

Analysis of aesthetic experiences

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Abstract. Aesthetic experiences of the natural environment are shaped by complex interactions among sensory perception, emotional responses, knowledge, imagination, and the environmental context in which natural objects are experienced. This paper explores environmental aesthetic experience through a reflective analysis of the lotus flower, focusing on the feelings of happiness, tranquillity, contentment, and resilience that emerge from its visual and symbolic qualities. The lotus flower provides a useful example for examining how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign aesthetic value to objects within natural environments. Drawing on theories of environmental aesthetics, the discussion considers different approaches to aesthetic appreciation, including scientific cognitivism, non-cognitivism, the aesthetics of engagement, and multisensory appreciation. Scientific knowledge can deepen aesthetic understanding by situating natural objects within their ecological contexts; however, excessive dependence on scientific knowledge may restrict alternative forms of appreciation derived from emotion, imagination, cultural narratives, and direct sensory engagement. The analysis therefore highlights the limitations of relying on a single approach to environmental aesthetic judgment. Instead, it argues for a more integrated and multisensory approach that recognizes the dynamic relationship between the perceiver and the natural environment. Through the example of the lotus flower, the paper further demonstrates that aesthetic appreciation can strengthen individuals' awareness of their relationship with nature and contribute to environmental concern and conservation. Overall, environmental aesthetic experience is best understood as a contextual, participatory, and multisensory process incorporating perception, knowledge, emotion, and imagination.

Keywords: environmental aesthetics, aesthetic experience, lotus flower, multisensory perception, aesthetic appreciation

1. Introduction

The image of the lotus flower usually evokes feelings of happiness, joy, tranquillity and contentment, particularly because of the way it grows in challenging environments and ultimately blooms into something beautiful. The flower begins growing deep within muddy waters, particularly in environments such as swamps. It then manages to rise and break through the mud and water surface, where it blooms in different colours. Its appearance often symbolises purity, as it emerges unsullied and visually pristine despite its origins.

The journey of the lotus flower—from below the muddy water to blooming without dirt or damage—can be understood as a representation of human life, in which personal challenges are synonymous with the initial stages of the flower's growth. Through resilience and commitment, individuals can also emerge victorious.

Similarly, the stages can be equated to a model for human life: being committed and dedicated to a course despite challenges, and showing a willingness to persist and act with integrity, eventually emerging victorious. Images of the lotus flower and the positive feelings of joy that they stimulate can also be interpreted as evoking the epistemic relationship that individuals have with the environment. It becomes easier to perceive the environment as inclusive of all that surrounds individuals, which subsequently shapes how people relate to it. As a result, it becomes necessary to embrace aesthetic appreciation of natural environments through efforts such as conservation, ensuring that the value derived from nature is sustained.

2. Aesthetic perceptions of the lotus flower and environmental engagement

2.1. Sensory and emotional experience of the lotus flower

The image of the lotus flower can enrich sensory experience, especially in relation to life, and offer a source of contentment, illustrating the ability of the natural world to enrich human wellbeing. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the lotus flower does not reveal its submerged life when fully grown; instead, it demonstrates its capacity to emerge from an underwater environment and mature atop the same waters and mud that otherwise would have impeded its growth.



Figure 1. Image of the fully grown lotus flower [1]



Figure 2. Image of a lotus flower as it grows and emerges beneath the water and mud [1]

The understanding of the lotus flower brings perceptual feelings of happiness, joy, tranquillity, and contentment, which correspond to the idea that happiness is often experienced during moments of heightened awareness and understanding. Consequently, one must cultivate the ability to embrace a speculative imagination in which one becomes open to intense observation of objects, events, or other natural occurrences [2].

2.2. Environmental values and conservation

The ability to obtain perceptual feelings of joy and happiness from the images in the immediate environment heightens ecological concern, especially regarding environmental conservation. For instance, through the lotus flower, it becomes easier to understand the need to conserve environments such as water sources, thereby protecting and nurturing the epistemic relationship between individuals and nature. Science has made it clearer that activities altering the environment have negative consequences, as they also affect human needs, which ultimately depend on the environment itself. This implies that science acts as a paradigmatic tool that enhances understanding of the interrelationships between people and the environment.

The close relationship between the perceiver and the lotus flower, together with the positive emotions it evokes, makes it easier to recognise the need to engage in environmental conservation. These efforts reflect an understanding of natural processes and their interconnectedness, such that environmental destruction would damage water sources, eliminate habitats for lotus flowers, and contribute to their extinction. Consequently, embracing environmental conservation reflects an understanding of the linkages that connect human wellbeing to environmental health, where a healthier and more habitable environment supports individual wellbeing [3].

Perceptions of the flower demonstrate that through vision, one appreciates the value of the plant through the formation of auto-centric senses. It is through these senses that the plant is drawn into the bodily sphere, and aesthetic experience emerges through sensorial engagement with the lotus flower. This also demonstrates how sensibility and reason become embedded within sensory experience. This indicates that aesthetics can be understood as the attainment of knowledge of objects such as plants through auto-centric body senses, rather than through detached forms of perception [4].

The assessment of the aesthetic experiences emerging from perceptual feelings towards the flower relates to environmental aesthetics and can also be regarded as the aesthetics of repatriation. These aesthetics seek to reconcile the world with the perceptions of the individual who inhabits it. They also aim to bridge gaps and encourage appreciation of environmental care, as this is the only way to guarantee the continued derivation of aesthetic value from natural surroundings. This form of aesthetics emphasises the different levels at which an individual experiences the environment, while also being an integral part of it.

2.3. Aesthetics of engagement and intrinsic value

The scenario can be referred to as the aesthetics of engagement, a concept explained by Berleant [3], because the perceiver's senses and emotional responses towards the environment are engaged in such a way that there are no barriers between the object—the lotus flower—and the perceiver. Consequently, viewing the lotus flower may arouse different sensual feelings such as joy and contentment, creating a moment in which the body experiences a convergence of the internal and the external.

The scenario demonstrates the need to broaden the scope of aesthetics to include natural environments, as objects such as flowers influence social life and evoke values and feelings that shape human experience. Referring to the flower as a source of beauty that evokes perceptual and sensorial feelings of joy and contentment means aesthetic value is being ascribed to it. However, other forms of value, such as historic, ecological, cultural, and ethical, can also be attached to the lotus flower [4]. This shows that environmental values attached to natural objects can be understood as the ways individuals perceive and evaluate them.

Environmental values, such as the emotive feelings towards the lotus flower, can be perceived as moral guidelines that inform the need to conserve the environment to ensure that the attachments people have with it are maintained. Such guidelines also inform the need to mobilise others to ensure the value of plants such as flowers—beauty, happiness, and joy—is preserved, as these values are commonly shared across communities. Consequently, the environmental values recognised and appreciated by communities should be understood as

normative positions attached to objects, places, ecosystems, and processes that assign positive significance to plants such as flowers, and to the conservation efforts required to maintain their value.

The satisfaction associated with the lotus flower and its ability to evoke feelings of contentment reflect its intrinsic value. Philosophers generally concur that intrinsic value is non-instrumental, indicating that the value attached to the lotus flower does not arise because it serves as a means to an end, but because it possesses value in and of itself. In aesthetic terms, such value can be understood as the appreciation of an object for its own sake. As a result, the value attached to the lotus flower arises from its distinctiveness and the qualities associated with it, qualities that are widely shared across communities in which the lotus flower is revered and even used in religious settings for its association with positive emotions and outcomes.

This demonstrates that interpretations of aesthetic value are based on the linkages between pleasure and feelings of contentment that emerge from the object, and that such pleasure is directly connected to the aesthetic qualities of the plant. In this case, aesthetic qualities should be understood as the characteristics that make the object appreciated for its own sake. Consequently, the feelings derived from observing and interacting with the lotus flower can be perceived as the aesthetic experience. Such experience is directly attached to the lotus flower rather than to the gains or levels of satisfaction obtained from interacting with it [4].

As a result, even though aesthetic value can emerge from the positive feelings developed through interaction with the lotus flower, such value must remain centred on the object and cannot be detached from it. The gains from the experience—such as happiness, joy, and contentment—should not be understood as aesthetic value, since the value lies in the object itself. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that while positive feelings are associated with the lotus flower, the primary motivation is the experience of directing aesthetic attention towards the flower.

2.4. Dynamic and multisensory environmental appreciation

Aesthetic experiences derived from the environment differ from those associated with static artistic objects. Unlike artworks, the environment is not experienced in two-dimensional formats or as an unchanging surface [4]. Instead, the environment, as reflected through a plant such as the lotus flower, must be experienced as an ecosystem that is continuously shaped by interactions among different organisms and forces such as light, water, seasons, air, weather, growth, decay, and pollution.

This demonstrates that, in contrast to the arts, the environment must be understood as less constrained and more dynamic, which directly affects the range of aesthetic qualities that humans can derive from environmental objects. For instance, in the case of the lotus flower, different people may experience diverse sensual and emotional responses based on their subjective assessments and intervening factors such as cultural beliefs and norms associated with the flower.

Additionally, the evaluation of environmental objects such as the lotus flower—and the dynamism of these environments—implies that the range of aesthetic qualities and experiences attached to the flower can change over time. In environmental aesthetic assessments, there are diverse opportunities and varieties of immersion [5]. This is evident in the different forms of positive experience associated with the lotus flower, which offers avenues for multisensory appreciation of the plant in connection with its surroundings.

Such an understanding rests on recognising that aesthetic experiences relating to nature are closely tied to the sensory perceptions developed by an individual in relation to the object. These perceptions are not limited to vision but arise from the collective involvement of multiple senses, which explains the ability of an environmental object such as the lotus flower to evoke different feelings based on deep imagination and insights elicited from multiple sensory viewpoints. This implies that aesthetic experiences and judgments

shape the nature of aesthetic valuing conducted by individuals towards objects in their immediate environments.

This demonstrates that sensory immersion in the environment is crucial, as it leads to the creation of intimacy between the perceiver and the environment. Consequently, the broader scope offered by immersive and multisensory possibilities when assessing objects such as the lotus flower in their natural habitats challenges narrower scenic approaches in art, which emphasise visual characteristics when attaching aesthetic value to natural objects [5]. Scenic models are limiting because they assume that nature is a fixed scene and ignore the spontaneity and dynamism that characterise natural processes and influence objects such as the lotus flower at different stages.

Aesthetic appreciation of natural habitats has played a crucial role in informing governmental commitments to environmental conservation. Efforts towards the aesthetic evaluation of nature have contributed to identifying and protecting scenic environments due to the value authorities attach to them. These concerns indicate that environmental aesthetics play a role in shaping environmental ethics.

2.5. Scientific cognitivism and contextual knowledge

Based on scientific cognitivism, scientific knowledge is integral in enhancing the quality of aesthetic responses to objects situated in the environment [5]. Through scientific knowledge, in-depth assessments can be conducted, and different aesthetic experiences discerned based on a deeper understanding of the interrelationships within the ecosystem of the object being evaluated. This implies that scientific concepts should be used to support assessments of aesthetic experiences that emerge from objects such as the lotus flower. Science ensures that such assessments are not superficial but informed by an understanding of processes and activities within the object's ecosystem.

As explained in Carlson's natural environment model, sensory perception of aesthetic qualities leads to aesthetic valuing of objects, and scientific understanding is essential in such instances [6]. The need for scientific knowledge parallels artistic representation, where historical context, such as the timeline of creation and dominant themes, facilitates informed aesthetic judgment. Context is therefore crucial in promoting informed aesthetic judgments of artworks.

Similarly, the evaluation of the environment and the object in question must be done in context. For instance, analysis of the lotus flower must involve understanding the scientific processes that support its growth, as well as the environments in which it is typically found [5]. Through such understanding, it becomes easier to identify and attach aesthetic values and qualities to the plant. For example, science makes it possible to understand the challenges faced by other plants growing in the same environment as the lotus flower, which then informs aesthetic experiences associated with the lotus.

Knowledge in areas such as ecology, biology, and environmental science impacts the aesthetic judgments individuals make. Having a solid foundation of objective knowledge contributes to forming aesthetic experiences and judgments about environmental objects. For instance, Carlson provides an example in which knowledge enables one to identify a whale not as a fish but as a mammal [6]. Through such recognition, it becomes easier to appreciate additional aesthetic qualities associated with the animal.

Additionally, it demonstrates that the use of the natural environment model to assess aesthetic experiences is vital, as it promotes the use of knowledge that situates the object being assessed in its rightful context [5]. Evaluating environmental contexts from such a viewpoint highlights the ability to differentiate value from disvalue. For example, naturally occurring floods may wash away blooming lotus flowers growing in stagnant water. However, understanding that such floods can be beneficial to these environments may allow the

evaluator to find value in a landscape that might otherwise be considered diminished due to the temporary absence of lotus flowers and other flora and fauna.

2.6. Non-cognitivism, imagination, and integrated aesthetics

According to Saito, an overemphasis on knowledge can be counterproductive when evaluating nature, as it may lead to aesthetic appreciation being constrained by the conceptual frameworks imposed by that knowledge [7]. Saito argues that aesthetic valuing of objects in their environments begins and ends with sensual analysis [7]. This position can be understood as lying between scientific cognitivism and non-cognitivism.

Consequently, aesthetic appreciation must be conducted in context, where academic knowledge is integrated with other forms of understanding such as myths, cultural narratives, and folklore surrounding the object. In assessing an object such as the lotus flower, it is therefore important to reflect not only on the scientific knowledge that explains the ecological processes supporting the plant, but also on the cultural narratives, beliefs, and folklore associated with it.

By emphasising the recognition of nature "on its own terms", Saito introduces the notion that moral considerations influence the aesthetic values attached to objects such as the lotus flower [7]. This implies that the lotus flower may evoke positive feelings in one culture while eliciting different or even contradictory emotions in another. Saito's emphasis on evaluating nature under "its own terms" aligns with Aldo Leopold's view that beauty and aesthetics are best assessed when an object maintains its integrity, stability, and its role within the biotic community [8]. Although non-cognitivist theories often downplay the role of knowledge in aesthetics, they concur with cognitivists on the need to avoid excessive subjectivity, which can lead to misinformation.

Excessive subjectivity and misinformation can undermine the value of aesthetic judgments by distorting the context of the objects being evaluated. Consequently, many non-cognitivists object to Carlson's natural environment model for being overly reductive due to its emphasis on scientific knowledge. According to non-cognitivists, the model is unsuitable because it overlooks alternative but rich aesthetic approaches through which individuals experience natural and semi-natural environments.

Berleant, in contrast, emphasises the need for participatory approaches that are multisensory and immersive when making aesthetic judgments [3]. Such approaches promote aesthetics of engagement and eliminate the subject-object dichotomy. This dichotomy, Berleant argues, is closely associated with "disinterestedness" [3]. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt holistic and somatic approaches rather than assigning scientific knowledge a central role in shaping aesthetic judgments.

Berleant further explains that the aesthetic environment can be sensed through various modalities: through one's feet, kinaesthetic sensations while moving, the feeling of sun and wind, and other embodied experiences [3]. These observations demonstrate that limiting aesthetic assessments to scientific knowledge is narrow. Carroll similarly argues that scientific cognitivism overlooks how emotional responses influence aesthetic appreciation [4]. Emotions, he suggests, have a legitimate place in aesthetic appreciation due to their non-sentimentalising nature.

Kant's aesthetic theory also supports this view, noting that emotions manifested through exploratory, projective, and imaginative processes enrich and deepen appreciation without trivialising or humanising nature [2]. Hepburn further explains that imagination is necessary when assessing nature, as it allows one to shift attention across different aspects and consider environmental influences, thereby avoiding biased or stereotypical aesthetic judgments [9]. Moreover, Hepburn explains that natural features can also invite or evoke imaginative explorations [9].

Non-cognitivists additionally argue that scientific findings may themselves be influenced by cultural biases and subjectivity, which can negatively affect aesthetic appreciation. Godlovitch advocates for the adoption of an "acentric model" when conducting aesthetic valuing, as it sets aside knowledge imposed by humans—whether scientific or cultural—and approaches nature as ineffable or mysterious [10]. Such an approach reduces the subjectivity that arises when perceivers rely heavily on personal or scientific knowledge.

Pluralist positions can also be adopted when making aesthetic judgments of nature. These include multisensory and participatory approaches that allow analysis from multiple viewpoints such as imagination, worldviews, and feelings. Such perspectives can be combined with diverse forms of knowledge from multidisciplinary fields such as literature, the arts, and science.

This trend demonstrates the value of adopting an integrated approach to aesthetic judgment. Such an approach considers the role of perception and imagination and draws heavily on Kant's theory of "integrated aesthetics" [2]. An integrated approach is vital because it grants the perceiver considerable freedom, ensuring that aesthetic understanding is not limited by cultural, personal, or scientific knowledge.

With regard to the lotus flower, this analysis demonstrates the need for a multisensory and integrated approach to ensure that perceptions and values attached to the object are not overly influenced by cultural, scientific, and personal beliefs. Based on such an approach, the emerging feelings and perceptions towards the lotus flower are more likely to be objective and less exposed to subjective predispositions.

3. Conclusion

From the discussion, it is evident that one should prioritise adopting a multisensory approach when evaluating natural objects such as the lotus flower. To reduce subjectivity in such assessments and in the formation of aesthetic judgments, it is necessary to ensure one is not constrained by scientific knowledge or other influencing factors such as cultural and personal preferences. This effort is essential for ensuring that the object is assessed in context and in an objective manner.

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