Not only did he open new paths in aesthetics with his fresh views, but he is also a “catalytic” thinker endowed with the rare gift of mentoring ability. It is to a large extent to his broad understanding of aesthetics that I owe my own turn from Heidegger and a phenomenologically-inspired philosophy of art to a social and environmental aesthetics that explores the design of urban sensescapes or weather conditions.

Above all, Berleant’s aesthetics is driven by a profound belief in humanity. In so many respects a modern thinker, indebted to the experiential focus of phenomenology and pragmatism, he distances himself, however, from the modern attempt at a strict separation of values. Constantly rejecting aestheticism, Berleant’s philosophy is anchored in the tradition of humanism in its best sense, with its claim that aesthetic and moral values ultimately pursue the same goal: the flourishing of the human being. It is well known that humanism is challenged at present by loud voices that proclaim that the age of post- or transhumanism has come. In this context and with the background of an increased life expectancy in the developed world, vitality and life-enhancement become core values. Scientific, technological and medical progress, along with unceasing efforts of self-optimization under the sign of self-control and self-design are meant to help us live longer and better. What then can be more suitable to celebrate Arnold Berleant’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday than to raise the issue of whether and how art, beauty and aesthetic sensitivity can foster and enhance life?

Roughly speaking, art is the creation of living beings who are inspired by life and produce images or even illusions of life; their works have an impact on their own and other living beings’ lives and vitality. Turning to beauty, both the authorship and the life-enhancing or life-atrophying effects must be reconsidered if we are to include natural beauty. Given the polysemy of the concept of life, the further question should be raised of how these concepts illustrate the relation between aesthetic and vital values or between beauty and vitality as energy, vigor, liveliness, or robustness.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, Arnold Berleant, who has pioneering contributions in so many fields of aesthetics, did not outline any aesthetics of life, let alone a biological aesthetics such as animal aesthetics or evolutionary aesthetics. Nevertheless, he constantly makes the case for considering the living body and the living experience as in a lived space or lifeworld; he even renamed Heidegger’s being-in-the-world as *living-in-the-world* and entitled one of his books *Living in the landscape*<sup>3</sup>. While these concepts attest to his phenomenological viewpoint, unlike most phenomenologists he emphasizes the interconnectedness between aesthetic and other kinds of values, such as ethical or political values<sup>4</sup>. Occasionally, he draws attention to the negative physiological effects of aesthetic harm and aesthetic deprivation and rather exceptionally uses metaphors of medical or organic origin. It is well known that the first generations of German phenomenologists deliberately avoided the concept of life in their strive to delimit the *Lebensphilosophie*, a typical example of this being Heidegger. Berleant does not share their concern, yet is not interested in biological life either, but only in its

“humane” fulfilling and elevation through art and beauty. As a result, the reader will look in vain for a definition of life in his writings; the “living” features he conveys with positive connotations are rather distinctive marks in his polemics against the intellectualist tradition of aesthetics. Does it then make any sense to search in these for an answer to the question of whether art and beauty can not only make life flourish, in the Aristotelian sense of a good life, but also enhance and even preserve it? And would Berleant subscribe to Dostoevsky’s dictum that beauty will save the world?

In the following I claim that, on one hand, Arnold Berleant sets forth the tradition of the ambivalent evaluation of the vital values in the history of Western aesthetics and, on the other hand, that it is worth what I would call “weiterdenken mit Berleant”: setting forth his expansion of the aesthetics in fields which have been traditionally excluded precisely because they are “tainted” with vital aspects. Moreover, if environmental aesthetics were supposed to support a sound environmental policy and inspire sustainable patterns of ecological behavior, then aesthetic theory has to complement the inquiry about the effects of art and beauty on human subjects by illuminating the consequences of aesthetic behavior (including art production and consumption) on our lifeworld. If humans are inseparable from their environments, their wellbeing is dependent on the “health” and even survival of predominantly natural environments. Dostoevsky’s maxim appears in a new light in the Anthropocene.

In order to understand this presumably epochal transition in aesthetic theory from subjective pleasure to environmental survival, it is first necessary to sketch a retrospective of the discourse on vital values in Western aesthetics (with apologies for not having been able to include other traditions); for practical reasons, the discussion will be confined to the vital *effects* of art and beauty on *perceivers*. The second part focuses on Berleant’s emphasis on the living experience and on his ideal of human fulfilment. The discussion ends with a few examples for how survival, health, regeneration or vitality have started to infiltrate into environmental aesthetics.

### **The rise and decay of subjective pleasure**

In general, it is possible to connect the aesthetic with vital values either by emphasizing pleasure or by considering aesthetic experience as a life process; the second approach is likely to be more fertile, because it is less biased by the rationalistic tradition. Besides this, aesthetic theory appears to have shifted in the last century from the first to the second approach.

#### ***Pleasure, but which one?***

From a rationalist perspective, claiming that art is nothing other than the creation of living beings with vital effects either disqualifies art or makes it dangerous. Both answers can be found in *Politeia*<sup>5</sup>, where Plato devaluates the figurative arts as being purely mimetic yet acknowledges that gymnastic skills and music exert a strong impact on citizens’ vigor and morality. According to Socrates, different musical modes and instruments are suitable for men and women, for warfare and diplomacy. Plato teaches us that when the aesthetic is subordinated to practical interests, vitality and morality could be controlled

by regulating art production. His philosophy inaugurated the history of an ambiguous appreciation of vitality which condemned crude hedonism but praised the higher forms of enjoyment produced by art – admittedly ones not as “pure” as those derived from the quest for the truth and the good.

Centuries later, Kant distinguished between (lower) pleasure and (elevated) aesthetic enjoyment. The fact that beauty and art have enjoyable effects is evident, otherwise we wouldn’t seek them; whether, however, a life without pleasures would be worthy to be lived, is less certain. Anyway, the question remains whether life-sympathetic and life-enhancing effects are limited to what Kant called sensory pleasures or can be extended to specific aesthetic enjoyment. Rationalist aesthetics censors “primitive” pleasure yet encourages the bourgeois’ self-cultivation through art; like Hegel, it defends the dignity of art and beauty (as being more than trivial amusement) only by sacrificing the body. In fact, vitality overlaps with *both* pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment; in particular, endurance and resilience are presumably inseparable from experiences of meaningfulness. Some pleasures are nocuous, others preserve or intensify the *joie de vivre*. As for art, aestheticism provides innumerable examples of how beauty can exhaust the body and weaken stamina, while moralism and didacticism, let alone ideologies like fascism and communism, can instrumentalize aesthetic experience as a means of a better (collective) life. How is it possible to avoid this alternative?

### ***Life as source of pleasure***

At the same time that Nietzsche was writing *Also sprach Zarathustra* Jean-Marie Guyau claimed that every physiological function can become aesthetic<sup>6</sup>. Against the hyper-intellectualization of beauty by Kant, Herbert Spencer and Maine de Biran, Guyau tended to consider beauty as coextensive with life: there is beauty in movements, sensations and sentiments, and utility represents a first level of beauty, when a need gives birth to a desire and its fulfilment causes satisfaction. Four basic necessities govern human life: breathing, movement, nourishment and reproduction – and all four can have an aesthetic character. Eating produces the “feeling of life that is repaired and renewed”, of a “veritable and profound harmony”, which is nothing other than beauty<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, the aesthetic pleasure of movement (including during physical labor) should be traced back to the feeling of our own vigor. Guyau not only integrates smell, taste and the sense of temperature in aesthetics, but also reverses the Western hierarchy of the senses: in his view, a thermic contrast with reinvigorating effects is more aesthetic than music. In this way his naturalistic aesthetics postulates the continuity between pleasure and enjoyment: “Need and desire, that is to say, the agreeable or what serves to life, is the primitive and rough criterion of aesthetics.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, he anchors both enjoyment and pleasure in the process of life itself, rhetorically asking: “To feel alive, isn’t this the basis of all art and pleasure?”<sup>9</sup>

### ***Aesthetic = vital + personal***

A more moderate rehabilitation of the vital values was undertaken by Moritz Geiger in 1926<sup>10</sup>. Against the “haughtiness” of those who used to compare art with religion and metaphysics, and the attempt of contemporary psychological aesthetics to level out any differences within the aesthetic experience, the

German phenomenologist distinguished between superficial and deep effects. According to Geiger, everyday aesthetics, along with bad art and the instrumentalization of art for the sake of pleasure, produce superficial amusement, excitement or sentimentality. These kinds of pleasure, distraction or agitation are varieties of vital effects. Real art, however, ought to be sought because of its provoking the profound effect called happiness. While common delight or joy remain momentary subjective states related to single events, happiness fills the ego with the feeling of equilibrium or elevation or, on the contrary, stirs and shakes the soul. Vital power and exuberance are derived from the elementary pleasures that accompany common life activities, such as eating and drinking, sport, sexuality, or thermic contrasts. Still, in contrast to Guyau, Geiger denies the continuity between superficial and profound effects; although he mentions the possibility of elevating or refining superficial effects, he stresses that in this case a new quality emerges. Admittedly, his theory is not exempt of certain ambiguities, yet his final option is clear: the ideal art combines both kinds of effects, in order to activate the spectator's vital forces and bring about the unity between person and life. Needless to say, Geiger was making efforts to integrate vitality in aesthetics without abandoning aesthetic quality, the difference between high and low art, or between art and the everyday aesthetics.

### ***The aesthetic experience as life process and expanded life***

Aesthetic experiences build enclaves, special sequences within the life-process with a high level of intensity. These peaks of vitality can only be endured for a short time. Living *with* art is in any case more bearable than living *in* the medium of art itself: the artists' biographies are pervaded by bipolar disorders; manic exhilaration alternates with depression, and both exhaust the individual's vital resources. This post-Romantic conviction was shared by several aestheticians around 1900, and the tragic lives of the *artistes maudits* confirmed it.

“Works of art arise from the full strength of a person and address all mental activities of the enjoyer; they are designed with the fool's exuberance and executed with the serenity of the wise; they shake the feeling and leave the clarity of mind unclouded; they excite and appease; they stand outside and inside life”<sup>11</sup> – this is how Max Dessoir in 1906 grasped the ambiguous relation between art and life. In the same vein, other philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century described the aesthetic experience as a process in which intense excitement alternates with a quiet calmness, receptivity with knowledge, activity with passive contemplation, a sort of perceptual, mental and emotional movement with resting places.<sup>12</sup> Physiological reactions are mentioned more rarely; for example, Dessoir remarks that the first aesthetic impressions are accompanied by faster or slower breathing, a shiver running over one's back, blushing or paling, etc.

More elaborately, Dewey's aesthetics introduces a distinction between experiences which *occur* all the time, because life itself supposes an interaction between living beings and their environments, and other experiences that can be *made* by actively composing the raw material of life into *an* experience<sup>13</sup>. By calling the latter “real” or “vital” experiences, Dewey suggests that they have their own

quality and coherence, are complete and self-sufficient, having a beginning, a maturation and a natural fulfilment. The unity or the integration of different parts and qualities into a whole is called aesthetic by Dewey, and underlies *all* types of experience, be they predominantly intellectual, practical or aesthetic in the strict sense. As such, the aesthetic experience appears to be that special kind of vital experience in which self-sufficiency, the autotelic character and unity (form) achieve the highest development. On closer inspection, the vital and the aesthetic character tend to coincide, since both are responsible for unifying a series of states into *an* experience. When Dewey calls this experiential wholeness form or structure, the aesthetic quality is essential; when he, however, stresses the emotional quality of experience, consisting of a “circuit of energy”<sup>14</sup>, then the vital dimension comes to the fore. Moreover, the completeness of experience is described in organic terms, as the inception, the growth, and the end of an energetic flow. Still, despite this *rapprochement* of the aesthetic experience to life, what finally counts for Dewey is to create and not merely to undergo an experience. If life is the condition of experience and energy its engine, its goal remains the understanding of life.

This short survey demonstrates that aesthetic theorists felt the urge to reconceptualize the relation between art and life, by leaving behind the concepts of pleasure and enjoyment. What may be called the demise of pleasure along with the rise of empathy as a means of expanding one’s life is epitomized by Hans-Robert Jauf. “Whoever would have the courage to use the word ‘enjoyment’ (*Genuß*) [...] for her attitude to art in our time would expose herself to the accusation of philistinism or – even worse – of satisfying mere needs for consumption and kitsch”, he wrote<sup>15</sup>. In a time when the *enjoyment* of art was, according to Jauf, frowned upon as a privilege of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, he had the “courage” to reintroduce it within the triad *poiesis* (the pleasure taken in creating art), *aisthesis* (the enjoyment of perceiving and recognizing representations) and *catharsis* (the specific communication of affects that enables spectators first to get to know and then to appropriate norms of action). In this threefold aspect, aesthetic emotions are indirect, being mediated by perception and understanding. In particular, the specific enjoyment gained by the reader from her identification with the protagonist of a literary work lets us see the correlation between art and life in a new light. Certainly, biological life falls outside the scope of Jauf’s investigation and both the receptive dispositions and the behavioral norms that a reader derives from her empathy with fictitious characters are either psychological or social skills. Nevertheless, on the whole, his *Rezeptionsästhetik* can be interpreted as making the case for art not only as a means of social pedagogy, but also as a way of expanding one’s horizons and undergoing experiences which are otherwise impossible or dangerous. In this respect, all narrative art is a vehicle for indirect experiences and a “prosthesis” that extends the realm of daily life in a controlled way. This line of argumentation is common to hermeneutics. In some cases, narratives are explicitly assigned the power to “refigure” the reader’s identity.<sup>16</sup> For Paul Ricoeur, for example, fictions are proposals of worlds – or, in Berleant’s words, “environments” – that can be inhabited by readers<sup>17</sup>, offers of imaginative variations of our being-in-the-world,

suggesting possible ways of living in various life-worlds. This also explains the strong impact the commerce with art can have on life, molding us from within and influencing our behavior and acts. Berleant himself is anchored in this tradition when he asserts the artists' ethical and social responsibility. Nevertheless, imaginary life-stories that expand real lives in the modus of "as-if" or even perhaps reshape biographies represent only two further aspects of the complicated relation between art and life. At the end vitality remains different from beauty, and life-enhancing emotions are mediated by cognitive and identificational processes.

### **The aesthetic experience as impetus for a humane life**

In our time vital values still play a mostly negligible role in philosophical aesthetics. In this context, Arnold Berleant's multifaceted aesthetics is an interesting case of praising life not in itself, but rather in its potential to make us more human. According to his "aesthetics of context and continuity"<sup>18</sup>, the aesthetic experience varies with different sociocultural and historic contexts, and its subject is a living body who is immersed into environments instead of contemplating objects that stand aloof. If engagement and participation circumscribe the individual's aesthetic sensibility, it is however "the life of human cultures" that the subject is integrated in<sup>19</sup>. The biological lifeform is only indirectly relevant. Even when Berleant discusses clinical death<sup>20</sup>, he is interested in the differences between art and philosophy and the specificity of artistic activity in the first place. His various examples for "death in image and word" and "the idea of death" lead to the conclusion that there can be no rivalry between fine arts and literature, on one hand, and philosophical reflection, on the other: art confronts us directly with the presence of death, whereas Socrates only reasons about it.

Love and empathy, too, fall for Berleant under the category of "aesthetic social situations"<sup>21</sup>. Aesthetic relations with small children involve suspending the judgment of bodily presence and enjoying merely their sensory qualities ("freshness, delicacy, fragility of expression, colouration"<sup>22</sup>), as when Rubens drew his son, Nicholas, as a child. No possible biological roots of the aesthetic experience are mentioned in this context, quite on the contrary, Berleant converts love itself into a subcategory of the aesthetic. In his view, close friendship and love present strong similarities to the seduction of music or the passion for art, which makes the relation between art and love appear as "a relationship of consanguinity, and one of siblings rather than parent and child"<sup>23</sup>. Both make boundaries melt, producing feelings of communion and engagement in relation; both acknowledge the other as a value in itself; finally, both "possess uniqueness without exclusivity"<sup>24</sup>. This kind of relation, Berleant states, is essentially aesthetic; therefore, instead of defining the aesthetic as love *for* beauty, we should see love *as* beauty and both, again, as aesthetic instances. The use of kinship metaphors for the isomorphism between art and love as instantiations of the aesthetic illustrate the reversal of the relation between vital and aesthetic values: the aesthetic takes precedence over life, and intimacy appears primarily as an aesthetic quality that can be cultivated in everyday life as well as by frequently experiencing art.



Other contexts endorse this interpretation. For example, Berleant characterizes the experience “that is intrinsically satisfying and fulfilling and that, at the same time, does not diminish the satisfaction and fulfillment of others”<sup>25</sup> as positive. If intrinsic satisfaction recalls the tradition of enjoyment in the history of aesthetics, this remains insufficient without *existential* completion (self-fulfillment) and the *ethical* condition (without impeding the others’ pleasure and fulfillment). Both these amendments are necessary, given that the subject of aesthetic experience is a *human* body and a *social* subject. Let us take a closer look at them.

First, Berleant’s humanistic aesthetic theory is not hedonistic. His lifelong engagement with art and aesthetics is deeply rooted in his belief that the aesthetic experience is able to give meaning to life: “I believe that the aesthetic provides the firmest ground on which to acquire an understanding that makes a meaningful and significant life possible”, he writes in presenting his “aesthetic argument”<sup>26</sup>. His aesthetics rejects the intellectualist tradition and mind-body-dualism, yet not the human’s need for meaningfulness; he could not make the case for the aesthetic so strongly if he were cutting the existential roots of our quest for art and beauty. The claim that the aesthetic can and should fulfill human existence is a leitmotif of Berleant’s reflections.

Secondly, the human is a node in a web of relations. After having initially reinterpreted art as a field that engages several (f)actors, Berleant expanded this relational approach in his social aesthetics: “The aesthetic environment is everyone’s medium, the art of environment part of the art of human living.”<sup>27</sup> The aesthetic connects the theory of art with everyday life, the high with low culture, the expert’s designing skills with the common pedestrian’s “art” of co-constituting the life of a city through her walking routes and other daily practices. This entire tissue of relations can be imagined as a sort of organism and Berleant thus compares efficiently organized cities to healthy bodies: traffic has analogies with blood circulation, the distribution of goods and services to the digestive system, and a “vital city” that is “busy and prosperous” resembles a “strong and active” organism<sup>28</sup>. Leaving aside any metaphors, urban planning affects the citizen’s wellbeing: “healthful living and working conditions safeguard human physical wellbeing,” and low criminality “help<s> make a city livable”<sup>29</sup>. Yet all these conditions are considered “necessary but not sufficient for humane and elevating urban experience. Although a healthy body is a precondition for a good life, it hardly fulfills our human potential.”<sup>30</sup> Berleant’s ideal of a good life transgresses its material conditions; what is at stake here is no more or less than the realization of human potential, to improve life and to foster a “creative culture”<sup>31</sup>. In essence, the aesthetic seems to be only a *way*, even if it is a *via regia*, for achieving the ideal of humanism. In the case of urbanism, efficiency and prosperity must be completed by urban design that is conceived for humans and implemented at a human scale. Translated into perceptual features, the urban masses, volumes, and dimensions should be human-friendly; on the contrary, “overweight cit<ies>” can hardly meet the citizens’ needs effectively, constructions at an excessive scale have intimidating or oppressive effects, and an uncontrolled urban sprawl is akin to “a cancerous growth that ends by destroying its

host”<sup>32</sup>. In its own way, environmental design is vital, because it goes beyond a decorative or recreational function and influences the inhabitants’ comfort and happiness. Berleant’s indebtedness to pragmatism comes to the fore here. Assuming that the core vital value is health in terms of functionality, life is subordinated to the humanization of the human; since health in general is inseparable from wellbeing, vitality integrates aesthetic values. Finally, both the vital and the aesthetic are oriented toward ethical action, and all three are inextricably linked in the case of fulfilling experiences.

Berleant explored the relation between different categories of values on several occasions. His basic concern is to reject aestheticism, yet at the same time, by drawing attention to the interdependence of values, he argues in favor of the dignity of aesthetic values and that it is useful to pursue them.<sup>33</sup> Mostly he dwells upon the “fundamental coalescence of aesthetics and ethics”<sup>34</sup>; aesthetic and ethical values are considered mutually supportive and together enhance human life. Nonetheless, their final convergence does not exclude conflicting situations in which concrete decisions have to give precedence to one or the other. In practice, at least in the case of social aesthetics, the consequences of design for the people’s lives are decisive: “the ultimate criterion in assessing any human environment is how it contributes to the fulfillment of the people who are an inseparable part of it”<sup>35</sup>. Once again, the goal is human fulfillment or “to humanize urban life”<sup>36</sup>. Mere vitality, meaning purely psychophysiological vigor or health is insufficient, whereas spectacular destructive acts, such as terrorism, can fascinate only an ethically insensitive and irresponsible aesthetic subject. Neither of these cases fulfills the humanistic function Berleant assigns to art; for what ultimately matters is “facilitating living that is deeply satisfying through the fruitful exercise of human capacities”, a goal which is according to Berleant both aesthetic and moral<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, he asserts that there is an “aesthetic underpinning of ethical values”<sup>38</sup> and is confident that aesthetic value is able to enhance human life, contribute to well-being, and reduce individual illness and social ills. Conversely, perceptually poor or offensive environments affect one’s aesthetic sensibility and indirectly affect the entire body. For these reasons the aesthetic value “is worthy of support for improving the quality of life.”<sup>39</sup>

Berleant does not avoid what he calls “the negative aesthetics of everyday life” and within it “aesthetic harm”; he is aware of the damaging effects offensive smells or air pollution have on our health, along with the depression that can be produced by environmental ugliness<sup>40</sup>. This situation, he claims, ought not to be confounded either with the unpleasant or painful experiences art confronts us with in the modus of as-if, or with the art’s critical diagnoses of the society; only the first of the distresses, one could say, is malignant, the second one is, on the contrary, therapeutic – for individuals and collectivities as well.

Berleant hopes for the aesthetic dimension to improve not only individuals’ lives, but also social life as a whole. With respect to this, on various occasions he has reiterated his affinity with Schiller’s theory of the aesthetic state. Berleant also believes that the aesthetic can provide a model of a social and political order that would be characterized by justice, free participation, and mutual

support. Once again interdependence is the right word for the relation between the aesthetic and the social: the aesthetic would be able to lay the basis for a “truly humane community”<sup>41</sup>, but itself depends on socioeconomic and political conditions. To paraphrase Dostoevsky, beauty can change the world for the better.

### **From living in the environment to environmental survival**

Berleant’s interpretations of art and social aesthetics have shown that he gives precedence to inner and communal life over biological life (in Greek concepts, to *bios* compared to *zoe*), and requires the human (as an individual and a species) to become humane. A somewhat different meaning of life underlies the concept of environment. It is precisely the reference to life that distinguishes the environment from the landscape, since “environment is the more general term, embracing the many factors, including the human ones, that combine to form the conditions in which life is carried on”<sup>42</sup>. Besides this general environment that resembles a framework of life and can be investigated scientifically, environments in plural are specific places people engage with or live in. In contrast to the visual-observational landscape, environments are engaged landscapes and locations of immersive experiences. The experience or direct knowledge of a living body in a lived space, as was often described by phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, is crucial for the metamorphosis of landscapes from images to inhabited places – in Berleant’s words: “what makes a place come alive as a presence to those who live, work, or visit it”<sup>43</sup>. This context also explains why often when Berleant mentions life and the art of living he actually means dwelling. He sporadically employs organic metaphors for the human habitation, as when he opposes Le Corbusier’s “machine for living” to the environment: the latter is “‘a place of habitation,’ a place as part of which we achieve our humanity, a womb”<sup>44</sup>. Still the analogy with the organism ends here, since Berleant never yields to the temptation of personifying Mother-Earth; the womb is only a symbol for the human-friendliness of the environment and our reliance on it. Moreover, humans can never leave this “womb” as long as they live, so there can be no gaze from an abstract nowhere, outside the environment; Berleant’s aesthetic theory remains in essence a theory of *experience*.<sup>45</sup> Even when humans contemplate or destroy landscapes, they cannot help inhabiting them: “Even the observational ones, in so far as they are part of human habitation, must be traversed. We are always *in* the landscape and find ourselves moving *through* the landscape.”<sup>46</sup> Dwelling as living-in-the-world precisely names this strange relation of continuity between the body and its environment that never recedes into indistinction: humans naturally *belong to* the world, but they can and should deliberately engage *with* the environment. Subjective and objective aspects are intermingled here: on one hand we depend on environments, on the other hand these environments objectify our way of living, are graspable life-worlds, and are “embodiment<s> of how we live in the world and of the kind of world we inhabit”<sup>47</sup>.

To conclude, the amalgam of vital and aesthetic values in everyday life challenges the modern quest for purely aesthetic situations and confirms Berleant’s assumption regarding the interdependence

of values. Although the life-preserving and life-enhancing effects of the aesthetic can still be considered a marginal issue in contemporary aesthetics, it nevertheless has relevance for recent fields of investigation, such as the aesthetics of sport<sup>48</sup>, the somaesthetics (including its legitimation of *ars erotica*<sup>49</sup>), the design of specific environments (think of health institutions), and evidently for the aesthetics of natural environments.

The field of environmental aesthetics that Arnold Berleant pioneered is particularly interesting. The use of organic metaphors has a certain tradition in environmental philosophy. Health, for example, was applied to ecosystems; in his late work, between 1938-1948, Aldo Leopold related the “land health” to the capacity of self-renewal and self-organization of natural environments and played with metaphors such as “the art of land doctoring” or “the science of land health”<sup>50</sup>. The concept of health was later criticized as an untenable organismic paradigm in ecology. According to J. Baird Callicott, however, Leopold never had in mind that nature would be a superorganism, but only used the health metaphor to make the dynamic and functional dimensions of environments more intuitive; in other words, health can be assigned to functional ecosystems in such a way that their dynamics does not affect their integrity and stability over long periods of time. Although ecologists refuted Leopold’s idea that biodiversity and complexity would represent criteria and norms of ecosystem health, according to Callicott his concept of ecosystem health is still useful as long as it is understood as a metaphor; to demonstrate this, Callicott highlights its analogies to Humberto Maturana’s and Francisco Varela’s concept of autopoiesis. Moreover, health in general includes both descriptive and normative aspects; basically, it refers to an “intrinsically valuable state of being”<sup>51</sup> irrespective of its subject: humans, social environments, or ecosystems. Nevertheless, Callicott adds that health has to be supplemented by further ethical and aesthetic aspects, including “the beauty of historic biotic communities”<sup>52</sup>. Berleant, too, claimed that the “health” (functionality) of cities is a necessary, but insufficient condition for the citizens’ well-being. The similarities are evident; the concerns, however, differ: Callicott seeks arguments for the conservation policy of natural environments for their own sake, while Berleant is interested in the citizens’ meaningful engagement with their medium of life. Neither of them endorses the trivial reduction of the aesthetics of natural environments to their recreational function. As Geiger emphasized for the art experience, the engagement with nature can reach an existential depth and through that foster life.

Another link between life and environmental beauty is topophilia, even if in such cases aesthetic appreciation often remains unarticulated. Topophilia goes beyond the artist’s or tourist’s taste for the picturesque and the invigorating effect of “beautiful” weather and includes the farmer’s or fisher’s deep attachment to land or sea and their gratitude for its nurturing resources, the physical intimacy with a landscape and the interweaving of the personal biography with the memory of places<sup>53</sup>. In Martin Seel’s view, the engagement with aesthetically rewarding natural environments is “a form of intensified existential experience”<sup>54</sup> and an exemplary case of the good life. The

familiarity with certain places over a long period of time is beneficial in general<sup>55</sup>: The observation of seasonal cycles has decelerating effects. Gardening teaches patience and increases the awareness of transience and becoming, as well enabling the identification with non-human life forms. Exercising synchronicity with natural cycles can order life. Blossoming phases of vegetation become special, “kairotic” moments that make us praise the value of unique experiences. Spontaneous emotional resonance with natural environments or atmospheric conditions can trigger meditations on life and death or the human condition, etc. The boundaries of aesthetic experience are open; sensory pleasure grows into enjoyable and ultimately fulfilling experiences, in which perception, affectivity, and reflection are mutually enhancing, like a sort of communicating vessels.

Being less biased by the modern Western principle of the autonomy of values, non-Euroamerican cultures are likely to integrate the regenerating effects of natural beauty on humans more easily. In this respect it is worth mentioning François Jullien’s reinterpretation of the landscape in his book *Vivre du paysage*<sup>56</sup>, in which he opposed the classical Chinese theory of landscape painting with both the utilitarian understanding of the landscape as an exploitable resource and with the reduction of landscapes to an object of contemplation. In Chinese traditional culture, the experience of the landscape is a source of “revival and vitality”, which is further described as an inner resonance and healing energy, an “invigorating tension” that creates life and maintains life<sup>57</sup>. Inspired by this model, Jullien suggests that natural environments are something one can live *from*, because they support, foster and enhance life. The Chinese conception of the landscape as a place where the ideal and the vital come together is indebted to a worldview that does not seek salvation in the afterlife or in politics but places hope in a long life and conceives vitality as capital to be exploited. Therefore, according to Jullien, it is a preference for the vital landscape and not for the so-called beautiful landscape that prevails in the Chinese culture. The term that he coins for this revitalizing potential of landscape is *ressourcement*, as a return to the sources of life<sup>58</sup>. This reviving and rejuvenating effect of nature is, in his view, also the reason why Europeans are able to rediscover the landscape given the current background of their weaker belief in the afterlife. However, the acknowledgment of the “healing power” of the landscape<sup>59</sup> depends on two presuppositions: not only to abandon mind-body-dualism, but also the static understanding of the landscape as a juxtaposition of discontinuous objects – I assume that both would be acceptable for Berleant. Landscapes can have an existential resonance precisely because they are only the “face” of environment as a dynamic interplay of forces. Familiarization with the traditional Chinese view of the environment can also help us better understand Chinese contemporary approaches to the environmental aesthetics, such as Chen Xiangzhan’s “aesthetics of creating life.”<sup>60</sup>

A specific field in which aesthetic appreciation and vital values interact with is the weather. A century ago the geographer Willy Hellpach accurately described the psychophysiological effects of weather on our well-being: an ideal winter day, the so-called “beautiful weather”, fresh weather and the

moment the sky clears up after a storm have invigorating effects.<sup>61</sup> Later, the biometeorology confirmed Hellpach's observations and conducted empirical research on humans' physiological responses to environmental radiation, temperature, humidity or air currents. It is interesting that such studies mention aesthetic aspects only in relation to tourism, for example when researchers investigate the impact of climate change on tourism walkability or associations between biometeorological variables and the tourists' recreational preferences<sup>62</sup>. An analysis from an aesthetic perspective is still anticipated.

Related to this is the aesthetics of tourism, mainly recreational tourism that looks for fine weather (e.g., summer coastal tourism), but also the para-aesthetic practices of catastrophe tourism. In this respect, Berleant's concept of engagement can be put to work and its relevance verified in various contexts. Subjectivism – he stated – “is not only a misleading idea and a dangerous illusion; it is also an obstacle to a transformative politics”<sup>63</sup>; his forewarning was directed against the intellectualism of Western aesthetics which he rejected in favor of the phenomenological emphasis on perception and experience in general. However, we can apply this alert to the collective subject of the “experience society”<sup>64</sup> as well. What if the subject of aesthetic experience is not the open-minded and sensitive middle-class individual, but *masses* of people looking for blue sky and scenic views? What are the ecological costs of their practices? What are the environmental costs of the love for art itself, and how can aesthetic theory motivate artists to try to keep these as low as possible? Finally, how can aesthetics draw the boundary between an aesthetic *engagement* with weather, landscape and art and their *consumption* or selfish aestheticization (e.g., of catastrophes)? In a comment on the relevance of the aesthetic sensibility for human survival Berleant recalled Schiller and expressed his own confidence in the educational, pacifying and even community-building significance of the aesthetic.<sup>65</sup> In this context he asserted “the survival significance of aesthetic sensibility.”<sup>66</sup>

The human species is so threatened by internal animosities that its self-destruction is imminent. For humans, reconciliation could mean not only peace but the greater likelihood of simple survival, the ultimate biological goal. The evolutionary significance of the aesthetic is compelling. A consistent naturalism can provide the ground and aesthetic sensibility the means.<sup>67</sup>

Far from the “subjectivism” that for centuries has made philosophers look for pleasure and enjoyment in art and beauty, Berleant *really* meant that the aesthetic can help the human species *survive*. Having the tourism industry, the debates around the loss of biodiversity and climate change, as well as the metaphor of ecosystem health in mind, I am tempted to push Berleant's “consistent naturalism” further and ask whether aesthetic sensibility would be able to contribute to the survival of endangered species or intrinsically valuable ecosystems, too. To return once more to Dostoevsky: Can our sense of beauty save the world? In my view, it would be unrealistic to give a positive answer to this question. Aesthetic values only overlap with vital values; the specific aesthetics of decay and ruins, the peculiar delight found in nostalgia and melancholy, and the ambivalence of tragical catharsis suffice to demonstrate that humans can aesthetically enjoy losses, even irreversible ones.

Nevertheless, given the ultimate convergence between aesthetic and ethical goals according to Berleant, we can claim that environmental aesthetics should be concerned with the “vitality” and “well-being” of natural environments, too. The aesthetic experience and aesthetic practices have the power to keep us alive, to foster life and intensify the feeling of being alive but we ought not to ignore that they can weaken stamina and destroy human and non-human beings as well. No, beauty does not suffice to save the world, yet it is worth trying. Arnold Berleant is right: it is not enough simply to live, but is also necessary to question how we live and how we let others live; the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility should be converted into an art of living that will fulfil our human potential.

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- <sup>1</sup> Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Lecture. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/lecture/> [17.11.2021]
- <sup>2</sup> *The Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus* distinguishes three semantic fields of ‘vitality’: as 1. energy, vigor, power, intensity, force, liveliness, vivacity, *joie de vivre*, exuberance; 2. vital force, vital power, life force, vigor; 3. as vital stamina, hardiness, endurance, energy, strength, robustness (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 1721).
- <sup>3</sup> Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Towards an Aesthetics of Environment* (University Press of Kansas, 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> Idem, *Aesthetics Beyond the Arts* [ABA] (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 100.
- <sup>5</sup> Platon, *Politeia* 398-400, 404e, 410b-c.
- <sup>6</sup> M. Guyau, *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1904).
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.: 24.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.: 21.
- <sup>10</sup> Moritz Geiger, „Oberflächen- und Tiefenwirkung der Kunst“, in *Die Bedeutung der Kunst. Zugänge zu einer materiellen Wertästhetik* (München: Fink, 1976), 178–201.
- <sup>11</sup> Max Dessoir, *Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1906), 453.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.: 159; Luigi Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria formativității* (Bucharest: Univers, 1977), 243, 253.
- <sup>13</sup> John Dewey, *The Later Works: 1925-1953*, Vol. 10. *Art as Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 42.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.: 47.
- <sup>15</sup> Hans-Robert Jauß, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 71.
- <sup>16</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1990).
- <sup>17</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 53.
- <sup>18</sup> Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics*. *Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* [RA] (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004), 18.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Berleant, “Death in Image, Word, and Idea”, originally published in 1973, reprinted in RA 129-140.
- <sup>21</sup> Berleant, “Getting Along Beautifully: Ideas for a Social Aesthetics”, in: *Aesthetics and Environment. Variations on a Theme* [AE] (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 155sq.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 155.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 156.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.: 157.
- <sup>25</sup> ABA 45.
- <sup>26</sup> Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense. The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* [SS] (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 56sq.
- <sup>27</sup> ABA 57.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.: 113.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.: 114.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> On the relations between categories of values see ABA 42, 97-103; SS 156 sq., 167, etc.
- <sup>34</sup> ABA 45.
- <sup>35</sup> SS 135.
- <sup>36</sup> Speaking about the aesthetic-ecological city, Berleant formulates as goal “to humanize urban life” (Ibid.: 130).
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.: 191.
- <sup>38</sup> ABA 198.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.: 42.
- <sup>40</sup> SS 169.
- <sup>41</sup> AE 159.
- <sup>42</sup> ABA 60.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.: 77.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.: 138.

- <sup>45</sup> When he occasionally characterizes his philosophy as a naturalistic metaphysics, it is only for polemical reasons, in order to delimit it both from subjectivistic and intellectualist approaches in aesthetics (Ibid.: 90).
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.: 66.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.: 90.
- <sup>48</sup> Wolfgang Welsch, "Sport Viewed Aesthetically, and Even as Art?", in Andrew Light, Jonathan Smith (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 135-155.
- <sup>49</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Ars erotica. Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- <sup>50</sup> J. Baird Callicott, "Aldo Leopold's Concept of Ecosystem Health", in *Beyond the Land Ethic. More Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (New York: SUNY, 1999), 333-364, here 339.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.: 334.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.: 345.
- <sup>53</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia. A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitude and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 97.
- <sup>54</sup> Martin Seel, *Eine Ästhetik der Natur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 308.
- <sup>55</sup> Madalina Diaconu, „Entschleunigung, Lebensordnung, Erfahrungsqualität: Meditationen in Sinnesgärten“, in *Sinnesraum Stadt. Eine multisensorische Anthropologie* (Wien: Lit, 2012), 81-98.
- <sup>56</sup> François Jullien, *Von Landschaft leben oder Das Ungedachte der Vernunft* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2016).
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.: 59, 90.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.: 73.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid.: 213.
- <sup>60</sup> Chen Xiangzhan, "Contemporary Global Ecological Aesthetics: An Overview", lecture in the series "Save the Planet! Climate Change and the Role of Intercultural Philosophy" of the Viennese Society for Intercultural Philosophy, 28.10.2021.
- <sup>61</sup> Willy Hellpach, *Geopsyche* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann, 1939), 24-27.
- <sup>62</sup> C. R. de Freitas, "Weather and place-based human behavior: recreational preferences and sensitivity", *International Journal of Biometeorology* (2015)59:55-63.
- <sup>63</sup> SS 214.
- <sup>64</sup> Gerhard Schulze, *The Experience Society* (London: SAGE, 2005).
- <sup>65</sup> ABA 177.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.: 178.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.

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