

Connections Between Geography and Aesthetics

di Paolo Furia

ABSTRACT

There are some interesting connections between epistemological issues concerning geography and the main interests of environmental aesthetics. Environmental aesthetics has already dealt with the issue whether certain kinds of scientific knowledge are relevant or not to aesthetic appreciation. What we hold here is that aesthetic appreciation of the environment plays a relevant role to the scientific knowledge of it. The argument unfolds in three steps. First, I will establish a phenomenological notion of geographical experience. This includes an overview of the debate in human geography between two epistemologies: a quantitative, nomothetic and an-aesthetic one and a more qualitative, idiographic and phenomenological one. Second, I will discuss some of the aesthetic metaphors that geographers and social scientists, who have adopted the second epistemology, have been using to build the geographical concept of place. Third, I will show that aesthetic appreciation serves as the basis for the geographical notion of landscape.

KEYWORDS:

Geography; Metaphors; Place; Space; Landscape

Geography is connected to aesthetics in at least two important ways. First, the original and indispensable task of geography, which can be found in its very etymology, is to draw the Earth. The primary tool of geography is the map. However accurate and exact a map may be, it always has a fictive trait which reveals something about the illustrator: her research objectives, the scientific conventions she is adopting, the technological support she uses for observations, her cultural heritage. The cartographic rendering is always also a matter of imagination. The neglecting of this evidence has been object of criticism in Cultural Geography (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988, Farinelli 2009). Second, geography includes field surveys, first-hand explorations, travels, and qualitative methods. In this sense, aesthetic experiences are at the heart of many geographical inquiries. Yet, the link between aesthetics and geography through experience is controversial. It depends on how one defines aesthetic experience, how one conceives the re-

relationship between aesthetics and science, and what epistemology of geography one adopts.

This paper addresses the second of these aforementioned issues. Environmental aesthetics has already dealt with the issue of whether certain kinds of scientific knowledge are relevant or not to aesthetic appreciation (Brady 2003, Carlson 2008). What I hold here is that aesthetics plays a relevant role in geographical knowledge. The argument unfolds in three steps. First, I will establish a phenomenological notion of geographic experience. This includes an overview of the debate in human geography between two epistemologies: a quantitative, nomothetic and an-aesthetic one and a more qualitative, idiographic and phenomenological one. Second, I will discuss some of the aesthetic metaphors that geographers and social scientists, who have adopted the second epistemology, have been using to build the geographical concept of place. Third, I will show that aesthetic appreciation serves as the basis for the geographical notion of landscape.

1. *Geographical Positivism and Phenomenology*

Experience is very relevant for both aesthetics and geography. An approach centred on the notion of experience will provide the first clear linkage between the two domains. In the case of geography, the assumption is as strong as it is simple: for humans, being always implies being in a place. This means that geographical knowledge, which makes use of concepts such as space, place, and landscape, develops from a primary set of spatial experiences. In the case of aesthetics, its consideration as a qualification of experience takes its connection to art and extends it towards different aspects of existence¹.

Phenomenological geography emerged during 1960s as a reaction against the predominant positivist attitude of Second World War geography. Tim Cresswell (2013) outlines five principles that form the basis of positivist geography: first, scientific knowledge is based on observable and measurable reality; second, scientific knowledge excludes unobservable, unquantifiable forces as explana-

¹ We will not discuss aesthetic experience here. Yet it is clear that the broadening of the scope and the objects of aesthetics from the artistic domain to the entire dimension of experience will facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue with geography at the level of its very source, which is the sensitive, interpersonal, and social experience of places and landscapes. Aesthetic experience in this case refers especially to Arnold Berleant's work, epitomized in the book *Sense and Sensibility. The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (2010).

tions of phenomena; third, testable theories are required – there is no room for value judgements; fourth, scientific knowledge should be useful and potentially applicable (a principle which quickly turned into the following: technological and practical applicability is the primary aim of theoretical knowledge); and fifth, knowledge is an ongoing process in which future results may correct prior ones. Under those assumptions, geography becomes spatial theory, where space is mostly understood as a neutral backdrop for the action of social forces, and places are reduced to mere locations identified through objective spatial coordinates. Through a broad application of mathematical and statistical tools, graph theory, and more recently, sophisticated network analysis, where places are conceived as “nodes” occupying certain “positions”, geography assumes the guise of an advanced but somewhat trendy positivist science that seeks the general and overlooks the particular. The earlier account of geography as an idiographic discipline, which understood the qualities and characteristics of different regions to be unique and irreducible, was thus branded “intellectually inadequate” (Cresswell 2013, p. 79). Quantitative methods are therefore important in geography, as they are likely to produce impacts at the policy-making level. Transport geography, for instance, accompanied the massive development of traffic infrastructure both in the United States and in Europe after the Second World War².

These qualities notwithstanding, spatial theory has often produced “a number of mistakes also in practises and thus leads to irrational land uses” (Mazúr 1983, p. 140). More than once, efficient architectural or planning projects on paper turned out to be dangerous for lived ecosystems or threatening to local cultures. The apparent rationality of spatial theories may also serve irrational or unjust purposes. As the philosopher John Pickles puts it:

Method and technique become arbiters of social understanding and truth, instead of establishers of certainty. In that move extra-scientific forms of knowing and dwelling in and with the world are relegated to secondary positions. From this point on we begin to live in a world where man is patterned as machine, information processor, or gene pool. When such reductions occur, not only do we run the danger of forgetting the nature of human being, but science itself can no longer say anything at all about human experience as such. (Pickles 1985, p. X)

According to authors such as Yi-Fu Tuan (1971; 1977), Anne Buttimer (1976; 1994), John Pickles (1985), and Ed Relph (1977), geography must not ignore the qualitative relationship between in-

² In order to approach transport geography from both an historical and theoretical point of view, cf. Rodrigue (2020).

dividuals and place. Something of its old idiographic practice has to be rediscovered. The retrieval of the qualitative does not imply that quantitative methods in geography are wrong, but rather that quantitative methods provide only abstractions of the complexity of the lifeworld and the plurality of contingencies and unplanned consequences in human actions. In fact, there has been much debate between phenomenologists of geography about how to assess spatial theory and quantitative methods. There were those who, by denying the tenets of positivism, ended up espousing existentialism or, as Pickles denounced it, “naïve subjectivism” (Pickles 1985, p. 68). There were also those who remembered that phenomenology is a method that aims to ground science on experience, not to delete science on behalf of the alleged ineffability of experience. If experience and science are separated, both in the forms of objectivism and subjectivism, it is impossible to reconcile aesthetics and geography as a science. In fact, objectivism requires that science be sharply separated from its experiential ground in order to be constituted as a complex of logically consistent theories and statements about phenomena, taken in their set-characteristics³. On the other hand, subjectivism, by implying that individuals’ spatial experiences are *de jure* unquestionable and unintelligible, re-affirms the same divide between an alleged objective reality and subjective experiences. In the first case, the central concepts of geography – space and place – are devoid of their lived, experiential meanings; in the second case, no theoretical reflection over space and place is possible, reduced as they are to individuals’ private intentionalities. Phenomenology considers lived experience to be the source and the end of scientific inquiries, and the theoretical abstractions to be necessary fictions suitable for the analysis and the elucidation of some kinds of phenomena, or at least some of their specific aspects. For instance, the notion of absolute empty space, immobile and homogeneous, first adopted in the framework of classical mechanics, is an important abstraction when the geographer’s task is to measure objective distances between two locations. The objective distance between two locations does not explain spatial behavior (for instance: people who travel between nations for leisure; people who migrate in search of better fortunes), in the same way that the mechanical force of an arm does not explain why a man raises

³ “Every individual is, by definition, different, but the most significant statement which can be made about modern scholarship in general is that it has been found to be intellectually more profitable, satisfying and productive to view the phenomena of the real world in terms of their ‘set characteristics’ rather than to concentrate upon their individual deviations from one another” (Haggett and Chorley 1967, p. 21).

his hand in the air. Spatial behavior and processes cannot be fully understood in terms of set characteristics. Spaces and places, in their diversity, have impacts on people's behaviors and choices. An idiographic approach in geography must be preserved in order to better comprehend the qualitative variety of human actions.

2. *The Aesthetic Metaphors of Place*

Phenomenologists have supported the notion of “geographical experience” in many ways, but we will focus on two: first, the affirmation of the priority of place over space; and second, the argument that human cognition and action is place-based. A pivotal contribution for the first argument is the philosopher Ed Casey’s “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Sketch of Time” (1996). The paper aims to revert the classical objectivist hierarchy according to which objective space comes before lived places. Casey calls into question the very basic distinction between an external objective world and an interior, private world of the subject comprised of its sensations: a distinction which, by the way, both idealism and realism assume. Following Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Casey states that everything depends on how we conceive perception. If it is primary, remarks the author, then “its primariness must be its ability to give to us more than bits of information about the phenomenal and epiphenomenal surfaces of things” (1996, p. 17). When we perceive, we situate the objects in “a scene of which we form a part” (*ibidem*). This scene, or perceptual horizon as Husserl puts it, is what we can call “place”, according to a phenomenological insight. A decisive argument against the empiricist conception of sensation revolves around place: “precisely as surrounded by depths and horizons, the perceiver finds herself in the midst of an entire teeming place-world rather than in a confusing kaleidoscope of free-floating sensory data” (*ibidem*). As perception is always emplaced, place is neither an object among the others, nor a scientific abstraction through which to pursue this or that inquiry. Place is instead presupposed in every knowledge, as it is constitutive of experience itself.

Casey also supports the second argument, according to which human cognition and action are place-based, by introducing the idea that the constitution of place is always also cultural and symbolic. Our experiences are always conditioned by cultural and social structures, which engrain themselves into the deepest levels of perception. Bodies and places are together the vectors of this

radical, ineludible affection. The power and the performativity of social symbols do not depend on some secret force of the human spirit, but on their embodiment in spatial dimensions, as they are integrated into those depths and horizons which make experience possible. Spatial experiences can both reproduce and challenge the social order. The geographer David Seamon, in his seminal book *A Geography of the Lifeworld* (1979), introduces a telling aesthetic metaphor to express the interanimation of lived bodies and places: the *place-ballet* metaphor. More recently, Seamon has defined place-ballet as “an interaction of individual bodily routines rooted in a specific environment that often becomes an important place of interpersonal and communal exchange, meaning, and attachment” (Seamon 2018, p. 15). The typical routines regularly happening in a place define its very character and atmosphere. However, an aesthetic metaphor only works when the rules of a system are followed according to a certain degree of interpretation and social creativity. A place is recognizable thanks to its unique character, which dwells in reciprocal action with the body-ballets sustaining it. Place-ballets reproduce the ordinary and expected attitudes of people towards and within a specific place: bodily movements and behaviors follow cognitive and even moral dictates which are attached to the place’s social function and meaning in the community. But spatial experiences in places can also include unexpected meetings and unsuspected possibilities of interaction with the environment. Unforeseen events may occur and display the unrealized and concealed possibilities that lie beneath the surface of ordinary life. The apparent stability of place is rather the precarious result of an ongoing process of morphogenesis, where socio-spatial forms are continually challenged by new possible interpretations or also by the explicit rejection of the already achieved forms. Place’s stability is fragile and requires the constant reproduction of the acts and the repetition of the routines and rituals attached to them. Through the reproduction of a set of distinct spatial experiences and place-ballets, place is always on the verge of achieving itself; and yet, it is at the same time never achieved once for all, for interruptions of the material spatial practices or challenges to the symbolic meanings attached to them are always just around the corner.

Here the aesthetic metaphor of dance has the same role as the metaphor of play in Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*: place, like art and dance, includes “an immersion (...) which cannot be fully anticipated or controlled by individual consciousness” (Davey 2016). Place, like art and play, requires an understanding of its rules and conventions; yet, place’s vitality does not reside in the mere fol-

lowing of rules. They can be interpreted by its inhabitants. In other words, place always has its spatial rules and organizations, but they can be lived in multiple and sometimes unforeseeable ways: “changes in the character of these paths are part and parcels of the transformation of social relations” (Tilley 2012, p. 25). Spatial experiences in places cannot be considered to be mere repetitions of the pre-given.

A powerful aesthetic-political interpretation of spatial experiences is provided by the seminal work of Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). In his book, the author divides spatial experiences into strategies and tactics. Strategies presuppose an institutional power capable of giving shape to space in accordance with aesthetical and political aims. Examples of strategies include the construction of large squares linked by wide boulevards, or the adoption of a certain architectural styles for institutional or religious buildings. Strategies, rather than just being spatial experiences, master them by imposing a spatial order. Tactics, instead, are the actual spatial experiences of the inhabitants and always include a certain degree of manipulation of the strategic spatial order. De Certeau focuses on the act of walking. It is, he claims, “a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian” (De Certeau 1984, p. 99). According to her aesthetical, social, political vantage point, which do not necessarily correspond to the ones of those who planned the social order, the walker re-invents it: “the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements” (*ibidem*). Place is here associated with language, as both spatial and linguistic practices are considered to be arts:

There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of “turning” phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*). Like ordinary language, this art implies and combines styles and uses. Style specifies a linguistic structure that manifests on the symbol system of communication manifests itself in actual fact; it refers to a norm. Style and use both have to do with a “way of operating” (of speaking, walking, etc.), but style involves a peculiar processing of the symbolic, while use refers to elements of a code. They intersect to form a style of use, a way of being and a way of operating. (De Certeau 1984, p. 100)

Seamon and de Certeau have implanted two relevant aesthetic metaphors in the field of human geography. The interplay between people and environment follows non-mechanistic patterns which can be expressed successfully through aesthetic metaphors. They must be understood correctly. The ballet performance in particular is not social interplay unfolding upon a backdrop which serves as the place. The place is not the “where” in which things and social events happen. On

the contrary, it has to be considered as the very ballet performance itself, which consists in the social interplay as always interwoven with the spatial dimension of experience. Place is circularly understood as both the condition and the result of the ballet performance. Actual and historical places act as active forces and help to form human motivations and moral drives. The aesthetic metaphors of place-ballet and the art of walking help to conceive the geographical notion of place as a processual totality, characterized by both its distinguished character and also the range of its possibilities for change.

3. Aesthetic Appreciation of Landscape

Even though aesthetic ideas help to develop deeper insights into geographical concepts such as place, aesthetic appreciation as such is also useful in geographical knowledge. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that geography shares one of its core concepts with the history of art: landscape. Along with geography and art history, in recent years the theoretical discourses on landscape have increased their presence in the domains of architectural studies, planning, juridical studies, physical and cultural anthropology, psychology, economy, demography, not to mention geology, geomorphology, and pedology. However, it seems most promising to focus on the dispute between art history and geography in order to uncover the ambiguity at the core of the very notion of landscape.

Many classical definitions of landscape display a keen awareness of this ambiguity. The geographer Richard Hartshorne, for instance, defined landscape as “the concrete unified impression that an area gives us, the objects in the area producing that impression (...) and the area itself” (Hartshorne 1939, pp. 149-150). The impression an area gives to the geographer works as a bridge towards a deeper scientific understanding of the area itself. What matters here is that geographical knowledge emphasizes the systematic connections of elements in an area. It can be properly interpreted as an ensemble of physical and anthropic spatial phenomena, susceptible to being objectively framed and explained. Another seminal definition of landscape in geography was the one proposed by the morphologist and phenomenologist Carl Sauer in 1925:

Landscape is the English equivalent of the term German geographers are using largely and strictly has the same meaning, a land shape, in which the process of shaping is by no means thought of as simply physical. It may be defined, therefore, as an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural. (Sauer 1996, p. 300)

Landscape, in Sauer's thought, consists in a distinct association of spatial forms. Its elements can be tracked, recorded, classified, and explained. If we stress the objectivist side of both the definitions of Sauer and Hartshorne, we would be tempted to consider the mapping of landscape as the primary aim of geographical knowledge. Landscapes are susceptible to objective representation and, in this sketched full-scale modeling of landscape, geography as a science would finally find its legitimate end. Nevertheless, the definitions of landscape proposed by both Hartshorne and Sauer do not fully embody an objectivist attitude towards landscape. Of course, it is considered to be something real, materially encompassing human and non-human beings. But its total nature cannot be entirely displayed in maps. Landscape's distinct character can be fully appreciated only experientially and aesthetically. Sauer made it very clear when he wrote about the importance of qualitative field methods for geography:

Being afoot, sleeping out, sitting about camp in the evening, seeing the land in all its seasons are proper ways to identify the experience, of developing impression into larger appreciation and judgement. I know no prescription of method; avoid whatever increases routine and fatigue and decreases alertness. (Sauer 1956, p. 296)

In order to "develop impression into appreciation and judgement", the lived experience of and within landscape is considered to be irreplaceable. Geographical experience alone leads to a proper geographical knowledge. Maps, here, no longer figure as the ends of the geographical knowledge; rather, they retrieve their legitimate role as tools for the empirical orientation of geographers along their journeys. According to Sauer, geographical knowledge is accomplished through and within the researcher's connection to environment, not by leaving this connection aside in the pursuit of an allegedly objective ideal of "scientificity." Moreover, Sauer does not emphasize experience alone, but, more specifically, aesthetic appreciation: "The best geography has never disregarded the aesthetic qualities of landscape", revealing "a symphonic quality in the contemplation of the areal scene" (Sauer 1996, p. 311). Landscape, the very object of geography, deserves "a quality of understanding at a higher plane which may not be reduced to formal process" (*ibidem*).

The recognition of a symphonic quality of landscape fits with the generally accepted derivation of the concept from the domain of art history and aesthetics in the broad sense. Art history and aesthetics locates the origins of landscape painting in the Italian Renaissance in the XV century. According to the French philoso-

pher Alain Roger (1997), the very origins of landscape are artistic and its determinations belong with art. Landscape painting reveals a privileged connection of landscape with the visual perspective of the painter or of the interpreter. This also means that a geographical ensemble can be an object of aesthetic appreciation and that it will be painted only as long as it evokes feelings of harmony, peace, fear, or sorrow, fright, and enthusiasm. The modern aesthetic category, articulated in the sublime, the picturesque, and the beautiful, introduces the possibility of considering nature (and anthropic nature too) through more subjective and emotional lens. Romanticism and its intellectual figures such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Alexander von Humboldt, promised a deeper knowledge of nature through the aesthetic category. But with time the paths of science, geography included, and aesthetic appreciation diverged from each other. The diagnosis proposed by the French philosopher Augustine Berque is severe:

The historical process that I should call modernity first of all set in motion, almost simultaneously, and certainly interrelatedly, both a landscapist and a scientific view of nature: then caused them to evolve, paradoxically, more and more independently of one another; and finally – and even more strikingly paradoxically – rendered impossible a unified vision of nature and a coherent genre of landscape painting. (Berque 1993, p. 33)

Berque falls in line with the guiding thread which begins with Georg Simmel and leads to Joachim Ritter. The basic idea of this legacy is that landscape is the product of a spiritual gaze. The eye of man, and especially of the artist, turns an environment into a landscape by attributing a recognizable *Stimmung*⁴ to it. However, the spiritual gaze produces no more than an aesthetic compensation for the loss of unity between mankind and nature. The aesthetic sense of the unity of nature, reflected into the landscape, tells something of the cultural condition of modern mankind but says nothing about nature itself. After the classical geographers such as Sauer and Hartshorne, it has been remarked, “the inescapable ambivalence of the concept led most geographers, concerned with giving their discipline and indisputable scientific foundation, to dismiss the category of landscape” (Pagano 2015, p. 12). This divorce is reflected in Berque’s distinction between environment and landscape: the first is “the factual aspect of a milieu” while the second “relies on a collective form of subjectivity” (Berque, 1993, p. 33). In this

⁴ What Simmel calls *Stimmung* is difficult to translate in other languages. It is a “mood” which “permeates all its separate components” (Simmel 2007, p. 26) but at the same time is “a mental state, and can thus reside only in the emotional reflexes of the beholder and not in unconscious external objects” (Simmel 2007, p. 27).

way, how environment is experienced, lived, and modified by man is separated from how it is seen and represented as a landscape. The French geographer considers this distinction to be a “product of a modern mentality” (*ibidem*).

Our purpose was precisely to reconnect what in modern common sense has been divided: the aesthetic and the scientific, the experiential and the objective, the cultural and the natural. In order to do so, many ways have been attempted. Berque’s (2013) suggestion is to draw on Eastern philosophy and culture, to integrate the analytical attitude of Western thought with more analogical and synthetical traits coming from Eastern culture and thought. Geographers are now reframing the phenomenological focus on experience within so-called nonrepresentational theories, where the refusal of the Cartesian divide between the object and the representation is seen as an opportunity to reconcile geographical explanation with human affection and aesthetic values⁵. Key for nonrepresentational theories is the focus on the materiality of landscape, which can be experienced through the different senses. There is no room for the divide between reality and appearance, as images and symbolic values are always at play in the ongoing interaction between mankind and environment. Lastly, the morphological definition of landscape as a totality composed by synergistically interrelated parts⁶ fully innervates the recent scientific field of ecology. Contemporary ecology’s idea that everything in nature is interconnected, human action included, redeems the holism of von Humboldt and Sauer, which was too quickly dismissed as outmoded and naïve during much of 1900’s geography. With holism, cooperation between aesthetics and scientific knowledge can be resumed. Von Humboldt claimed that the aesthetic experience of landscape as “the total character of a region” stood at the source of both the “differentiated analysis of the nested structure of reality” (Fränzle 2001, p. 61) and its artistic reinterpretation. It follows that landscape art, far from being a mere subjective reinterpretation of nature, is charged to “bring about the best and immediately comprehensible representation of nature” (*ibidem*). The artistic sentiment is of prime importance in this effort to comprehend landscape, and thus the entire Earth, as a totality; this comprehension is today the charge of ecology, with the help of aesthetic appreciation:

⁵ “The event and affect are two key terms at the heart of NRT” (Cresswell 2013, p. 230).

⁶ About the distinction between synergistic and analytical relations cf. Seamon (2018, pp. 22-23).

The significance of a global ecosystem is not a matter of biological interest only; one can also find aesthetic properties present. Like any ecosystem but on the all-inclusive scale of the whole, a global ecosystem can exemplify the formal aesthetic features of harmony, proportion, and unity in variety, as well as a range of enhanced perceptual pleasures emerging from an enlarged repertoire of styles, traditions, and media. (Berleant 2010, p. 134)

With nonrepresentational and ecological geographies, a decisive step has been taken to regain the long-lost connection between aesthetics and geography.

We can conclude our essay by claiming that aesthetics relates to geography in many ways. It provides geography with key metaphors suited to build up its main notions, namely place and landscape; it emphasizes the importance of field experiences; it helps to rediscover a symphonic, or dissonant quality in landscape, and it helps to overcome the persistent Cartesian divide between subject and object, paving the way for an ecological understanding of regions. Hence, some issues are delivered to future inquiries: the role of aesthetics in triggering spatial criticism and geographical change, and the heuristic function of aesthetic categories (the beautiful, the sublime and the picturesque) today in relation to place and landscape.

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