

Eco-aesthetics and Ecological Aesthetics of Nature¹

Ekoestetyka i ekologiczna estetyka przyrody

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Abstract

Eco-aesthetics and ecological aesthetics of nature are closely related, twin disciplines having a similar, but not identical object of interest. **Eco-aesthetics** is a discipline which – in our opinion – focuses on the existing world of nature, nature intact by man or modified by him only to a limited extent (wilderness areas, natural ecosystems, nature and landscape parks). Eco-aesthetics would advocate simple acceptance of nature without arranging it, nature protected against anthropogenic impact distorting or modifying its original, existing beauty. And for these reasons eco-aesthetics is part of – or at least is close to – the biocentric vision of the world, in contrast to **ecological aesthetics of nature**, which fits more into the anthropocentric vision of reality. While eco-aesthetics is interested in nature understood autonomously in its original and existing form, ecological aesthetics of nature focuses more on the environment modified by man.

Key words: nature, beauty, art, eco-aesthetics, ecological aesthetics of nature

Streszczenie

Ekoestetyka i ekologiczna estetyka przyrody to bliskie, siostrzane dyscypliny o podobnym lecz nie tożsamym przedmiocie zainteresowań. **Ekoestetyka** to dyscyplina, która – naszym zdaniem – uwagę koncentruje na zastanym świecie natury, nietkniętej przyrodzie, bądź w ograniczonym tylko stopniu zmienionej przez człowieka (obszary dzikie, naturalne ekosystemy, parki przyrodnicze i krajobrazowe). Ekoestetyka opowiadałaby się za prostą akceptacją przyrody, bez jej aranżowania, chronionej przez wpływy antropogennymi, zniekształcającymi czy modyfikującymi pierwotne, zastane piękno. I z tych powodów ekoestetyka wpisuje się, albo przynajmniej bliska jest, biocentrycznej wizji świata, w przeciwieństwie do **ekologicznej estetyki przyrody**, która wpisuje się bardziej w antropocentryczny obraz rzeczywistości. O ile dla ekoestetyki przedmiotem zainteresowań jest przyroda pojęta autonomicznie w swej pierwotnej i zastanej postaci, to ekologiczna estetyka przyrody, bardziej kieruje uwagę ku przyrodniczemu, przetworzonemu otoczeniu człowieka.

Słowa kluczowe: przyroda, piękno, sztuka, ekoestetyka, ekologiczna estetyka przyrody

In the second half of the 20th century attempts were made at understanding and interpreting the rich spectrum of man's aesthetic relations to the natural environment. As a result, a new discipline of knowledge emerged (or rather has been emerging, as it has not yet been fully constituted), located on the border between ecology and aesthetics, most often referred to as *e c o – a e s t h e t i c s*. The very name of the emerging discipline suggests that it is interested

in the subject matter in the field of the possible relations between aesthetics and ecology. *Eco-aesthetics* is the term most frequently used to refer to the emerging area of interest, but there are also other concepts and terms, behind which there is content which seems different to some and similar or even identical to others, such as: *aesthetics of reality*, *environmental aesthetics*, *empirical aesthetics*, *ecological aesthetics of nature*, or *aesthetics of ecology*. In this situation, cer-

¹ The article refers to some author's statements comprised in the book *Nauki humanistyczne i ekologia/ Humanities and Ecology*.

tainly there is a need to first introduce some conceptual, terminological and – as a consequence – problem order. According to M. Gołaszewska, *eco-aesthetics is an empirically-oriented branch of aesthetics and its subject matter are the phenomena of synergy (mutual support) and feedback between beauty (aesthetic values of art and nature) and broadly understood ecology* (Gołaszewska, 2000). Aesthetics of reality, in turn, seems to be a broader concept and it represents a certain theoretical proposition of *understanding the phenomenon of beauty in the real world: in the anthroposphere as a system connecting man with nature in individual experiences, sensations* (Gołaszewska, 2000).

Eco-aesthetics is undoubtedly a contemporary discipline, but its roots reach far into the past. The issue of the beauty of nature, but also the conviction still valid today, that *beauty is a direct link between the natural world and the world of man* are part of the aesthetic reflection of different cultures and epochs (Iron, 2008) and let us add that it is a particularly important reason why these two worlds have moved noticeably closer. What deserves special emphasis, however, is that eco-aesthetics is a discipline which is emerging and developing in the context of an environmental crisis and largely due to this crisis. Among others, German ecologist E. Meinberg draws attention to this fact when, analyzing the contemporary processes alienating man from his environment, he shows that the experience of the ecological crisis has, somewhat paradoxically, *forced the rehabilitation of the aesthetics of nature* (Meinberg, 1995, 2003). We should agree with Zbigniew Łepko when he observes, that *the encroachment of the products of human civilization upon the world of nature most often isolates man from the experience determining the full development of his aesthetic sensitivity* (Łepko, 2003). At the same time, these processes ruthlessly make us aware of the fact that the world of nature in its pure, natural form uncontaminated by human activity is fading into the past, along with the form of beauty which can be discovered and contemplated in the natural environment not modified by man. Unfortunately, for the modern man this beauty has to a large extent been lost. Nature films, literary descriptions of nature, and small enclaves of primeval nature remaining in their wild form, shrinking by the day, are the only substitute for it. With the degradation and devastation of nature, its original beauty fades away.

In this context, the question is rightly posed of how *the aesthetic perception of nature is linked with the phenomena jointly referred to as the contemporary ecological crisis? (...) Perhaps not strongly enough – is one answer to this question – it is emphasized that the ecological crisis is primarily the crisis of the perception of nature, and therefore it is of a purely aesthetic nature. While heated debates are held on whether we are indeed dealing with a global ecological crisis or rather with some pessimistic visions of environmentalists, there is no doubt about the fact*

that beauty, or, more broadly speaking, the aesthetic values of nature consisting, inter alia, of the diversity of plant and animal species, forms of landscape, unique combinations of colors and shapes, are disappearing at an alarming rate. Hardly anyone draws attention to the importance of this issue, especially in Poland (Liszewska, Liszewski, 2011). Others, on the other hand, believe that the argument of aesthetic character is one of the strongest arguments in favor of the conservation of nature. This approach is advocated by Jean Dorst, who in his book entitled *Before nature dies* argues that *above all, nature can be saved by our feelings, since nature is beautiful, and we need beauty in all its forms* (Dorst, 1970).

The form of nature the modern man is exposed to is – to a lesser or greater extent (with a clear majority of the latter) nature processed by the work and activities of man, tailored to his aesthetic taste, preferences, and ideas about what beauty is. Therefore, a different kind of beauty, the beauty of *civilized*, processed nature, is taking place of the beauty of primeval nature, unspoiled by the activities of man. The patterns of beauty typical of nature in its original form are being replaced with the patterns of beauty of nature transformed by human activity. It is probably worth realizing more clearly that when we are referring to the beauty of nature today, what we actually mean is not the natural, primeval beauty, but the beauty which has been extensively processed or, speaking more bluntly, constituted by man. This difference is clearly illustrated in the comparison of the natural beauty of the primeval forest unspoiled by human intervention with the beauty of the city park, shaped in line with the ideas, taste and aesthetic beliefs of its designers. *What is nature to modern man?, What determines the validity of the category of beauty?* and, in particular, *What is the role of beauty as an ally of ecology?* We should expect answers to these questions, hoping that they will be provided by the science of the beauty of nature – as eco-aesthetics is referred to in the subtitle of the book *Święto wiosny/The Rite of Spring* by M. Gołaszewska (2000). This should be expected of eco-aesthetics, which cannot be satisfied with the overly narrow, traditional formula of philosophy of art. Therefore, it focuses attention on the object of study brought out by modern ecology, this object is understood not only as the natural environment, but any human environment. Some aestheticians perceive the concept of the environment offered by modern ecology as an extremely attractive research area in which, in some ways, it is easier to formulate clear theses of the new aesthetics, departing from the formula of the philosophy of art. Aesthetics combined with ecology becomes an attempt to respond to both the desire of beauty and the need for being in close contact with nature, not remaining indifferent to aesthetic values. Gołaszewska sees the origin of eco-aesthetics at the time when two attitudes: *pro nature* and *pro arte* came into contact. In her opinion, art purposefully got closer to nature, preserving reverence for its strength

and beauty. Eco-aesthetics focuses on the links between the human axiological world and various natural phenomena. Writing about the general theoretical premises of eco-aesthetics and raising the subject of the peculiarities of its research, the author formulates the thesis that the said discipline is *committed to the task of getting to understand the phenomena associated with the beauty of nature – it assumes a priori the axiomatic premises regarding the manner of existence of these phenomena and creations of nature (the real and the potential one), the formal character of the system of values, especially aesthetic values, and the ways of structuring reality (symmetry, rhythm, enrichment, etc.): eco-aesthetics strives to create a closed, coherent system of propositions describing and interpreting the axiological side of natural phenomena* (Gołaszewska, 2000). According to Gołaszewska, eco-aesthetics is theoretical knowledge, *it is not meant to formulate directives governing behavior, it is not trying to improve the world, but its goal is to understand the extent to which the beauty of reality, nature, and wildlife contributes to the creation of the specific aesthetic attitude rising out of the sensitivity of man to the beauty of nature* (2000). I share the author's opinion that eco-aesthetics has no intention of improving the world, let me add, however, that I believe that – the way I understand it – it postulates that what exists, i.e. the natural world, should be protected and preserved, referring to aesthetic arguments and motivation.

In the eponymous rite of spring, Gołaszewska offers the reader a vision of a happy man inspired by the beauty of Nature, while devoting a lot of attention to the issues of eco-aesthetics as a science. The author wonders about the phenomenon of the widespread conviction that aesthetic sensitivity supports environmental attitudes and actions. If, indeed, beauty serves as an important ally of ecology, this role should be examined, we can also talk about the formation of a peculiar *ecological ideology* in which the pro-ecological function of beauty takes its rightful place (next to pragmatism, humanistic view of the world, and purely emotional involvement).

In my opinion, eco-aesthetics as a discipline has two functions: cognitive and theoretical, and practical and educational. The former is theoretical knowledge, and more precisely – philosophical knowledge, aimed at understanding the phenomena associated with the beauty of nature, formulating propositions regarding the phenomena and creations of nature expressed from the aesthetic perspective, identifying the character of aesthetic values associated with nature, or the ways of structuring reality, etc. The latter is interested more in the phenomenon of directly experiencing the beauty of nature, reflecting on how human sensitivity to the beauty of nature and aesthetic and emotional relationships between man and nature emerge and are shaped, and the emergence of a specific aesthetic attitude resulting from such dispositions. All this is connected with the belief that aesthetic sensitivity en-

coded in a specific aesthetic attitude can greatly support environmental attitudes and actions.

The belief that nature has value not only in the instrumental, utilitarian and biological dimensions – as a living organism, but also in the aesthetic dimension – which, for many, is much more valuable – is, in my opinion, a vital and strong motive for taking environmental actions. Doubtlessly, many examples could be provided to illustrate how much the aesthetic qualities of a landscape, a particular place, sometimes a single object, motivate environmental actions. In order to save and preserve the aesthetic values of nature in its more or less concretized dimensions and when convinced of its real, not imaginary values, we are sometimes capable of making heroic efforts. I know one example from my own city, where the residents of a housing estate did not agree to the construction of a road in a beautiful forest located nearby, even though it would allow them to get to their homes a lot faster. They simply recognized the aesthetic, recreational values as being more valuable than the – generally speaking – utilitarian values (waste of time, costs associated with longer rides, convenience).

Perhaps the concepts of combining the aesthetic and ethical dimensions in the reflection on the environment emerged in connection with such examples. They include the attempt to found environmental ethics on aesthetics – and thus anthropocentric environmental values formulated by Eugene C. Hargrove. *Its starting point* – says Marek M. Bonenberg – *is the claim that modern environmentalism is genetically based more on aesthetic than ethical considerations, since it is the aesthetic experience resulting from the contact with nature that has shaped the modern environmental sensitivity and intuition. For this reason, debates on the moral relationships with the environment will be more fruitful and conclusive if they remain connected with their aesthetic roots. Hence, Hargrove constructs a theory of aesthetic values as 'anthropocentric internal values', according to which the aesthetic value of an object is, indeed, the result of an act of evaluation by the subject, and this is due to the positive experience of this subject, but at the same time this valuation is selfless in nature and therefore non-instrumental, from which Hargrove concludes that it is internal in nature* (2000). The author of the foregoing statements is convinced that the aesthetic values of nature can serve as the basis for the moral concern for the environment, and provides grounds for them by presenting an *ontological* argument, *trying to prove that what determines the unique status of aesthetic values of natural objects is the real existence of these objects, which is a property enhancing their aesthetic value* (2000). Thus, it can be said that *the awareness of the real existence of an object makes us assign a greater aesthetic value to it, which means that we have a moral obligation to preserve the existence of aesthetically valuable natural objects* (Hargrove favors the beauty of nature over the beauty of art) – *nature is not only the subject of*

aesthetic contemplation, but also the 'creator' of the forms existing in it, while works of art are passively shaped by man (2000).

We do not wish to get into a discussion here about the extent to which aesthetic sensitivity resulting in a specific aesthetic attitude is a natural response to our close and more remote natural environment, and to what it is a conscious and shaped ability. The fact is, that the phenomenon, which can be referred to as the absence or scarcity of the aesthetic dimension in connecting with the natural world, is something which occurs very often. This, in turn, clearly raises the question about the problem of aesthetically oriented environmental education.

Moreover, in our opinion, eco-aesthetics is a discipline which should focus its attention on the existing world of nature, intact wilderness, or wilderness only slightly modified by man; what I mean here are wilderness areas, natural ecosystems, nature and landscape parks. Eco-aesthetics would advocate a simple acceptance of nature, the beauty of which, intact by conscious human activity, was experienced by it in its *natural*, primeval and existing form, nature unarranged, protected against the anthropogenic impact distorting or modifying the original, existing beauty. And for these reasons eco-aesthetics is part of, or at least is close to, the biocentric vision of the world, in contrast to **ecological aesthetics of nature**, which fits more into the anthropocentric view of reality. While the subject of interest of eco-aesthetics is nature understood autonomously in its original and existing form, ecological aesthetics of nature focuses more on the natural environment of man.

The idea referred to as ecological aesthetics of nature – a discipline being designed rather than fully formed – was conceived by Gernot Böhme. In his view, the constitution and development of such a discipline is urgently needed in times when *we have rediscovered that we have to live in nature and with nature, more than that, we need nature* (Böhme, 2002). The new discipline is needed as an ally of ecology and human ecology, which emphasize the need to experience nature in physiological terms only *as a need for clean media conducive to health*. They do not say anything, however – and it is much needed – *about the sensual and emotional or (...) sensual and moral qualities of the environment* (2002). According to Böhme, ecological aesthetics of nature has an important task of spreading the belief *that for a healthy, not to say, a good life, one has to experience the environment which has certain aesthetic qualities* (2002). Setting such a goal for itself, aesthetics should provide arguments supporting the view that the frame of mind of a man is co-determined by the sensory and emotional qualities of his environment.

Yet another, equally important task of the new discipline is to continuously remind us of the belief that the basic needs of human life include not only the general need of beautiful surroundings, but also the need which the author of the project of the discipline

calls the need of nature, i.e. something which *exists on its own* and which *moves man through its independent existence*. The truth is that each one of us has a deep need to experience something other than himself or herself.

Böhme believes that the future ecological aesthetics of nature should make direct references to and learn a lot from the theory and practice of landscape gardening. It turns out that a number of very similar premises can be seen in the ways of relating to nature as a garden and treating nature in accordance with the proposals and guidelines of the new ecological aesthetics. Landscape gardening bears traces of human activity. Recalling this fact and giving it a more generalized dimension, one should note that *we have irrevocably entered an era in which every state of nature contains anthropogenic elements, i.e. it is marked in some way by the existence of man* (2002). The difference between the previous aesthetics of nature and the new ecological aesthetics lies in the fact, that the former treats nature as something already existing, given, while the new discipline emphasizes the fact that nature is saturated – to a greater or lesser extent – with anthropogenic elements, and, therefore, it is socially constituted nature. Böhme adds that ecological aesthetics of nature is also about nature as such, *that is about what exists and operates on its own*, and that means that ecological aesthetics of nature cannot be *exclusively a preparation of the environment, nor – as eco-aesthetics – a simple acceptance of nature* (2002). And it is *the theory and practice of landscaped gardening that provides here an example of a possible solution to this paradox. As a specific poetics of nature, landscape gardening was an art, which was about making as much room for nature as such as possible. If nature is arranged here, it is to move man to a greater extent* (2002).

Böhme thoroughly analyzes various types of gardens, mainly comparing the French and the English gardens. French gardens are almost always presented in the form of their vertical projections, geometric layouts equipped with sophisticated ornamentation, they are an absolute subordination of nature to the formal principles of man, and, in particular, to geometry. The plants merely provided the construction material which was used to build walls and ornaments, or the mass in which statues were carved out. The autonomy of nature appears in this context as an obstacle or a deviation, and the whole production work of man is targeted at a drastic reduction or destruction of the effects of the independent activity of nature. It is clearly emphasized that the form of the French garden can be maintained only in a constant battle with the autonomy of nature.

A typical feature of English gardens is that they are presented through *views* and changing sceneries. One should look for their artistic sources in landscape painting. The English art of shaping gardens begins with the actual nature, accepts its diversity and adapts to it in its implementation of order. Land-

scape gardens – although they are still gardens – are guided by the idea of freedom, free nature. In these gardens the gardener allows the plant objects to grow. It should be noted and clearly stressed that the English garden does not fit into the traditional dichotomies: nature and art, nature and technology, nature and civilization, nature and culture. On the one hand, in these dichotomies nature is always something which exists on its own and develops according to its own laws. On the other hand, there are things which are deliberately created by man through laws, work and shaping. This form of gardening breaks the existing models and, as a result – as maintained by Böhme – becomes art allied with nature. What is typical of the English garden is that human activity here focuses on the intentions of nature, on respecting its freedom and liberty. Even if the English garden should be treated as a product of art, and even – to a certain extent – of technology, it is a special kind of art or technology that assumes the possibility of a future reference to nature. What is important, is that landscape gardening – although it is a form of art and a technique of gardening – does not appropriate nature and does not intend to control it. Böhme believes that the English garden has a paradigmatic significance for the development of the new way of relating to nature.

Landscape gardening does not fit into the dichotomy of art and nature. The future ecological aesthetics of nature can learn a lot from the theory and practice of landscape gardening, because the latter provides rich material on the relationship between the aesthetic qualities of the environment and the well-being of man. It implies a relationship with nature which is about preserving, favoring and experiencing its spontaneity. It is not so much about watching, becoming aware of, contemplating or perceiving nature in any other way – which has been the case in aesthetics so far, *but about life in nature and in alliance with nature*. While the *very beauty is not merely an addition, ornament or reflected light of an idea, but rather sensory and emotional nourishment*. The English garden was created with a view to its being used on a daily basis, it was meant to create certain conditions and opportunities for the life of its user, for his or her mental economics, quality and value of life. *From this perspective, English landscape gardening was not only a branch of aesthetics but also of ecology – human ecology, while the theory of landscape gardening is becoming a paradigm for the future ecological aesthetics*. Böhme believes that *landscape gardening as an alliance technique, through recognizing the spontaneity of nature and minimizing the indispensable reproductive work, may serve as a point of reference for the new practical way of relating to nature as such* (2002).

Eco-aesthetics and ecological aesthetics of nature are two twin disciplines interested in protecting the beauty of the natural world, both existing in its natural form and processed by the work of man.

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