

Objectives

The aim of this project in the history of philosophy, environmental ethics, religious studies, and aesthetics is to critically compare the European and Asian traditions of the aesthetics of nature in order to gain a better understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of our current environmental crisis. Climate change, wilderness depletion, and ecological ruin are symptomatic of transformations in human attitudes to nature. These changing attitudes to nature are not only scientific, they are also aesthetic, expressive of transformed assumptions concerning beauty, order, and the human's place in nature. While the two aesthetic traditions to be compared in this project may initially seem opposed, with the European tradition emphasizing form and permanence and the Asian tradition emphasizing impermanence and "emptiness" (a translation of the Buddhist term, *Sūnyatā*), the reality is more complex. The European tradition deteriorated in the 19th century. The late Romantic subjectification and marginalization of European aesthetics coincided with the exploitation and management of nature without regard for its aesthetic or moral value. Meanwhile, in the Asian tradition, aesthetic form was never assumed to be purely objective, intelligible and enduring, but was always viewed in relation to the emptiness from which it was inseparable. Both the Western and Asian traditions of environmental aesthetics have now given way to more modern, utilitarian approaches to development and preservation. This project aims to explore the potential for comparative environmental aesthetics to offer a deeper understanding of the legacies of both the European and Asian traditions and a more sustainable global attitude towards nature.

The project is organised around three main research objectives. (O1) To what degree is environmental crisis a consequence of aesthetic marginalisation? (O2) Is aesthetic marginalisation the inevitable outcome of the traditional European aesthetics of form? (O3) What can environmental ethics learn from a critical re-appraisal of European aesthetics in the light of the Japanese aesthetics of emptiness?

Context

Theoretical Framework

We are proposing the first major, international, collaborative comparison of European and Asian environmental aesthetics. While there has been a significant amount of work done on each tradition individually (Nguyen 2018, Mara 2002, Kuki 2002, Izutsu 1981, Imanishi 2002, Guyer 2014, Eco 1986, Tatarkiewicz 1962, Carlson 2000, Brady 2003, 2013), there is currently no international collaborative study that compares the two traditions in terms of their commonalities and differences. Such a study could be crucial in facilitating the necessary, yet currently strained, international collaboration on environmental policy. However, our goal goes beyond this important comparative historical work. We also aim to construct a more multi-cultural approach to a global aesthetics of nature that could de-marginalize aesthetics and inform environmental ethics. To achieve this, we propose to examine and analyze the antithesis between the European aesthetics of form and the Asian aesthetics of emptiness in order to set the stage for the construction of a new aesthetics of nature that is neither European nor Asian, and a new philosophy of technology that is genuinely ecological and grounded in the understanding that all things are interdependent (Morton 2010).

There are five key terms in this proposal that will need to be carefully defined and historically contextualized in our research: the aesthetics of emptiness, the aesthetics of form, subjective aesthetics, aesthetic marginalization, and environmental crisis. "The aesthetics of emptiness" refers to the Chinese and Japanese Taoist and Buddhist belief that, as all things are inherently transitory or "empty of self." The experience of beauty in a traditional Japanese context is the feeling aroused by

the ephemerality of nature as highlighted in built or natural form (Izutsu 1981). “The aesthetics of form” is the theory of beauty rooted in the work of Plato and Aristotle and prevalent in Europe until at least the Renaissance. According to this view, being, truth, goodness, and beauty are real features of nature, each representing a different way in which the human subject experiences the forms of things as they appear in matter (Eco 1956, Mauer 1983, Voigt 1997). “Subjective aesthetics” refers to the 19th century European theory that the experience of beauty is the perceiver experiencing their own capacities for imaginative synthesis and not the effect of the perceived object. In this view, beauty is subjective and resides in the eye of the beholder, rather than in the object itself (Guyer 2014, Gadamer 2004: 37-101). “Aesthetic marginalization” is our term for the separation of aesthetics from science, ethics, and the philosophy of nature in modern Western thought, as well as the sidelining and trivialization of art in contemporary culture (Sellars 1962; Danto 1986). “Environmental crisis” in the context of this project refers to the negative impacts on the natural world resulting from the burning of fossil fuels, sprawling urbanization, and unregulated and uneven economic development. These impacts include the loss of wilderness, the extinction of species, and the increase in pollution in the post-World War II period known as “the Great Acceleration” (McNeill and Engelke 2014).

Both modern Japan and Europe developed in the past century under the influence of aesthetic marginalization. Prior to the 19th century Meiji restoration, which opened Japan up to the rest of the world, European and Asian aesthetics existed largely in isolation from each other. Japanese aesthetics developed from the everyday application of Chan Buddhist values (the Chinese origin of Zen) to ordinary life during the Kamakura period (1185–1333). With the opening up of Japan, a rapid period of Westernization occurred, leading to the sidelining of traditional Japanese aesthetics in the pursuit of building modern cities, weapons, and systems of communication, production, and exchange. However, many Japanese aesthetic terms, such as *mono no aware*, *wabi*, and *sabi*, are still in use in Japan and express a sensitivity to environmental aesthetics that is distinctively Japanese (Richie 2007). The Japanese term, *mono no aware*, refers to the feeling for the inevitable passing of things, “the ephemeral beauty of a world in which change is the only constant” (Richie 2007, 71). This feeling is cultivated in Japan through the annual cherry blossom festival, where the flowering trees are celebrated not only for their beauty, but also for their fragility and transience. *Wabi* refers to rustic simplicity, while *sabi* refers to that quality of built form that highlight the effects of time. Japanese architects, gardeners, and tea masters often sought to cultivate the concept of *mono no aware* by incorporating elements of *wabi* and *sabi* into their work. Through a careful choice of building materials, arrangement of plants, and placement of art, they aimed not so much to impose form on nature as to showcase the fragility of existence and the transience of nature. The combination of *wabi* and *sabi* is exemplified in features like a weather-worn bamboo fence or a rough, irregular ceramic tea bowl. The concepts of *wabi* and *sabi* express an intimate relation between humans and nature and between cultural forms and natural forms: both arise from and return to emptiness.

The contrast between the Japanese aesthetics of emptiness and the European aesthetics of form is evident in Western garden design and building styles. Where Japanese design highlights the emergence and disappearance of natural forms by building in a way that draws attention to time, European design often seeks to impose form on unwilling matter and builds to last. One sees the product of such an aesthetic in the Gothic cathedrals of medieval Europe, in Baroque palaces, in traditional French gardens such as those at Versailles, and in glass and steel skyscrapers.

We shall analyze in detail the different concepts of nature underlying European and Asian aesthetics. For the European, time is the moving image of that which never changes (in Plato's words). Nature reflects or participates in stable, intelligible structures that make it possible to have knowledge of passing things, the forms of things which we experience as beautiful in their

proportion, clarity, and integrity (Maurer 1983, Eco 1956). Japanese aesthetics by contrast assumes a concept of nature as inherently fragile, fleeting, and “empty of self” (Saito 1997).

These initial assumptions will need to be tested and scrutinized to determine the extent to which the European and Asian traditions may intersect or influence one another. Is the European Platonic tradition as fundamentally at odds with the Buddhist tradition as it appears? For the other side of Buddhist emptiness is form: neither exist apart from one another. We know that Greek aesthetics influenced Buddhist art after the invasion of Northern India by Alexander the Great. What evidence is there of an earlier influence passing from East to West? Is it possible to create a third way that synthesizes the best of both traditions, transcending the contradiction between them and offering a new, ecological approach to the aesthetics of nature?

The potential impact of this research extends beyond the social sciences and humanities research community. Despite the efforts of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise to dangerous levels among the 165 signatories. The recent UN Biodiversity Conference brought attention to the alarming rates of habitat loss and species extinction. It is clear that the world's nations do not equally share a sense of urgency about environmental action and are struggling to reach an international environmental ethic. China and the United States, the two largest emitters of greenhouse gases, have fundamentally different value systems which are grounded in conflicting conceptions of nature and the human's place in it. This conflict goes beyond the divide between liberals and communists. A comparative study of European and Asian attitudes towards nature could help the West and East better understand each other and potentially find common ground.

Literature Review

For the past fifty years, continental philosophers and environmental ethicists have argued that a new concept of nature is needed if we are to avoid the worst ecological consequences of environmental crisis (White 1967, Naess 1977, Merchant 1980, Brady 2003, 2013, 2020, Morton 2007, McGrath 2018). A consideration of the intrinsic relationship between collective feeling and political will, on the one hand (Nussbaum 2013, Koschut 2020, Witzgall and Kesting 2022), and the capacity of the aesthetic to directly engage feeling, on the other (Collingwood 1938, Langer 1953, Rosenberg Larsen and Sackris, 2020, Otabe 2020), reveals that contrary to popular assumptions, aesthetic issues lie at the root of the environmental crisis. The way we perceive and value the natural world, as well as the way we represent it in art and media, directly impacts our actions and political decisions. By engaging with the aesthetic dimensions of the environmental crisis, many have argued that we may be able to tap into our collective emotional and moral responses to ecological problems and mobilize action towards sustainable solutions (Hepburn 1966, Godlovitch 1994, Carlson 2000, 2018, Scruton 2012, McGrath 2003, 2018). A consensus is growing that the environmental aesthetics we need must take account of the new horizons opened up by technology; reactionary Romanticism and spurious re-enchantment agendas are dead-ends (Latour 2004, Morton 2010). The European Romantic aesthetics of a “beautiful and sublime” nature, which was foundational for the National Parks movement and early environmentalism (Gatta 2004), is associated with reducing nature to an aesthetic consumable (Morton 2007, McGrath 2018). The relationship of European Romanticism to traditional European aesthetics of form is disputed, with some arguing that Romanticism is continuous with the aesthetics of form (Hedley 2008, Hampton 2019), others that Romanticism betrays it (Gadamer 2004). According to a mainline continental philosophical tradition, aesthetic marginalisation, whether European or Asian, allowed nature to be exploited and managed without regard to either the aesthetic or moral value of things (Heidegger 2008, Kohak 1984).

Japanese aesthetics is not subjectivistic because the Japanese never separate the experiencing subject from the experienced object in the aesthetic experience (Izutsu 1981, 29-30, Nishida 1990, Imanishi 2002). This may also go some distance to explaining the centrality of aesthetics to traditional Japanese culture (Okakura 1906, Kuki 1987). The Asian tradition is largely assumed to be innocent of environmental crisis, as much a victim of the unbridled development of technology as nature itself (Callicott and McRae 2014, 2017, Saito 1997, Wirth 2017, Davis, Schroeder, and Wirth 2011). Tanizaki's classic, *In Praise of Shadows*, shows how the Japanese fascination with impermanence, with time and the transitory influenced traditional Japanese architecture and design, from the layout of a tea house to the highly formalised structure of *Noh* theatre (Tanizaki 1977). These aesthetic sensibilities were rapidly disappearing when he wrote in the 30s. Okakura's *Book of Tea* explains the Japanese search for perfection in the routines of ordinary life (Okakura 1906; Otabe 2022). Tea ceremony, like flower arranging (*Ikebana*) and gardening, were cultivated as high arts of engaging with an intrinsically transient and empty nature (Takei and Keane 2001; Kuitert 2002). And yet questions remain as to why Chinese and Japanese aesthetics so quickly capitulated to utilitarian, reductionist and consumerist modernization agendas (Richie 2007).

Any discussion of environmental aesthetics in a continental philosophical context must reckon with the troubling legacy of Heidegger. In a series of highly influential lectures given in Germany in the 50s, the unrepentant former Nazi professor argued that Western thought is essentially technological (Heidegger 2008). Reductionist technological development according to Heidegger has not only pushed many non-human communities to the point of extinction, it also threatens 'the human essence' itself. The root of environmental crisis in Heideggerian philosophy lies in "the forgetting of being" (Folz 1995). It may be impossible to say precisely what Heidegger means by this notoriously ambiguous phrase but it concerns what we have called aesthetic marginalisation. Being for Heidegger connotes nature (*physis*) in its spontaneous emergence, which is, Heidegger says, simultaneously an experience of the beautiful (*das Schöne*) and the true (*aletheia*) (McGrath 2003). A literature exists on Heidegger's dependence on Asian sources (Parkes 1987; May 1996). It is undeniable that Heidegger was in contact with Japanese scholars of Zen and was as influenced by them as they were by him. In the wake of Heidegger, the continental philosophical appreciation for Japanese aesthetics has developed quietly and steadily over the past fifty years (Izutsu 1981, Mara 2002, Nguyen 2018). Heidegger's problematic contribution raises the question of the elitism and authoritarian tendencies associated with some approaches to aesthetic, a problem also addressed in discussions of Japanese aesthetics (Richie 2007) and which sheds some light on the increasing marginalisation of the aesthetic in post-war, liberal-democratic Japan. The politics of environmental aesthetics shall need to be addressed head-on in this project.

Methodology

This project brings together researchers from various interdisciplinary fields, including the history of philosophy, art history, aesthetics, religious studies, East Asian studies, environmental ethics, and eco-criticism. By combining the insights and approaches of these different disciplines, this project aims to explore the complex and multifaceted relationship between aesthetics, environmental crisis, and political action. The methodology proposed is philosophical, with a focus on the conceptual analysis of archival and historical material. We will seek to collaboratively understand texts, traditions, and cultural objects within their historical context for the sake of identifying the fundamental concepts at play. Conceptual analysis will be supplemented by critique: evaluating the contemporary relevance of these historical forms of thought and expression and considering their potential for integration into a global, democratic environmental ethic.

To achieve the three objectives, we will establish a working group in environmental aesthetics (WGEA) made up of specialists in the history of philosophy, environmental ethics, comparative philosophy, religious studies, and aesthetics. The WGEA will exchange ideas, present drafts of papers and plan two international conferences on environmental aesthetics (to be funded with sources external to this grant). The first conference is to be held in Kyoto, one of the most important cities in the history of Japanese philosophy, religion, and garden aesthetics, and the site of several UNESCO heritage sites. The second is planned for Rome, arguably the epicentre for European aesthetics. The WGEA will meet monthly via Zoom for collaborative work, the sharing of research, and the planning of the two conferences. By the end of the grant period, the applicants will publish two peer-reviewed articles in comparative environmental aesthetics addressing the three objectives. Both articles will be translated into Japanese. In addition to these articles, we anticipate producing two further deliverables. These include a video documentary series for YouTube showcasing the proceedings of the conferences and the art, architecture, and landscape of the culturally and ecologically significant locations of the meetings. Alongside the formal academic presentations, we shall produce more accessible discussions of the themes of our research in podcasts and short, user-friendly video blogs. We also plan to submit a prospectus for a multi-authored volume on comparative environmental aesthetics to Edinburgh University Press by the end of the grant period.

The meetings of the WGEA will occur virtually every month with the exception of the inaugural meeting, which is scheduled in person in Cupid's Newfoundland. Cupids, founded in 1612 by the English, is one of the oldest European settlements in "the New World." The purpose of the inaugural in-person meeting is to create the team spirit and establish the collegial relations necessary for long-term collaborative research across three continents. The location of Cupids has been chosen because of its proximity to Memorial University as well as its cultural-historical significance and for the obvious natural beauty of the environment of Conception Bay North. We shall make use of the Cupids Legacy centre for our meetings (<https://cupidslegacycentre.ca/>), and at the end of the inaugural meeting, host a public symposium at the nearby Holyrood Marine Base of Memorial University.

Because of the diversity of specializations involved in this project a working group has been deemed as the best way to reach the objectives. Each member of the WGEA will take the lead at one of the monthly meetings, with a short paper or power point presentation on the theme for the month. The WGEA will then discuss the presentation. The recorded proceedings shall be archived on the project website for later consultation, as well as for sound-bites that could be integrated into our YouTube series. In the first semester of our work together (Fall 2023), the WGEA will focus on O1 (environmental crisis and aesthetic marginalisation). In the second semester (Winter 2024), we will focus on O2 (aesthetic marginalisation and the aesthetics of form). The third and fourth semester (Summer and Fall 2024) shall be dedicated to O3 (European and Asian aesthetics critically compared). The last two semesters (Winter and Summer 2025) shall be dedicated to a discussion of the relationship of environmental aesthetics to environmental ethics and the plausibility of a global, democratic environmental ethics. We shall also envision future projects beyond the grant period. While the monthly meetings are going on, applications shall be underway to SSHRC, the Japan Foundation, and the German Research Foundation (DFG) for funding for the Kyoto and Rome meetings. Calls for papers shall be posted and submissions reviewed at the appropriate time. The members of the WGEA will be invited to develop their research contributions into keynote addresses at these meetings.

It is our hope that this IDG funded project will plant seeds for a much larger comparative project in environmental aesthetics, internationally funded through Japanese, German, and Canadian sources.